

Shiree McCarver

*All I Want
Is You*



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Shiree McCarver

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Acknowledgments

A special shout out to the musical group *Journey*. Thank you for those days when I use to sing the love songs but was oblivious to the emotional meaning in the lyrics of the songs. Now that I have experienced the pangs of love, your music soothes my heart; this book is dedicated to one of those songs.

When You Love a Woman

In my life I see where I've been
I said that I'd never fall again
Within myself I was wrong
My searchin ain't over...over
I know that
When you love a woman
You see your world inside her eyes
When you love a woman
You know she's standin' by your side
A joy that lasts forever
There's a band of gold that shines waiting somewhere...oh yeah
If I can't believe that someone is true
To fall in love is so hard to do
I hope and pray tonight
Somewhere you're thinkin of me girl
Yes I know...I know that
When you love a woman
You see your world inside her eyes
When you love a woman
You know she's standin by your side
A joy that lasts forever
There's a band of gold that shines waiting somewhere...oh
Its enough to make you cry
When you see her walkin' by
And you look into her eyes
When you love a woman
You see your world inside her eyes
When you love a woman
Well you know she's standin by your side
A joy that lasts forever
There's a band of gold that shines
When you love a woman...
When you love, love, love, love
When you love a woman
You see your world inside her eyes

From Journey's *Trial by Fire* album featuring Steve Perry

Author's Thoughts

Every day we read in the media where a celebrity had adopted or attempted to adopt a child from another country. Well, of course, I did some snooping and realize we as a country have over 500,000 children in the foster care system alone waiting for permanent homes.

In all truths it is not because the children here aren't just as needy of a good home. It's that our government needs to reform the adoption process. They still believe single parents can't provide an adequate stable home even though millions of divorced, unmarried and/or households where their spouse is away saving their country and sometimes dying for it have proven differently.

I was raised by a single mother and the one thing I found is that in most families the child is raised by everyone. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, sister, brothers and cousins all have a hand in the raising of a child.

I can understand the strict rule since we know not everyone has honorable attentions, but that is where hiring more and paying better social workers should be like the changes we need to make for our children.

Our children are to be the future of our country and they are treated poorly and we wonder why all these angry adults are walking around?

Those that are caring for our children's needs and social development should be making more than those seeking to make their living out of entertaining them. I think the highest paid between the two is the one that gets to influence our kids the most. If you pay the teachers better, more people will want to become one and more would care whether one child succeeds or fail. Too many kids are slipping through the cracks.

The question that plagues us I guess is where do we start making a difference?

<http://www.savethechildren.org>
<http://www.americanadoptions.com/>
<http://www.bgca.org/>
<http://www.adoptionnetwork.com>

Tell Congress to Overhaul NCLB

<http://www.unionvoice.org/campaign/NCLB070708>

CHAPTER ONE

“There will be no running away to Las Vegas to get married. I didn’t agree to it on New Year’s Eve and I am *not* doing so now!”

“Daddy,” Mary whined. She felt as if she was seven years old again. Not much had changed now that she was thirty-two.

Retired veterinarian Joseph Christmas was well into his sixties, standing six feet four and weighing two-hundred and sixty pounds. He was still as imposing as he had been when she was his “bitty baby girl.” She knew by the look on his dark and still attractive face that she was losing the battle.

“Don’t look at me that way Mare. I’m not going to give you my blessings to run off and have a fly by wedding with this man.” Joe reiterated. The more annoyed he got the more prominent his Alabama accent became.

“It’s been two months since Alec and I announced our plans to get married. I thought you had come to terms with the fact that the man I love is Caucasian.”

Joe cocked a thick eyebrow at her. “This is not a race issue and you know it, Mare. I can’t believe you’d even think such a thing. If it wasn’t for how me and your mother raised you, you would never would have been opened-minded enough to fall in love with him in the first place.”

Mary turned beseeching eyes on her mother Miriam sitting quietly on the sofa with her bare feet curled beneath her as she looked from her husband to her daughter.

“We are at a stalemate, Mommy. Whatever you say goes.”

“Are you both sure you can’t compromise in some way? I do hate choosing sides. We are a family,” Miriam reasoned. “You two *adults* should be able to discuss this without a mediator.”

Mary turned her gaze on her father. “Daddy, I’m in my thirties. I don’t need a big wedding to be happy. All I want is Alec and he loves me. If we have a big wedding the media will come out in droves.”

“Not if we have it here in Alabama,” he countered.

“Unfortunately love doesn’t allow you to choose who you fall in love with. I happened to have fallen *in love* with a well-recognized millionaire playboy business tycoon who has dated super models, actresses and socialites very publically. There is no way he is going to be able to give up his vowed bachelorhood quietly once you bring in the wedding planners, the caters and send out invitations.”

“A newspaper announcement that our *only* daughter is engaged...” Miriam threw in. “It would be nice to brag a little bit.”

“Definitely not that,” Mary grimaced. “Alec being the gossip rags ‘bachelor darling’ has already made us more cautious. We are trying to keep this a small private family affair.”

“Used goods, is what HE is,” Joe muttered. “My daughter deserves better than all those other women’s leftovers. You sure he wants to keep it quiet because he doesn’t want those women knowing he’s the marryin’ kind after all?” His dark brown eyes narrowed. “Or maybe he doesn’t want the world knowing he’s marryin’ a Black Woman and he wants to keep you his ‘dark’ little secret.”

Mary rolled her eyes. *Who thought such things these days?* “Daddy, do you think that I would truly fall in love with a man who would be ashamed to be seen with me in public? Do you think I wouldn’t be able to know if *my man* was ashamed of me? This was my suggestion because I didn’t want to be listed up there with all the women he’s dated in the past.”

“You think you’re going to keep the press down forever? He is a public figure and are you going to stay home when he has to do all those public functions he’s seen at? What you going to tell him gal? Your momma has been supportive through my career and a man looks for his woman to be by his side! Are you going to stress over how you look to the public? You know your health won’t be able to take the strain,” Joe argued.

“Because I love Alec, I’m going to do whatever it takes to make things work for the both of us, Daddy. I just want my wedding to not be some big show boat!”

“A father gets this opportunity once, Mare, to make a big whoop about his daughter’s wedding. This man is already limiting your happiness. Now if you would marry someone like...say...*Cedric Thomas*. He would make a fine husband for you.”

“Cedric? *Awe*, come on. Why you bring him up after all this time?” Mary snorted and rolled her eyes heavenward; throwing up a tiny prayer to help her remain respectful to the man that gave her life.

“Yeah, *bitty baby girl*,” he threw in the childhood endearment to soften his protest to her current male choice. “You grew up together and you have common Christian God fearin’ backgrounds. He’s a big time doctor now and had a practice in Atlanta but he’s come back home. Maybe you should pay him a visit while you’re here.”

Mary remembered Cedric very well. They were childhood friends and he was her first love; though she never felt that Cedric was interested in anymore than acting like her brother. He watched over her and kept others from picking on her because she was fat. That is until his girlfriend Monica came into the picture.

Monica was the typical popular girl that seemed to have it all. She was a beauty queen and head cheerleader. Her family was wealthy and her body was perfect.

She was healthy and everything Mary could never be. Monica could join Cedric in the many outdoor activities that she could only enjoy from the wayside. No one was surprised; not even her, when Cedric proposed to Monica their senior year of high school.

Everything she and Cedric had discussed like going to the same college and opening into a medical practice together changed. Without her best friend, she decided to go into business management, while he stuck to the plan only with a different girl. She hadn’t been bitter by his change of loyalties. He fell in love and she understood, but she had been disappointed to find out he was just like every other guy in school after all.

“Daddy, Cedric never asked me out like *that*. Now, we just talk on holidays and birthdays.” She lightly shrugged off the thought. “Isn’t he and Monica still

married?”

“They divorced three years ago.” Her mother was the one to answer.

“He never said a thing.” Mary voice was full of surprise. “But why would he to me? We stopped discussing Monica years ago.”

“Why? Were *you* jealous?” Joe asked.

“Give me a break, Dad.” She rolled her eyes. “Monica didn’t want his female sidekick intruding on her perfect relationship. Good thing I stayed out of it, or she’d probably be blaming me for her failed marriage.”

Joe and Miriam changed looks that wasn’t lost on her.

“Okay, what’s with the look?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t huh me, what’s going on.”

“Err...Cedric asks about you every time he comes by the house. He stops in and has dinner with us at least one Sunday a month. He talks about you all the time, Mare,” Joe grinned at her. “He’s really missed you since you moved to Seattle. I suppose he made it known to Monica that casting aside your close friendship was the worse decision he’d ever made.”

“Oh great,” she snorted. “So what you’re saying is even though I didn’t interfere she is blaming me for her failed marriage? Even if that were the case, I admit Cedric was my first crush, but I’ve been available all my life waiting for Cedric or any other man to get beyond the not so pretty packaging and see that I had a lot of love to give; but it never happened. So I don’t need to hear this now.”

“Honey, I’m just tellin’ you this because if you have feelings for Cedric this would be the time to do something now. Don’t regret it years from now and break Alec’s heart,” Joe argued.

“Daddy, I have always been the ‘fat girl’ or the ‘girl with the weird disease’. I was the one who was always last to be asked to a dance. I was always the ‘friend’ and never the ‘girlfriend.” Mary’s eyes burned with unshed tears. She pushed up her glasses. “Ced had his chance and he too chose the ‘beauty queen’ girl.”

“Still, Cedric stood by you when others picked on you and he took you to your first dance,” Joe reminded.

“He still didn’t ask me to be his girlfriend,” Mary countered. “*Alec* has been the first man to look at me with eyes that make me believe for that moment I’m beautiful and healthy. To him my weight, surgical scars and skin grafts don’t matter. He has everything he could possibly want and he could have any woman; but he chose *me*.”

“Mare, no one is denying Alec is a likable guy. It’s just he’s your first relationship. Don’t you think you should give yourself some time to make sure that you aren’t marrying him just because you believe you can’t get anyone else?”

“Dad--”

“Baby Girl, I’m not tryin’ to hurt you. I just don’t want you to sell yourself short. Your mother and I know you’ve always dreamed that when you got married you would have a big glorious wedding,” Joe stated. “We know this because we still have your dream wedding scrapbook. We saw the clippings of dresses--”

“With *my* head cut out and pasted on the bodies that I wish were mine,” she abruptly interrupted. “That dream never came true either but I learned a long time ago life isn’t made up of perfect people or perfect weddings. I’ve learned to be happy with the small things in life.”

“You mean, you stopped dreaming,” Joe countered. “Are you living your dream now right? I guess what I’m trying to say is...if you are about to marry the man of your dreams and you want to spend the rest of your life with him, why are you doing this drive-by weddin’ in Vegas that you’re talkin’ about?”

“Because you declared that Alec and I need to stay apart until we marry or you wouldn’t approve of the marriage!”

“I didn’t quite say ‘stay apart.’ I said *no more sleeping together* until you are married, baby girl,” Joe fussed. “I’m also not beyond locking you in your room if I have to. There is no reason for a woman to be giving the milk up for free. You know the saying.”

“Joe, you’re being a hypocrite.” Miriam injected. “I’m sure *my father* would

appreciate the irony of this moment if he were still alive.”

“Well baby, now that I am a father myself, I would apologize for what I put him through. I will send a prayer up to him tonight instead. But Miriam, you have to be wonderin’ what I’m wonderin’ about?”

“Daddy, what are you wonderin’?” Mary asked. “Just ask me. You ain’t held your tongue about anything else.”

“Mary, watch your tone,” her mother chided softly.

“Yes ma’am,” she murmured contritely.

Mary’s southern accent was becoming more pronounced and her jeans a little tighter with each passing day she spent in the southern comfort of her big family and their weekly gatherings. She had to get back to her life in Seattle soon.

“I’m a wonderin’ what the big hurry is?” His eyes narrowed on her face before going over her short two hundred pound frame. “Is there something you aren’t tellin’ us?”

She shook her head and released an agitated sigh. “I’m not pregnant if that is what you’re asking. I’m not careless dad.”

“Considering we caught you two on the floor of his family holiday home fornicating like nobody’s business. It looked like a lot of *carelessness* was going on,” Joe exclaimed.

Mary groaned and covered her face flushed from the memory. “It wasn’t supposed to go that far. Alec was in the middle of proposing and I suppose we got carried away...”

“You...you suppose?” he sputtered. “I *know* you got carried away, shoot!”

“I’m sorry daddy that you had to see us like that.”

“Sorry? Well, you should be.” Joe cleared his throat. “The horror of the flashbacks I experience is enough. No father should be a witness to such horror.” He suppressed an exaggerated shiver.

Mary grimaced.

“Nor a mother,” Miriam chuckled in agreement. “If children think that walking in on their parents is awful they should see the roles reversed.”

“Okay...okay you two, I get the picture and you’ve made your opinions clear. You aren’t happy with me and Alec having sex before marriage. We are trying to respect your wishes and be together at the same time. It’s not easy and getting married quickly is the only way Alec and I know how to do this to make everyone happy. What other options are you giving us?”

“This doesn’t sound like you, Mare. Why are you ready to give up your dream...*our dream*...of having a proper wedding? Is he pressuring you? He can’t do without sex long enough for us to do a wedding up right for our only child?” He shook his balding head muttering, “For all we know this man could be one of those sex addicts we hear about. Every year the magazines do a collage of his past conquests.”

“Joseph, you should change your argument because lord knows how you get when you don’t get sex in a timely manner.” Miriam gave him a knowing glare from across the room. “Also what man doesn’t have a dating past? The man is in his thirties for God sakes.”

“Miriam!”

“Mom!”

Joe and Mary cried out in unison.

Recovering quickly, he changed his argument. “I personally think the boy is frightened that you may wake up and see you are getting the short end of the stick. He fears that other men are going to see in you what he sees and you will pursue your options.” He moved to stand next to the sofa.

“Daddy, Alec is a *good* man. He has accomplished a lot in his life and I’m honored that he proposed to me. He didn’t have to. I was a willing participant.”

Joe groaned. “You sure you’re not marrying him for the wrong reasons? He’s a very wealthy man. Money? Is that making you blind to his faults?”

“I can’t believe you,” Mary balked. “*Daddy*, do you think you and mom raised an opportunist? Yeah, he is wealthy. However he wasn’t born into a wealthy family. He’s not some spoiled and pampered trust fund baby. Nor is he only what the media plays him out to be.”

“Hmm,” Joe grunted.

“Do you think I would fall in love with him, otherwise?” Mary pushed up her glasses on the bridge of her nose. “Dad, you met and spent Christmas and New Year’s with him and his family and you know that his parents, Dr. and Mrs. Mercer, are amazing hard working class people like you and mom.” Mary reasoned. “Are you both saying I made a mistake in falling in love with Alec?”

“No we are not!” Miriam interjected firmly. “Joe, enough is enough. You make it sound as if Alec being able to financially care for our daughter is a bad thing. The evident love that young man has for our Mary was written all over his face; in every stare and touch.” She reached out and took her husband’s hand, her brown eyes softening. “Darlin,’ look at how sincere he was when he formally asked, no begged because you didn’t make it easy on him, for our Mary’s hand in marriage.”

“Miriam--”

“Besides, look at the size of that ring on her finger. There is nothing wrong with marrying a man for his money.”

“Mommy, not you too,” Mary rested her head against her fist as she leaned back against the kitchen counter. She shook her head.

“I’m just teasing you, darling.” Miriam chuckled. “Still you have to admit something that big, sparkly and pretty makes it hard to say ‘no’ even if you need time to think about it.”

“I love him and he loves me. Is there anything more important than that?” Mary countered. “*We* want to get married in a small private ceremony--”

“Daughter of mine, I’m sayin’ once again that it is not possible with a family our size,” Joe barked. “We do this right or I can’t give you my blessing. We have been saving up to give you the wedding you dreamed about since you were a child and I will not have my good Christian daughter sneaking off to Vegas as if she has something to be ashamed of. We are going to do it up right or not at all.”

“Okay everyone, I need to know what we are going to do before I talk to Alec tonight; and obviously since Dad isn’t going to compromise, Mommy, you

must decide. Do we have a small wedding in Vegas or a big traditional southern affair here?"

"For once I agree with Mary." Joe looked from his daughter to his wife with a nod of his head he grumbled, "Honey, whatever you decide we will agree to."

"Are you sure what I say will go for the both of you?" She asked.

They both nodded.

Miriam gave them a wide smile and clapped her hands together. "I better get the engagement announcement together along with a photo to send to the local newspaper. Mary, do you think Alec can come here and do a photo sitting with you."

"I think a single photo of our girl will do just fine for the engagement, Miriam."

"Oh Great," Mary shook her head. "Daddy you're getting your way, yet you still want to keep me and Alec apart until the wedding."

"Mare--"

"Come now, you two. There is much to do if we are going to get a formal wedding planned in six months time--"

"Six months!" Mary repeated. "No way, unless you can get Dad to agree that Alec and I can be together."

"You mean have sex?" Joe shouted. "No way would any decent God fearing father agree to such a thing for his little girl."

"The both of you stop!" Miriam yelled. "We are going to have a big wedding and we will do so in *three* months time. Joe you will get use to the idea your baby girl is not a 'little girl' anymore and yes, she has sex. Mary, you will respect your father's feelings and refrain from anymore public sex on the floor of other folk's houses." Mary noticed her mother's lip tremble as she fought to keep from laughing. "Joe, you keep worrying about my sexual happiness and you won't have time to worry about nobody else's bedroom business."

Joe grinned and winked at his wife. "You know I do you right woman."

Mary groaned. She had been a virgin when she met Alec and now that they

had crossed over that obstacle, they could barely keep their hands off of one another. She wouldn't be away from him now if she hadn't wanted to convince her father on the idea of a quick jaunt to Las Vegas with her and Alec to wed.

These days she seemed to be incapable of making anyone completely happy. Alec wasn't happy when she left him, but he tried to be understanding and for that she was grateful. Her dad wasn't happy that she had given up her virginity before marriage and her mother wasn't happy with the idea of a small wedding.

She was an only child to elderly parents and their blessings and happiness were important to her. Making sure that they and Alec, along with his family got along well would determine how their future as an interracial family would proceed. She didn't want to bring children into an intense situation.

It was true what her father had said. She did have big dreams of how her wedding would be. What girl doesn't at one time or another? This was supposed to be one of those joyful moments and here she was riddled with worry.

It worried her that she wouldn't be able to commence her new position as Alec's assistant at work, but they hadn't had the chance through Christmas and New Year's to discuss if she was to continue working by his side now that their relationship was no longer a professional one. Alec probably had to go through the temp service once again. Would he hire an executive assistant who skills were more important than her looks? Or would he return to hiring deceptive educated bimbos whose goals in life was to snag one of Seattle's most eligible millionaires from his best friend, Allison James's, employment service? Well, he wasn't *eligible* anymore; but he wasn't married yet either.

You're wearing his ring dummy, stop worrying. She chided herself. She needed to trust in his love for her or she shouldn't be marrying him. Hopefully it would be enough to keep him faithful and if it wasn't, then it was best to find out before she married him.

In the end of her mental ranting Mary had convinced herself that the time apart would give them the chance to make sure they were doing the right thing. More than the fear of Alec finding someone else to love, Mary feared being another

failed marriage statistic and losing everything after they had built a home and had children.

How was she going to break it to Alec that she would be remaining in Alabama at her parent's? And how was he going to take the news about a big wedding and most likely they wouldn't have a moment alone for the next *three months*?

She groaned.

CHAPTER TWO

Alec Mercer threw down his cell phone with a low curse. He leaned back in the leather office chair. Placing his elbows on the arms of the chair, he crossed his feet on the corner of his desk and closed his eyes.

It had only been a week since they parted but he missed Mary. He called her twice and received her voicemail both times. Why wasn't she picking up his call? The very minute her father insisted that she fly back to Alabama with them instead of returning to Seattle with him and his parents he knew this would happen.

Joe Christmas was still very upset about the position he found Mary and him in upon his arrival. Alec had thought up some stupid ideas over the years but that one had taken the cake, and it also took Mary away from him. He knew the man wouldn't be happy until he made him suffer a little bit.

He couldn't blame him. If he and Mary had a daughter and if he were to catch her making out with some guy, he probably would kill the guy. So Joe taking his daughter far from him until they married was probably a good idea; or so he thought it was as long as they were going to go to Las Vegas soon and tie the knot.

What if she changed her mind? He wondered. "No, Mary loves me. I know she does."

"Then why are you sitting here in the dark worrying about it?"

Alec opened one eye slowly to peep up at his best friend Allison James. He made out her brown lovely face in the semi-darkness of his office.

"I'm not worried," Alec countered. "Besides, what are you doing here in my office this late all up in my business?"

She reached over and cut on the desk lamp and he squinted.

"I've been thinking..."

"Uh-oh."

Ignoring his sarcasm she continued. "If I'm to be your best man/best woman I think I should have a say in the matter don't you."

“You don’t want to stand up for me?” A light frown puckered his brow.

“Mary was a virgin right?” Allison asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?” He tilted his head to the side in question.

“Alec, I may be a dyke but I’m still a woman and I can’t see any girl waiting this long to lose her virginity to the man she loves, happily wanting a quick ten cent wedding in Las Vegas.”

“Your point is what?”

She rolled her dark brown eyes. “I’m saying she deserves a wedding; a real one. It’s not like you can’t afford to give her something wonderful and unforgettable. Don’t you think she’s worth it? Or is this some ploy to appease your guilt from taking her innocence?”

“Of course Mary is worth it!” He snapped. “The only thing I feel guilty about is not asking her what kind of wedding she wants. I assumed she is as anxious as I am to begin our life together and there is no way her father was going to allow her to move in *with me* until we married.”

“Does she want to move in with you?”

“Mary isn’t the type to do the ‘living together’ thing,” Alec said.

“I meant, does she want to move to your place or is she expecting you to move into hers or are you two planning to look for a new home together?” Ally asked.

Alec released a long sigh. He wearily rubbed his fingers across his eyes. How could he be thinking of a wedding when there was so much he and Mary had yet to discuss?

“We haven’t discussed it.”

“Then why are you rushing her to marry you? You knock her up?”

“Of course I didn’t.” Alec paused. His attractive face became contemplative before he answered. “At least I don’t think so.”

“Oh, *damn* Al! The more I hear you talk, the more I think you had no business messing around with the ‘good-girl’ type like Mary.”

Alec stuck up his middle finger and made a face at her. Allison had been his best friend since they were kids. They had hooked up once and after him, she realized she was a lesbian. Every time he thought about it, he wasn't sure if he should feel insulted or not; but feeling no sexual connection to Ally made remaining best friends easy.

There was no awkwardness between them and they talked about everything including the fact that until Mary came along they had the same taste in women with big hips, thighs and curves everywhere. Ally was the only one who knew he was personally attracted to big beautiful women.

"I didn't ask to fall in love with Mary, Ally." He shrugged and grinned. "I just do. She makes me happy."

Ally returned his smile and nodded her head. "I can see that and I know I'm fussing at you, but someone has to be the voice of reason when your head is in the clouds."

"You are right, you know."

"I usually am, but I rarely ever hear you say it." She snorted at him. "So tell me what exactly am I right about?"

"Mary deserves a wedding. A *real wedding*," he conceded. "When I came up with the Vegas idea, it was because I was doing everything within my power to keep her with me; but her father made her feel guilty and she was forced to leave me anyway."

"Old man Christmas wasn't having it; was he?"

"I knew by Joseph Christmas's reaction after catching us together that there was no snowball's chance in hell that man was going to allow me to get my hands on his daughter again without a wedding certificate."

They shared a knowing look and laughed.

"So, we are going to have a wedding? *Damn*. I'll get to throw you a bachelor party and everything." She clapped and rubbed her hands together.

"Keep it tame, Ally," he warned.

"You want the usual super models? Or maybe we can have some drag

queens. That will keep things tame." She gave him a teasing wink. "At least for a few of us. A few of our down-low straight dog friends don't let a penis stop them."

Before Alec could reply his cell phone rang and he hurriedly picked it up to look at the screen and saw the words "My Curvy Sweetheart" on the mini screen. A big smile came to his lips.

"Ally, I meant tame like a poker game, band video tapes from the old days and pizza."

"You're kidding right? Your final night of freedom and you want just a bunch of dicks in breeches playing poker and reminiscing over the good old days?"

"Unless you want to strip for us," he teased.

"You're *fucking* hen pecked already," Ally muttered.

Alec was too happy to disagree. He answered the call. "Hey sweetheart...not at all. You know you can call me anytime. I miss you very much. When can I see you?"

Ally snickered and mimicked the mushy loving change in his voice.

He cut his eyes at her and lowered his legs from his desk to swivel around his desk chair and look out at the skyline view of Seattle from his 33rd floor office.

"Before you tell me what you want to tell me. I need to apologize to you," Alec continued. "For being selfish in doing what I wanted to do without asking you what you want. Neither one of us have ever been married before. I want to spend what's left of my life with you; so I think we need to do this right."

He paused and listened.

Laughingly he said, "Is that relief I hear in your voice? Ah, it stands to reason that your parents would want you to have a proper wedding."

Listening the smile turned into a look of gloom.

"Mary, please tell me I didn't hear you say you promised your parents that you will remain with them until the wedding?" His voice grew louder. "How long did you say?"

Alec was momentarily distracted by Allison's laughter behind him. His

scowl deepened. “Ally is being a pain,” he explained when Mary asked. “Huh? What am I going to do about an assistant until May? Yeah I can ask her. Suddenly you don’t mind my having super models for assistants?”

“Oh for you I have matronly assistants ready to help.”

“Huh?” Surprised Alec swiveled the chair back around to look at Allison but it was Mary that supplied the answer in his ear. “You talked to Ally already? When? Ah...I see. You were giving her advice because you felt she was discriminating in her hiring practices.” Alec repeated with a grin at Ally’s expression. “That’s my Mary.”

Allison nodded at him with a serene smile saying.

“Yup, Ally likes you too. I’m sure you will be great friends.”

Allison winked at him and murmured, “Kissing friends.”

Alec squinted a silent warning; thinking, she better not even think about turning that dangerous female prowess charm of hers on *his* Mary.

“No Mary, I’m not upset. I want this time to be special and memorable for everyone. I want the photos for our children to look at and giggle at how funny mom hair and pop’s hair look.” He chuckled as she threw in her dreams about their future. His chest tightened. He wanted to see her, to hold her and kiss her full mouth until she was breathless and his knees knocked together.

He missed the cushioned softness of her curves pressed against his body and the feel of being deep inside her tight moist warmth. Three months? *Oh God.* He groaned inwardly not wanting her to feel any worse about the wait. He could hear in her voice she was as disappointed as he was, but he could also hear the barely contained excitement in her voice as she talked about a wedding scrapbook she’d had since she was a little girl. How could he deny her anything?

“I want you to have everything you dreamed of Mary. I will extend my help to your parents.” He smiled again. “Yup, I know...I know...but it’s my wedding too and I should help pay for it. I’m not going to argue with you about this Mary.”

“I told you a virginal woman would want a big wedding, dumb ass.”

He glared at Allison.

“We can discuss it,” Alec spoke into the phone. “When can I see you? I miss you. You miss me too don’t you?”

Allison stuck a finger in her opened mouth and pretended to gag.

But Mary was crooning words of love in his ear with a little dirty talk thrown in that immediately brought his cock to attention, so Allison was just a blur in front of him as he smiled and closed his eyes. He pictured his future wife’s wide grin with her short spaced teeth, her full cheeks and heart shaped mouth. The round curved of her dark eyebrows, long lashes over puppy brown eyes.

Her beautiful warm eyes caused him to take a second look at her. Mary thought she could hide her loveliness behind the glasses she wore.

She hadn’t fooled him one bit. He could see behind her modest style of dress and the demure way she sometimes wore her shoulder length hair in a bun at the nape of her neck. She had the feminine roundness a man could get a hold of and sink into. She had a sexuality that was potent, yet she had no idea that men found her attractive. Her being a virgin had been a pleasant surprise. As selfish as it was for someone as promiscuous as he had been, to think it, belayed his arrogance in his pride at being her first lover.

Clearing his throat he opened his eyes. “Uh sweetheart, I’m not alone. Ally is here, remember?” A deep soft laugh escaped his throat. He felt childish and silly but he loved the feeling. “Are you trying to distract me for a reason? I notice you didn’t say when we could see each other.” He listened. “What the hell? Your father is making me suffer painfully, is he? I’ve already apologized a hundred times over since Christmas.”

His face went blank. Apparently, comical even; since Allison fell to her knees out of her chair in silent laughter pointing at his face.

“Mary, you tell him I’m apologetic but I have my limits. I’m not waiting until our wedding to spend some time with you. There is much we need to talk about.”

His eyes closed and he released a long sigh. “I’m not yelling.”

“Yes you are.” Ally said expressing Mary’s exact words.

"I'm sorry," Alec apologized sheepishly. "Did I tell you how *much* I am missing you?" He nodded as she spoke even though he knew she couldn't see him. Alec knew better than to try and out speak a woman. "I love you too and I will call you once I get home. I'm not done with this, Mary. I am not going to wait three months to get some alone time with my fiancée."

"You're yelling again," Allison warned in a sing-song voice.

"Okay, but when I call you later I want an answer as to when I will be seeing you." He rubbed the throbbing place over the bridge of his nose.

"I will be calling your cell phone. If I call on the house phone your father probably will put us on a timer."

He laughed with her when she agreed.

"You want to do what?" He could feel his ears turning red. Alec turned his chair away from Ally again and quietly spoke into the phone. "I'll make sure I recharge the phone before I call so we don't have to rush ourselves. You know I do, sweetheart. You better take a nap. I'm going to keep you up late."

He waited for Mary to hang up first then slid his phone close. With a lingering grin on his lips she remained on his mind. His breathing became labored as he pictured their intimate times together; seeing her eager responses to his kisses and touches. Love was real. Who knew that this crazy feeling really existed? He had joked and teased others never believing it was an emotion he was capable of and here he was in such a short time, feeling as if he was truly living a fulfilling life for the first time.

Turning back around in his chair Alec was startled for a moment. He had forgotten Allison was still sitting there.

"*Shit*, you got it bad, boy." Alison grinned shaking her head in disbelief.

"Yup," Alec nodded and he couldn't stop smiling. "I really do."

"Is it *Minnie Riperton's*, 'Lovin' You' good?" She asked.

"More like *Journey's*, 'When You Love a Woman' good," he replied.

"Oh my *damn*." Allison let out a low whistle. "That's a deep *goosey* nobody want to hear about it kind of love."

“Yup...yup.” He nodded and exhaled a long sigh of contentment.

CHAPTER THREE

Mary stifled a yawn. Freshly showered, she laid across the bed in the bedroom she grew up in with a magazine feature of Alec. Her *fiancée*. How crazy was that?

Giddy laughter escaped her and she buried her face in the pillow and kicked her legs in childish glee. Lifting her head she looked down at the face staring back up at her from the high glossed page and it was a surreal moment for her.

In this particular picture they had Alec dressed casual in a black tank top revealing well-defined arms and shoulder muscles as he crouched in blue jeans with the knees ripped out and unlaced black work boots. She didn't know what the photographer said or did to get him to laugh for the picture but she knew from the full display of white teeth and the laughing crinkles at the corners of his beautiful green eyes, his smile forever caught in time was genuine.

There were so many facets of Alec that she was looking forward to discovering. Not only was he the talented businessman that took a small advertising firm and turned it into a lucrative company; he was also an artist. As she leafed through the magazine at the latest photo spread of Seattle's sexiest bachelors, it was apparent that Alec looked at home in front of the camera. He could have easily made a career as a successful fashion model.

Mary dreaded the backlash that would come once the media got wind that this particular playboy bachelor was about to take himself off the dating market. They would be even more surprised once they got a load of her. She released a long resigned sigh at the thought of her private life being thrust into the spotlight. She didn't know if she was ready. What if she said the wrong thing? She didn't want to see them breaking down her wardrobe piece by piece; nor talk about her weight as it fluctuated up and down like it usually did.

Feeling the fear of change wrenching at her gut, Mary wondered if she

should tell Alec about her growing fears. She decided against it. He already had a full schedule and if they were going to take time off for the wedding and honeymoon before the summer advertising sweeps, he didn't need her adding to his stress with foolish concerns.

Absently her fingertips traced over the magazine photo. His dark hair shaded his brow. She traced the full cherry colored mouth. He had a nice mouth for a man. Most White men she had come in contact with had thin, to nearly non-existent lips, but not Alec. He had delicious kissable lips that sent shivers through her and brought forward a drumming ache between her full thighs.

Mary was taken aback by the lyrical sound of her cell phone lying beside her. She couldn't hide the smile that was in her voice as she answered.

"Hello baby," she gushed. Her nose wrinkled up at sounds of adoration in her own voice. "Wait, I'm putting you on speaker phone so my hands will be free." She pressed the button. "Okay, now what did you say?"

"What are you wearing?"

"I just showered, s-o-o-o I have on a purple floral print satin robe and nothing else," she answered. "What are you wearing?"

"I'm as naked as the day I was born."

She grinned and bit down on her bottom lip to keep from nervously giggling.

"Are your parents at home?"

"Yes, but they go to bed early so they can watch the news and one of those crime channel shows before turning in."

"My heart misses you, Mary." There was a catch in his voice. "My body is missing you too."

She slowly circled the brownish-red areoles of each breast with feathered circular motions of her fingers. Her nipples hardened in anticipation.

"I wish you were here with me right now," she confided. "I know my father thinks it will be better for us to not sleep together anymore until we are married, but I honestly don't want to wait that long. I already feel as if I waited

most of my life to fall in love.”

“I don’t want to wait either, sweetheart.”

She tugged at her nipples and a gasp caught in the back of her throat.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m touching myself,” Mary said.

“Where?”

“My breasts. My...nipples...I’m wishing it was your hot wet mouth on me.”

“Can you feel me kissing the underside of your breast...licking and sucking on your nipples; making those popping sounds that you love?”

“I like the other sound more?”

“What other sound?”

“The *whacking* sounds you make as you stroke yourself.” She moaned her need for him. Her fingers smoothed over the fleshiness of her stomach to run her fingers through the tightly curled hair between her legs. “I love that throat grunt you make as pump yourself.”

“I’m slowly stroking myself now Mary and I’m remembering the feel of your fingers wrapped snugly around my cock.”

“Yeah, I’m stroking that big beautiful penis of yours while I slowly trace the veins with the tip of my tongue. Can you feel me licking you?”

“Yes-s-s-s...”

“Mmm, there is pre-come on the tip. I can’t allow that protein to go to waste.” She smacked her lips. “Alec, you taste s-o-o-o good.” She crooned huskily.

“God, Mary,” he groaned. “I wish you were here.”

“Or you here with me, I don’t care which as long as we’re together,” she passionately agreed. She believed she found more pleasure from hearing how much he was enjoying her pillow talk than the stroking of her fingers against her clit.

“What are you doing now?”

“I have a magazine here with pictures of you in it. You are so *fine* boy! I’m drooling all over these pages. You have such a sexy mouth?”

“You think so, huh?”

“Huh um and that ass of your in those jeans. I could nibble each butt cheek until I get my feel...maybe travel slowly up between the sweet split and...”

Alec hissed into the phone at her words and she laughed softly. Her fingers found the rubbed and strummed at her clitoris with moistening fingers.

I’m imagining your taste Mary; your wonderful musky scent when you’re aroused. My nose bumps against the hood of your clit as I lick and suck your thick pussy lips.”

“Oh, I like that...” Mary panted lifting her hips up to meet her fingers. Her free hand reached up and squeezed one of her breasts. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and moistened them before circling the wetness around her turgid russet nipples.

Hmmm, I can hear that you like that baby...that’s it. Let me hear you moan for me as I lap-up and eat-out that beautiful pussy. Can you feel my fingers spreading you wider so I can fuck you with my tongue?”

“Uh huh,” she managed on a throaty whimper. She was oozing from her vaginal opening and the moist smacking sound from her masturbating. This caused her to thrust earnestly against her hand. Mary rolled over onto her stomach and pushed the pillow beneath her hips. She humped the pillow between her spread thighs with her hand still pressed hard against her pubic bone.

She could hear Alec’s masturbating noises also. He had begun that wonderful grunting sound that told her he was getting close. Neither could manage another word as they pushed themselves towards the mutual orgasm that loomed so close.

“I’m...I’m going...to com...come, Alec. Oh-h-h-h!” Mary’s fisted the Turkish comforter of her bed, not thinking beforehand to pull back the covers in her anxious need. “Oh, Alec...fuck...I do love you!” She cried out and quickly stuffed the comforter between her lips to stifle her scream. Even though her mother and father's bedroom was located downstairs at the opposite side of the house, she realized one thing about herself after being with Alec. She was a

screamer.

Her body jerked and shuddered. The orgasm was sweetly and painfully intense. Mary's asshole spasmed, like a tight lip kiss, at the air as she continued to slowly swirl her hips against her hand to calm herself.

"Fuck yeah, Mary...fuck yeah...Mary..." Alec repeated like a mantra until she heard him gasping for breath and his words turned into garbled nonsense. Then nothing but grunts and garbled throat noises exhaled from his side of the phone line. She could picture his handsome face mottled white and red, his eyebrows puckered as if he was angry at the world, before an angelic peaceful look comes upon his face with a serene smile on his lips. Right now she would be spraying his face with tender kisses, as if she was marking him with her love.

Just when she thinks he has fallen asleep on her, those beautiful green eyes would open up slowly, his pupils so dilated they were the color of the forest at night. It was during those afterglow moments of lovemaking he would smile lovingly and tenderly making her feel as if she was very precious to him before kissing her languidly until she fell asleep in his arms.

Even though she was feeling temporary sated, she felt empty. This wasn't going to be enough anymore. Now that she has known how it felt to be swept up in the maelstrom of Alec, she could never be happy with this long distance loving.

Tears rolled down the sides of Mary's face as she rolled back over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling above her bed. She sniffled.

"Mary," he called out tenderly.

"Hmm," her voice cracked and the tears continue.

"Sweetheart, this isn't going to be enough for me."

"Me either," she admitted with a long exhale of her breath.

"Tell your parents that I will sleep in a separate room, but I'm bringing everything I need with me and I'm coming to Alabama."

Mary's heart soared. "You can really do that, Alec?"

She heard him release a shuddering sigh before he said, "Now that I found you it's killing me to be apart from you. This week has been hell. Even if I can't

make love to you, I need to see your smile and hear your laughter. I need to be there to wipe away your tears and to remind you everyday that you complete me.”

Her heart swelled so much she thought it would burst. The tears began to flow earnestly. It wasn't tears of sadness, but tears of joy. The most terrifying thing about love was the fear that if you were too happy something was going to go wrong to ruin that happiness. She prayed silently that their relationship and love be blessed and protected.

“Mary, are you still awake.”

“Yes. I was just thinking how frightening being in love can feel. I will let my parents know. When will you be coming in so I can meet you at the airport?”

“Hopefully, I can wrap up the meetings I must see to personally. Then I can turn the rest over to my associates and bring along the samples I'm working on.”

“Alec. Thank you for being so understanding and thanks for considering my father's old-fashion demands. I know it must seem childish for a thirty-two year old woman to be concerned about her father's approval.”

“Not at all. I can see how close you are to your parents. He can't be too bad, he raised you didn't he. I'll do this for myself and the children we will someday have. Life will be more pleasant if we all can get along with one another. Besides, I'm the one that created this mess with my foolish antics. This is my payback.” He expressed mirth.

She could hear the strain in his voice. “You sound exhausted. If you can't find an appropriate assistant, I will insist on returning to work. It's bad enough I'm sleeping with my boss to get special favors.”

“Mmm, if that's the case, your *Boss* demands you to be on the next flight home because he's been sleeping alone all week and I'm finding out that I no longer like sleeping alone.”

“This coming from a man that always kicks his lovers out on their ass before sunrise?” She laughed softly. “I guess my big butt in your stomach has spoiled yah, huh?”

“You have ruined me forever,” he declared teasingly. You’re better than a mattress any day.” He went quiet before voicing, “Mary, promise me that even if I’m snoring in your ear over the cell you won’t hang up. Just let the battery die and if the battery holds out through the night I will wake you up with the sounds of me kissing you before I get ready for work.”

She could hear the echo of her own loneliness in his voice. “I would like that. As long as I can hear you breathing, I will feel comforted. Will you sing me something before I fall asleep? I love hearing your voice.”

“I might as well because I’m not going to sleep anytime soon. My body believes our little phone sex was a warm up for some serious lovemaking to come. I’m still hard for you, baby.”

“I feel the same way,” Mary fretted.

Alec had sung to her like her mother used to do when the pain of her *Hidradenitis Suppurativa*, a disorder of the follicles and sweat glands, was flared up leaving her unable to sleep. Even now she was amazed that this wonderfully, near physically perfect man could continue to desire her, knowing the battle her body sometimes raged against her. She spent so many years hiding her body in fear of scorn from her many scars and lesions caused by an illness she had since she was seventeen.

To her delight, Alec didn’t flinch away from her due to her flaws. He soothed her when she was agitated, was understanding when her pains caused her to snap at him and lovingly aided her in cleaning and applying antibiotic ointments to inflamed areas. She had long decided she would never find a love in this world due to her being overweight and sickly, but Alec squashed all the low opinions that she had and made her feel like a desirable woman.

Mary had become accustomed to his singing to her in the quiet darkness of the bedroom they shared once the household was asleep during the holiday season. She didn’t have his fingers delving in her hair to massage her scalp, but she still could appreciate the comfort of his soothing smoky tenor voice.

She found singing to be another one of his many artistic talents. After

hearing him, it didn't surprise her that he had been the lead singer of a garage band a friend started up in junior high with his best friend Allison playing the drums. The more she learned about him the deeper her infatuation and love grew.

Her father had asked her to take this time apart from Alec to think sensibly. He didn't have a clue that even when she was with him she'd over think things to death.

It was only through Alec and his carefree nature she blossomed. She was outgoing and made friends easily; she laughed a lot in front of others and shrugged off their jokes about fat people. Afterwards, Mary would go home and eat her favorite "pity me" fare of microwave extra butter popcorn with a box of sugar babies poured into them while they were still warm.

Her father didn't realize she and Alec had the common bond of secrets. They both suffered silently with their individual pains. Hers pain she numbed with the comfort of food and hours of silent tears while Alec used women and sex as a way to desensitize his guilt over his younger brother's death in Iraq. So as perfect and happy as she allowed her parents to believe her life was after she moved to Seattle, it was all a lie.

What her father didn't know was Mary *needed* Alec and Alec *needed* her. They had quickly become dependent upon each other; with patience, understanding and love become a healing balm for what ailed them.

"Mary, have you heard the song *When You Love a Woman* by Journey?"

His question pulled her from her reverie.

"I love Steve Perry," Mary gushed. "Your voice reminds me of him."

"With the garage band I was in, we sang a lot of Journey's songs because they were all over the music charts. You could get more chicks by doing Journey's songs." He laughed softly.

Mary pulled a face as if he could see it. "I should have known even back then you were a player."

"Only a player in training," he corrected. "Let me put some pillows behind me so I can pretend it's your sexy softness," he murmured. "Okay, *Mrs. Mercer*, let

me know when you're tucked in on your side and hugging your pillow the way you like to do."

"You notice how I like to sleep?" She remarked, pleased.

"You sound surprised." He let out a long audible sigh. "I also notice no matter where we sleep, be it my bed, your bed or on the floor, you favor the left side. One of the things I come to look forward to the most is watching you sleep. I lean in and nuzzle my nose to the place between your neck and shoulder. The warm smell of you eases me into dreamless sleep." His voice grew was thick and unsteady with emotions as he spoke. "I miss sharing my bed with you."

Tears burned in her eyes. Her voice was shakier than she would have liked when she said, "I feel disjointed without you. I swear once we marry we shall never spend another night apart if it can be helped. But thank you for understanding I needed this time with my parents."

Mary stood up and peeled back the bedding and scooted beneath the sheets. She settled the full page face shot of Alec's sexy face on the empty pillow beside her. Settling down she could also hear the rustling of bed sheets over the phone line and pretended he was settling in beside her. Laughter erupted from her when she heard a thudding sound and cursing.

"Are you okay?"

"I hit my damned elbow on the corner of the table. I've been sleeping in this bed for eleven years and I still do that every once in awhile. I think I need smaller bedside tables."

"I wouldn't know. You've been to my place and I've been you your holiday home, but I've yet to see your home in Seattle," Mary reminded.

"You will, sweetheart, as soon as you return home. We do need to decide on living arrangements after the wedding. I think moving in here will be best because I have building security which is necessary now that you are to be my wife. But of course if you like, the penthouse apartment can be temporary until we choose a home we both approve of."

Mary couldn't believe they considered going to Las Vegas for a quick

wedding. They were about to combine two households and two separate lives. Both of them were independent and reasonably contented living alone. They now had to get accustomed to sharing...everything. There was so much they haven't discussed yet.

Already it was assumed she would be the first to compromise even though she fully understood his reasoning. Her life was about to become as public as Alec's was. She could only hope that once he settled down, the rumors and assumptions about his life would do the same. Her father was going to have to be more understanding. She and Alec should be sharing this special time together adapting to one another needs. They needed to learn their differences and like mindedness. Otherwise, how could they begin to lay the ground work for a successful marriage?

She imagined this fear she felt inside happened to every woman before she married. It probably was the reason her mother made the choice she did about planning a big wedding. It would give her the time she should take to reflect on one of the biggest decisions, next to having children and buying a house, she would ever make.

"I'm ready for you to sing to me, baby."

Mary closed her eyes, her lashes shadowing over the flesh fullness of her cheeks as she rested her face against her arm while she held her pillow as if it was Alec.

He began singing with staid calmness. She admired his surefooted assertion. She had heard the song countless times, yet hearing those words coming from her lover's mouth gave it a brand new meaning because he was speaking to her from the deepness of his heart even though the words had been written by another.

Mary was discovering falling in love over and over again with this man was going to be the easy part. Building a life together will be another matter entirely. What if it became impossible to blend two cultures, two sets of dreams, two personalities and two single lifestyles? What if love wasn't enough? She didn't want to give up her home and the life she knew if in the future they were going to allow something to come between them. To her, marriage meant forever after.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mary was far from being the happy bride. One week had turned into two and two into three since she and Alec had agreed that he would be coming to stay with her until the wedding. Obviously, it was easier said than done.

One of the executives he was going to delegate some of his duties to mother died and he took leave to go back east to handle her affairs. The other had fallen during a skiing jaunt and was in traction for the next six weeks. If she didn't know better she would think the fates were fighting against them.

Since Alec's new temporary *male* assistant, Robert, and her mother had exchanged a conference call in regards to announcements and press release of the engagement, Mary had become a social butterfly. People she had not spoken to in years was calling and inviting her out to tea, lunch and/or dinner.

It was going to be the wedding of the season. Everyone that was anyone was expected to be there. Suddenly her dream wedding was turning into a nightmare. The last time she looked at the guest list her mother put together and the emailed listing of Alec's, they were up to over three hundred people.

As she sat at the table listening to her mother and the wedding planner go back and forward over the flowers, she doodled on the invitation book in front of her.

"Mary?"

It took two calls of her name before she realized her mother was calling out her name. "Huh?"

"Dear, is Alec allergic to any foods? What about his family?"

Mary was momentarily speechless. She had no idea. Oh God, she was about to marry this man and she didn't even know what he was allergic to. It hadn't even dawned on her to ask and he hadn't bothered to ask her either. What are they thinking? Also, would he always be this busy? Would she be spending their entire

marriage sitting alone at home waiting for his call or waiting for him to return from yet another business trip?

Mary's eyes misted over with tears. "I...I don't know," she said in a broken whisper.

Miriam released a long sigh. "Marceau, why don't you take my daughter's wedding scrapbook to the living room and see if you can draw some ideas from that and we will discuss it in a few."

"Will do," he said cheerfully. Accepting the book, he gathered up his satchel from the dining room table and swish swished out of the room.

Mary brushed a tear from her cheek and pushed her glasses back up on the bridge of her nose. She chanced a look at her mother across the table where she saw an older and slimmer version of herself with the exception of salt and pepper hair styled in a cheek-length bob and tapered into a V at the nape of her neck staring back at her with concerned brown eyes.

"Are you okay baby?"

"I don't know," Mary murmured. "I'm trying to get into all of this wedding planning." She shrugged her round shoulders. "But I feel somewhat disjointed. You know?"

"No I don't know. That's why I'm askin' *you*. Tell me what's going on? You and Alec have an argument."

"No," she shook her head. Her single ponytail brushed against her t-shirt clad shoulder. "I suppose...*I guess*...I'm feeling a little disappointed."

"Mare, it's your wedding if you are unhappy with anything we've done up until now, this is the time to speak up so we can change it honey."

"It's not the wedding in particular," Mary tried to explain what she was feeling. "I just always thought when I got married my husband-to-be would be by my side and we make all these decisions together. Also it would give us the opportunity to learn even more about each other."

"I can understand that," her mother said.

"Yet here I am in Alabama and Alec is in Seattle--"

“Don’t you talk on the phone every day?” Miriam leaned back in the dining room chair and folding her hands together across her midsection. “I know every time I’ve spoken with him about something he’s always end the call saying, “Tell my sweetheart I love her and I will call her when I get home.” I tell ya, that White boy got some love for you child,” she chuckled. “I can hear him grinnin’ from ear to ear every time he says it.”

Mary smiled, yet another tear glided down slowly and she wiped it away looking up over the rim of her glasses. She sniffled and took a discarded tissue from her jean pocket. The tears had been coming on their own accord at inopportune times so she made sure she carried tissue with her at all times.

“I know he loves me and I love him too. But what if it’s not enough, Mommy?”

“It must be enough because he proposed and you accepted. You two were gun-ho to shoot up to Vegas and marry. So why now are you beginning to doubt if what you already know about each other won’t be enough to sustain a marriage?”

“It’s just...”

“Just what?” Miriam queried. When the answer didn’t come fast enough she said, “*Daughter*, one of the exciting things about a marriage is discovering things you didn’t know about each other and to do so every day of the rest of your lives.”

“Really?”

“Of course; would your mamma lie to ya? Your daddy and I had to plan our wedding while apart. He was away at Veterinarian school while I had just started a teaching job. I came here and started setting up house for the both of us while planning a wedding.” Miriam shook her head and laughed out. “We didn’t have the resources like you do at your disposal. Between your daddy and that man of yours, girl you are getting a wedding that befits a queen. Now me? I didn’t have the money or a mother around to go through the little planning I did do.”

“I know. I’m sounding ungrateful, aren’t I?” Mary grinned sheepishly.

“Pretty much.” Her mother cocked a refined eyebrow at her. “I suppose in some way I chose to have this big wedding for you because it’s something I had

always wanted for myself. I'm sorry if I had anything to do with the unhappiness you are feeling now. You know how your momma can get, so just pull me in when I start getting out of hand. This truly is your and Alec's wedding, darlin'."

"I suppose I'm feeling a little guilty too." Mary muttered with a half smile.

"Guilty? About what?"

"I want Alec here with me so badly, but in a way I'm relieved he hasn't been able to get away yet to come here," Mary confessed aloud.

"I don't understand. I thought--"

"Yeah," she interrupted. "I want him here and I don't want him here because I haven't told daddy yet that he said he was coming and when he did come he wanted to stay here with us in the house."

"Are you asking if he can sleep in the same bedroom also?" Her mother shrieked. "Mary, now you know your father—"

"He even had Reverend Blankenship up in here the other day preaching to me about the ways of the flesh and I don't know where it is in the bible, but he mentioned why would a man 'buy the cow,' which I didn't appreciate by the way, when he can get the milk for free."

Miriam chuckled. "Oh that's original."

"Please, tell me where in the bible does it say that?" Mary snorted. "Geeze, Mommy. Daddy is drivin' me crazy. I see if I was still in my teens, my early twenties even but I'm nearly thirty-three and this is not the 1950's!"

"Just keep going along with it and do what your daddy did with my daddy whenever he got to come home from college for the holidays. Wait until he goes to sleep and sneak him into your room."

"No mommy, I can't believe it!"

"Oh...*please!* Your daddy know *what's what*, he's just tryin' to fool yah into being good. But in truth we couldn't have had a better child or be more proud of you. You made a good choice of a husband and you waited until you fell in love to lose your virginity right?"

Mary nodded.

“Then what else could a parent ask for in their child? Of course your father is putting on this big righteous show for you. I’m sure the church folks too since he is born again, but back in the day...” Her mother slapped her lap and shook her head.

“Girl, he wasn’t a bit worried about *my daddy*, your Pawpaw Albert’s, concern over my morals.” Mary winked with mirth. “*Lord*, help me.” Her shoulders shook with laughter and she waved her hand. “Joe was somethin’ else then and he is somethin’ now.” Miriam leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial tone. “Keep this between you and me; but that night after you two were caught doing the nasty on the floor, once we got to our room, Joe laughed his ass off.

“Mommy, your face is all red. I can’t believe you are blushing,” Mary teased.

“Mare, you go ahead and tell Alec to come on down here; just in case he is holding back comin’ here because of your father. He probably doesn’t want to just show up seeing how you haven’t spoke to your dad yet. Alec is too nice to tell you or me that your daddy is being a pain in the ass.”

“Oh my goodness,” Mary shook her head in disbelief. “I never considered that this could be the reason nothing seems to be going well enough at work for him to get away. It would be like Alec to make up excuses to give me more time. He has asked me almost every night if I had talked to Dad yet and I told him I wasn’t sure how to bring it up.”

“*Look here*--if your daddy even looks like he is going to act a fool over this, I will take care of him myself. But this is yours and Alec’s wedding. It’s time to start makin’ good memories. This young man is investing his future with you, just as we trust him to make and keep you happy. I want you to enjoy this life altering moment of your life.”

“You really think everything will be okay. I don’t want to ask Alec to come here and have him to get his feelings hurt or have him feel uncomfortable,” Mary reasoned.

“I think you need to get your man here gal; that way I can get me some pictures of the two of you together so we can get started on your wedding album.”

“I love you so-o-o much.” Mary crooned with emotions. Pushing away from the table, she practically skipped around the table to wrap her arms around her mother’s neck pressing her face to hers in a hug. “Thank you, Mommy. You always know how to make me feel as if everything is going to be okay.”

“Of course it’s going to be okay and if your daddy takes any of this happiness out of your special time, I will buy the tickets for that quick wedding in Vegas and call this entire circus off. You know he doesn’t want to disappoint his congregation and Reverend Blankenship. He’s probably already had a new perm put in his hair for the occasion and he will preach on your daddy until he make things right.”

“Can anyone besides *mom*s get a hug up in this joint?”

Pulling apart from her mother, Mary turned at the sound of a deep voice coming from the patio doorway off the dining room.

“Well damn, look what the cat dragged in,” Mary teased. Placing hands on her ample hips, she eyed him from his white sneakers to his black jean clad legs and further up until she met his eyes again before commenting, “If it ain’t the one and only Dr. Cedric Thomas.”

“Miss Mary Christmas,” he returned her jest. “I have officially come to you since you haven’t bothered to call and let me know you’ve been home for a few week.”

Mary found Cedric as chocolaty delicious as she had when she was a girl of twelve and realized she no longer wanted to punch him. As she looked at the full shape of his wide mouth smiling at her, she remembered those were the first lips to ever kiss her. Unfortunately for her blossoming heart at the time, it wasn’t a kiss of love but one of genuine affection and the curiosity of two kids learning how to kiss with each other before they kissed someone they “really” loved.

Mary returned his smile at the memory. It all seemed so innocent and childish back then. But the tears she shed in the passing years to come were painful

to remember.

“Come here girl,” Cedric growled playfully. He tugged her against him and wrapped her in a bear hug.

When Mary felt her feet lift off the floor her eyebrows shot up in surprise. *Damn, he’s gotten stronger over the years*, she silently thought. Well in all honesty his shoulders were wider, his chest and arms more muscular beneath the expensive black leather jacket and he weighed a lot more now than what he did back in the day.

“Put me down boy, before you get hurt or worse drop ME and break something I might need,” she giggled. He lowered her to her feet and held her back by the shoulders to get a better look. Mary adjusted her slipping glasses back on her nose.

“Is it me Mare or have you gotten prettier.”

“They say that’s what being in love can do for a woman,” Miriam said.

“*Love* huh? Good to see you as always Mom Miriam.” Cedric winked at the older woman placing a kiss to her cheek while still holding onto one of Mary’s hands.

She looked at their palms clasped together. His hand swallowed hers. It felt the same, comforting and protective.

“It’s always good to have you here Cedric, dear. What are you up to this evening?”

“I came to kidnap your daughter.”

“No way, I’m not dressed to go anywhere and my hair is in a ponytail.”

“You look good to me. Besides, you don’t have to get dressed up for where I’m taking you.”

Mary looked at her the digital display of the microwave over the stove. Alec would be making his nightly call in a couple of hours and she couldn’t wait to tell him about the conversation she had with her mother. If he was waiting for the green light of approval before coming to be with her, she would give it to him tonight.

She felt a tightening to her fingers that brought her out of her reverie of Alec to look up at Cedric. She was greeted with another smile that curled his top lip over beautiful even white teeth.

“Where did you go?” He asked.

“I was wondering if I had enough time to go out with you. Maybe we should hang out here,” Mary suggested.

“So now I need to make an appointment to see you?” He drawled and shook his dark head. The dining room chandelier lighting glistened down on his fashionable short edged haircut with its tapered sideburns blending neatly into a neatly groomed beard and mustache.

“No, but Alec...my fiancé usually calls me at nine every night and I don’t want to miss the call,” Mary explained.

“Alec?”

“Mercer.”

“Alec Mercer...Alec Mercer? Why is the name familiar to me?”

“If you pick up a People or Forbes magazine, Cedric, you’ve probably seen the young man in there,” Miriam supplied.

“Oh...snap, crackle and a pop,” Cedric mused. “Hmm, you got it like that, now, Shorty? You found you a brother on the Forbes list?”

Mary blushed. “Well you know how it is,” she laughingly teased him with fluttering eyelashes and a saucy grin. She didn’t correct him on the “brother” part. The name may be familiar to him, but apparently he hadn’t placed the name with the face yet and she didn’t think it should make a difference one way or another.

“I do now.” He spoke in that deep husky way that used to curl her toes. She had heard him countless times using it with other girls over the telephone but she had never heard him use it with her before.

“I don’t know...”

“Dear, go ahead and go out. If Alec calls the house phone I will tell him that you are out with friends and to call your cell phone.”

“Thanks Mom Miriam.” Cedric called out tugging Mary along behind him

as he quickened through the dining room sliding glass door.

“Was that Cedric I heard?” Joseph asked as he strolled into the dining room, his thumbs hooked inside his front trouser pockets.

“It was and you well know it?” Miriam turned in her chair to train her eyes on her husband.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Cedric never comes over without calling first. I didn’t hear the phone ring so that means you called him.”

“I don’t know what you are implying,” he muttered looking away from her knowing eyes.

The phone shrilled and Joe scurried into the connecting kitchen to answer the call.

“Hello, Joe here. Alec...well, I’m good...I’m good and you? That’s good. If you’re calling for Mary she is out on a date.” He grinned turned in time to see Miriam stroll into the kitchen with her arms crossed over her breast and a stern look. He corrected himself, “Uh...did I say date? Heh...heh...it’s not really a date per say. Mary is out with a childhood boy *friend*--”

“Joseph Christmas,” Miriam warned.

“Well, Cedric is a *boy* that is a *friend*. Yeah, that is what I meant to say. Can I give her a message...ohm, well I’m surprised Mary never told you about Dr. Cedric Thomas. That is strange because those two were together all the time growing up. Mary and he...”

“Give me that phone, *old man*,” Miriam muttered taking the phone from his loose fingers. “Alec, hello sweetie, I’m doing fine thank you. Mary should have her cell phone with her. Yes, well Cedric is more like a brother if anything.”

She shot Joe another menacing look for stirring up trouble where there wasn’t any.

“You are callin’ early tonight, is there something wrong? Oh you were just thinking of her and you are *missing her*?” Her eyes shot a knowing look at Joe as she repeated his words aloud.

“Alec, I know you love her. She loves you too, dear.” Miriam crooned with a wide smile. “Just between you and me, our Mary is feeling a little depressed that you aren’t here to make the wedding plans with her.”

She paused as she listened.

“I didn’t see her being depressed,” Joseph mumbled in the quietness of the room.

Miriam put her hand over the mouth piece of the phone. “You aren’t seeing a lot of things Joe. You better get on board this train while you still have a daughter who gives a *hoot* about your feelings.”

“Miriam, what does that mean?”

“Alec, I’m sorry about the misunderstanding. I told Mary as much. At this time let me personally extend an invitation to you. We have plenty of room here at the house so there is no reason for you to get a hotel room; you’re family. No, it’s no bother at all--”

“Not yet he ain’t.”

She put up a finger to hush him.

“I won’t hear of it. You and your family welcomed me and my family in your home during the long holiday when you didn’t have to do so.”

“Don’t shush me woman.”

“Oh, wonderful son, Mary will be so happy...okay, if you want it to be a surprise I won’t tell her. I understand,” she chuckled. “Oh, that sounds wonderful. Now, I’m embarrassed that I didn’t call and invite you personally as soon as we returned home. I will tell Joe and you too, dear. Have a safe flight and we will see you when you get here. Bye bye.”

Miriam put the cordless back on its cradle and braced herself for the argument that was to come.

“Have you gone completely mad Miriam? You are going to put those two horny kids under the same roof as we sleep. I suppose next you’re tellin’ me they are going to be sleeping together too!”

“No, I was thinking of putting Alec in the guest room but if you keep trying

to come between Mary and that boy, I'm going to do just that and tell them to get started on me a grandbaby!"

Joe cursed softly.

"You take the Lords name in vain one more time, Joseph Christmas and I swear that you will be in the other guest room," Miriam warned.

"If I'm in the guest room, I will at least be on the same floor as those two to make sure he doesn't go creepin' into Mary's bedroom."

"Oh like you use to do....through my bedroom window when my dad was asleep?"

"You didn't tell Mary about all that did you?"

"You bet I did."

"Aw Miriam," Joe whined. "You might as well have given our daughter permission to have sex on OUR den floor by the fireplace like we caught her doing at the Mercer home."

"Don't worry. I told her if she must scratch the itch to do so more discreetly."

"Oh, you are trying to kill me, woman."

"You are too stubborn to see you are breaking our daughter's heart during the happiest time of her life. I allowed you to have the time you needed to get use to the idea by choosing to have a large wedding. Don't make me my regret my decision."

"Miriam we both know our daughter must live a low-stress life. An interracial marriage will be nothing but stress. How can Alec help with her illness?"

"He helps by accepting the fact that she has one. One that is painful, scarring and occasionally limits her mobility; yet he didn't run away."

"Cedric is a doctor. What better care could she receive than the care of a doctor in her own home, baby?"

"I like Cedric, Joe. I really do, but Cedric didn't date our daughter during her high school years. He didn't ask her to marry him and he had no problem leaving her behind when he went and married the girl whose father just happened to

know people on the John Hopkins board.” Miriam took it on herself to point out the things that Joe was conveniently forgetting. “He had his shot and he had the chance after he divorced Monica, yet he still didn’t seek out Mary? Do you really want to trust Cedric with Mary’s future happiness?”

Miriam thought the vein in Joe’s forehead was going to burst he was so livid. Yet she was too miffed by his interference to appease him. She stood on the side of love and her daughter was in love with Alec Mercer and her heart told her the man was sincere in his feelings.

Refusing to argue with Joe any further Miriam left him to stew alone in the middle of the kitchen.



Cedric pulled into the parking lot of a corner convenient store and waited in the car after buying some sodas while Miriam went to the bathroom.

A lyrical sound of an old school tune he was familiar with, “Our Love” by Natalie Cole, was coming from the passenger seat. Lifting the cell phone up, he checked out the display and saw the words “My Husband” come up on the display.

He put his hand on the door handle of his Mercedes to take the phone to her knowing she was waiting on the call and paused at seeing her with glasses now off and her shoulder length hair loose about her shoulders. She threw back her head and laughed. He could see the guy behind the cashier was flirting. Mary was looking more vibrant and alive than he remembered.

Her smile was infectious. He grinned and shook his head in wonder at the rapid beating of his heart. Mary always had a beautiful smile and a great laugh, but he had forgotten how easy it was to be with Mary. He’s never met a girl that was sweeter, or more attentive. She was kind to all including those that hadn’t been kind to her, such as his ex. Mary was the opposite of everything Monica was. How could he not notice how pretty Mary was years ago?

He had made a mistake once for choosing ambition over his closeness with Mary and he thought until today when he heard from her father, that she wouldn’t want anything to do with him after he broke his promises and let her down by going

to a different college. Yet, when he saw her in the dining room tonight it was like they had never parted on less than amicable terms.

Cedric looked at the blinking cell phone he was holding in his hand playing. He moved his hand from the door handle and settled back in the expensive leather seat. He put his finger on the button of the phone and pressed the “power end” before slipping it onto the floorboard and scooting it beneath the passenger seat.

“Alec Mercer...Alec Mercer. I know this name...” Cedric spoke softly to himself. Snapping his finger he realized where he heard the name. They had a mutual acquaintance; a woman he had a brief encounter with while on a convention trip. It was the first time he had cheated on Monica.

The woman had an “encounter” with the well-known confirmed bachelor and business mogul. Knowing the circles in which his lady friend traveled, he was impressed that Mary had snared such a catch. He wouldn’t have thought she would be this man’s type, much less be the one woman he would give up his bachelor reputation for. He wondered what Mercer and Mary’s story was and planned on finding out as much as he could about his competition before he returned her home.

But first he placed a quick call to his old friend to see if the number he had for her still worked. It did and they exchanged a few words starting with him telling her why he was calling. He was a bit surprised by her heated reaction to his news. But seeing how Mary was finishing up inside the store, he hurried the woman off the phone with the promise to call her again tomorrow so they could catch up on “old” times.

Cedric smiled and winked at Mary’s smiling face as she came out of the store. Unfolding himself from the car, he made his way to the passenger side and opened the car door for her allowing his hand to touch and linger on the small of her back before she slid into the automobile.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alec towel dried his hair as he walked out of the South African tile slated master bath, with its glass enclosed fireplace, of the exclusive high-rise penthouse apartment. Imported Italian furnishings, maple hardwood floors and all the luxurious conveniences he could ask for made up what some in his financial class would consider a “modest” home. Alec could have went bigger and better, but he fell in love with the 18th floor view overlooking downtown Seattle, Washington.

The navy blue towel wrapped about his lean hips rode low and brushed against his knees as he padded his way on bare feet to the dresser. Picking up the bottle of iced-cold sparkling water off of the dresser, he screwed off the cap.

Taking a deep swig, Alec burped and strolled over to the window and peered out at the picturesque night skyline. Romantic rock ballads played softly in the background from the expensive multiplex stereo system that was piped throughout the apartment.

Taking another drink from the bottle, his eyes fell on the clock. It was after eight his time and Mary was two hours ahead of him and she had yet to return his calls.

Not once since they had been apart had they missed the set time of their nightly phone chats and tonight they were an hour late. Alec didn’t want to admit what he was feeling, for the emotion was lost on him. He had never been jealous of a woman before nor had he been overly worried he and Mary were having problems during their separation until Miriam Christmas had pointed out that Mary had been depressed because he wasn’t there.

Alec felt it would be best he not go to their home until she discussed it with her father. He didn’t want to show up on her family’s doorstep and piss the man off even more than he already had because he “deflowered” his daughter before he married her. He couldn’t believe there was anyone who thought such things these

days and times, yet he didn't know any virgins over thirty until he met Mary and that had been a pleasant surprise.

Damn, he didn't like feeling vulnerable at the thought that Mary had not returned his call because she was out with this Cedric fellow, but what made Alec feel worse was he could hear it in Joseph Christmas's voice that he had approved of the other man wholeheartedly.

Alec now wished he had insisted that they married on New Year's Eve in a private ceremony. They could have been together tonight making love and making plans for a bigger second wedding for their families to attend. Hell, he loved Mary so much he'd marry her every month if she wanted to.

Drinking the last of the contents of water, he turned away from the window. Alec placed the empty bottle on the dresser in passing and sat down on the side of bed. His elbows rested on his spread knees. He reached over and picked up his cell phone to see if he had missed her call while in the shower. He hadn't.

Alec hit redial and it went straight to Mary's voice mail. His hand tightened around the phone before he slid it closed and tossed it back on the bedside table. He clasped his hands in front of him, his dark damp head lowered while his broad shoulders drooped forward.

The muscles in his jaws quicken and his nostrils flared with his growing agitation. Closing his eyes in a resigned sigh, he made a decision. Reaching for the phone once again, he speed dialed a number and waited. It rang three times before the party picked up.

"You do any drinking within the last forty eight hours? No," Alec rolled his eyes. "I don't want to go out drinking. I want to go to Alabama. Yeah, you heard me right. I want to go now instead of tomorrow afternoon. How long will it take you to reset the flight plan? That will be fine. Call me when it's a go and I'll call for a limo. Talk to you soon."

Alec clicked the phone off. His suitcases were already packed by the suite butler. All he had to do was get dressed and head out once he got the call. Without

further hesitation he headed for the dressing room to slip into something comfortable for the flight. He was determined to be with Mary before the night was out.

He paused. What if he got there only to find she was staying out with her “friend” all night? Alec shook his head. He couldn’t allow himself to think that way. Mary wasn’t that type of woman.

As Alec was slipping on his boxer-briefs, he heard the music of his phone. It wasn’t the “Our Love” song Mary had set up on his phone with “My Wife” to come up on the display. He rushed to answer the call just in case Mary was calling from another phone or it could be the pilot.

“Mercer,” he called into the phone a little winded by his hyper movements.

“I hope I didn’t disturb you.” A feminine voice with a soft accent spoke softly through the ear piece.

He didn’t recognize the voice. But why should he? If it wasn’t Mary, she was just one of many from his past.

“As a matter of fact, I was preparing to go out of town.”

“Then, I should get to the point. Do you know who this is?”

“No.”

“Francesca Faustina.”

Alec brow puckered in a thoughtful frown. “Francesca Faustina,” he repeated. “Ah...yes, you’re the art courier from Italy?”

“You do remember.”

“I remember. I’m just surprised that you would be calling me. Gosh, Francesca it’s been what--”

“Exactly, six months ago,” she supplied.

“Have you returned to the states?”

“I’m set to return next week and I was hoping we could get together.”

“I...I don’t think that would be a good idea Francesca. Things have changed. Believe it or not I’m happily engaged now.”

“I’ve been at my parent’s chateau in the country. They choose to remain cut off from worldly distractions when they go out there.”

“I see,” Alec said though he really didn’t. Why was she calling him? “You just want to congratulate me?” He nudged along her hoping she would say whatever she called to say.

“After hearing the news, I knew it was best that I contact you *sooner* than later. Now that the emergency period has passed, I feel safer in telling you.”

Alec felt a heaviness suddenly sweep over him and his fingers tightened on the phone as he cast a glance at the bedside clock.

“I hate to be rude Francesca, but I must be leaving soon for the airport. I...”

“Alec now that I’m close to my third trimester I feel comfortable in telling you now. I’m pregnant...with *your son*.”

Alec felt as if his entire body went numb. His knees buckled and he was thankful for the bed as he slowly descended.



Mary, finally glad to be home, tore the house upside down looking for her cell phone. She had checked in her purse and couldn’t find it; leaving her wondering if she’d left it behind on the dresser beside the bed. But it wasn’t there nor was it under the bed.

Her mother had told her Alec had called right after she left and her father had told him about her going out with Cedric. Even though she had nothing to feel guilty about by going out with an old friend to catch up on everything, she would have liked to have been the one to tell him about Ced.

She imagined he wouldn’t be too happy, not so much about her being out all evening with a friend but because she hadn’t been reachable while she was gone. Mary did something she rarely did. She cursed softly and came up off her knees from searching beneath her bed. Picking up the house phone she called her cell number to see if she could find it that way.

It rang two times and she hit the intercom button on the phone. She moved to search the other rooms when suddenly she heard a man's voice over the speaker. She stopped and turned in surprise.

"Uhm...Hello, Mary's phone."

"Hello, *who* is this?"

"Mary, is that you?"

"Ced? Oh, thank God! You found my freakin' phone? Where was it?"

"It was beneath the passenger's side seat."

"It must have fallin' out of my pocket."

"Do you want me to turn around and bring it back to you--"

"No...no, don't be silly. If you can drop it off tomorrow sometime, I will appreciate it," May reasoned.

"Will do."

"Can you do me one favor?"

"Anything for my girl."

"Check and see if I have any missed calls or is there a little mailing on the display indicate messages?"

"Uhm...no Mare, it doesn't look like you got any calls. Sorry, guess your man is distracted tonight, huh? Good thing you decided to go out with me or you would have stayed home sitting by the phone for nothing."

"No he called and spoke to Mom and Dad. But he said he would call me back. It worries me when he doesn't check in," Mary worried her bottom lip. "He could have been in an accident or something."

"I'm sure he is fine and you know worrying isn't good for you Mare. If he really loved you like you say he does, shouldn't he have called again and left several messages by now?"

"Cedric, thanks again for everything. It was good for us to finally talk again about some stuff we left hanging."

"We have to do that again...*soon*."

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.” Mary shuffled from one foot to the other. “I mean...I have a lot of wedding stuff to tend to in a very short time.”

“I hope to see my invitation in the mail,” he laughed off her brush off.

“Of course and you must bring *a date*.” Mary hope the implication wasn’t lost on him. “Thanks again for finding my phone and for this evening. Goodnight.”

She hit hang up and immediately tried Alec’s home phone. It clicked and she knew it would automatically transfer her to his cell phone. She waited and instead of hearing the live voice she longed to hear, she had to make do with the sound of his voice on his cell mailbox.

Looking at the clock, she noted it was early enough that he could still be pulling a late night meeting at the office or he could be out to dinner with some of his business associates. With a resigned sigh Mary undressed and went to take a shower.

Even though she felt the warmth of the shower spraying across her breasts and then her shoulders as she turned her back to it, she was still tense about her evening out with Cedric.

Their relationship had changed. She no longer felt comforted by just hanging out with him. He had changed or maybe it was she who had changed because she now had another man in which she would forever compare all men to; and for her, they would all come up short next to Alec.

She could feel Cedric trying to reach out to her like he used to but this time it was intense because of the continuous flirtation and his need to touch her face, her shoulders or grasp her hand in his and hold it as he drove. It wouldn’t have bothered her if hadn’t been for the boldness of his touch.

The way Cedric’s thumb stroked her palm with the familiarity of a lover made her prickly to the point that she felt as if he was more of a bothersome distraction than a good friend.

He also had been very curious about her relationship with Alec, yet not to forthcoming as to why he and Monica had divorced. When he had asked her out to

lunch for tomorrow, she had politely declined. Now she was beginning to wonder if he took her phone just to use it as an excuse to see her again.

Mary unwrapped the towel that she had put around her head to keep her hair dry while she showered; then pulled her hair back and looped it in a silk ponytail holder before placing a satin sleep cap on. She made her way into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed to continue her nightly routine. She rubbed the cocoa butter lotion on her damp skin until the creaminess became clear and her skin glistened under the soft lamplight.

Next she took a cotton pad dampened with a mixture of peroxide and witch hazel and used it to clean the areas prone to flare up from her Hidradenitis; then she put antibiotic ointment on them before setting her care basket of personal items aside and slipped on her terry cloth robe. She pulled back the covers on her bed and settled in to read the latest Aliyah Burke interracial novel while she waited on Alec to check in.

CHAPTER SIX

By the time Alec arrived outside the Christmas's household the sun was clearing the horizon. He had called Miriam on her cell phone to give her his estimated arrival time and she had placed a key for him under the mat and told him to come in.

Since they didn't live that far from the airport he had no problems finding the place with the help of the GPS device in the Navigator rental he picked up at the airport.

Miriam assured him that he and Mary would have the house to themselves for the day. She did volunteer work at the local Children and Women's Center and Joe would be going fishing. Sitting in the rental with the motor running to keep warm from the early morning chill, he watched from down the street as Joe waved to another man sitting in a truck with a boat trailer behind. He got in and passed right by Alec without even a glance his way.

Soon afterwards, true to her word Miriam exited the house; an attractive split level Tudor home that was teamed in a neighborhood of attractive Tudor, Ranch and Cottage styled homes. If it hadn't been for the worry he had on his mind, he would have let her know he had arrived safely and thanked her for her help. But as it was facing Mary was going to be difficult enough.

For all he knew after he told Mary about Francesca's call, he probably would be gone before Miriam and Joe returned and he wouldn't blame her one bit for ending things. Still, the thought of losing the one woman he'd ever love tore at him and almost weakened his resolve to be honest.

Alec pondered the thought of not telling her until after she married him and the thought that he would stoop to something so low disgusted him. He pushed the thought aside knowing when you truly loved a person, *honesty* was the only thing you could do to build a trusting relationship.

Standing at the door of the Christmas's home with the retrieved key from under the mat in hand, Alec let himself in. Upon entering, he realized he had no clue as to which was Mary's bedroom. He decided to search the downstairs rooms first before heading upstairs.

The Christmas' really had a lovely home with hardwood floors, stylish furnishings and warm to neutral color schemes throughout the rooms. He found one bedroom downstairs that appeared to be the master suite. Being unsuccessful at locating Mary downstairs, he made his way up the stairs. As his hand touched the wooden railing his lips turned up in a smile. He remembered Mary's adventure of sliding down the stair railing of the Mercer's holiday home with no underwear on under her long nightshirt.

He could chuckle fondly at the memory now, but he had been terrified upon finding her in such a vicarious position. She could have killed her fool self when her hands slipped and sent her swooshing down the handrail.

Remembering how he had rested with her on the floor while she recovered from the embarrassment, he realized it was a turning point in their relationship from being boss and employer to something more substantial. He believed his fear at the possibility that she could have died from the fall made him realize how important she had become to him.

The feelings of protectiveness he'd felt over her well-being at that moment were new to him. He wanted to have the right to hold her in his arms, kiss her full mouth and take care of her when she was hurting from her illness. It was only after learning of *her secret*...the physical pain she lived with and the shame she had for the surgical scars that marred her body, had he been able learn why the woman that spent her life making others happy, was living her life alone and unhappy. The more she shared with him, the more protective he felt and the deeper he fell in love.

Once he reached the landing of the second floor, he looked first to the right then to the left choosing to go to the right towards the only door closed on the second floor. He passed a bathroom and two other rooms, which appeared to be guest rooms before reaching the closed door.

Lifting his hand he started to knock before realizing he wouldn't be seeing anything he hadn't seen before. They had been too intimate with each other's body for him to knock as if he was some stranger.

Walking in, he went to stand beside her bed. She was lying on her side with the covers pulled up to her chin and he grinned at seeing the satin sleep cap she had on her head. She never wore it when she slept with him. Obviously she realized how much he enjoyed running his hand across the silkiness of her thick dark hair as they cuddled, so she left it unhindered for him.

Alec enjoyed watching her sleep. It was one of the things he had come to look forward to by being in a serious relationship. His motto was to *never* allow a woman the opportunity to spend an entire night in his bed. It kept their relationship in perspective and made her aware that she was only a temporary distraction at best. That was the old Alec.

He liked the man he was when he was with Mary. He felt as if he could be himself completely, not just the millionaire bachelor playboy with a new woman on his arm every night.

There were no secrets he hadn't wanted to share with Mary; including his secret identity as the retired artist *Marceau Rubenesque* who had become wildly popular and obscenely rich from the portraits and sculptures of voluptuous "overweight" women. This led Alec to believe there were more admirers of the bodacious bodies than what statistics spoke garnered a man's "idea" woman.

In spite of his reputation for dating models, he'd always had a secret passion for full-figure women and Mary fit his mold of perfection. It was through his attraction to this beautiful kind woman that made him realize he no longer wanted to hide behind the persona he had created out of what other people expected from him. He had nothing against a thin woman, but he didn't want to spend the rest of his life sleeping and making love to one every day of the rest of his life.

Alec glanced at the red digital display on the bedside clock. It was only half past six in the morning and he surmised he should let her sleep a little longer. He

wished he could allow her to continue dreaming and believing all was as it were when she went to sleep, but he couldn't risk her family returning home before they had a chance to talk.

He didn't look forward to causing her the pain he had felt when he received the news that he might be a father. He was still disbelieving because he always wore protection in the past, but there was always that one possibility because abstaining was the only sure thing and he definitely never abstained. The longest he'd ever been without sex was during the time he realized he only wanted Mary and he realized after learning of her illness that there would be times when making love would be physically impossible for her.

Yet in the past, he also assumed one woman was as good as another. He realized now how chauvinistic and asinine his way of thinking had been.

Alec squatted down beside the bed. Leaning forward, he brushed his nose against her arm. He didn't think there was anything more arousing than the smell of a warm sleeping Mary. He closed his eyes for a moment and pulled in her coco butter scented brown skin. His hands tightened into fists and he bit down on his back teeth fighting down the tears that burned and threatened to spill.

Alec was scared. He was scared Mary wouldn't be understanding and continue to stand by his side. He was scared that if she did believe he hadn't known about this before he seduced her, her father would demand she break off the engagement. Joe Christmas would have the ammunition he needed to confirm Alec was everything he thought him to be.

Drawing back, Alec stood and shrugged off his black leather jacket. Looking about the room for the first time he smiled. His home was full of neutral colors of black, white, beige and obviously Mary's taste were more exotic and full of color. The burnt orange focal wall is where the king sized wooden frame bed was placed. The adjoining walls were soft white chocolate along with the trim.

Mary's chosen salmon pink comforter with orange floral stitching wasn't his taste, but it worked in accordance to the rest of the room causing him to feel like he was in a Turkish harem.

He was thankful her taste didn't run to more frilly bed linens and curtains. He hated a bunch of flowers and lace in a room. This room he could rest in peacefully even though he imagined himself propped up against the various colors of decorative pillows in shimmering satins, beaded silk with tassels and fringes in the corner of the room awaiting his harem to feed him dates and dance half naked for him.

Alec moved to place his leather jacket on the settee. There was a contemplative expression on his face while he walked around touching items and picked up gilded frames of family pictures, many of whom he hadn't had the chance to yet meet. He lifted the golden ornate brush from the mirrored tray and realized to his surprise his Mary was a foolish romantic. She had the bedroom fit for a princess.

He heaved a sigh. She wouldn't be happy living at his penthouse apartment the way it was. Her townhouse in Seattle was decorated in an Asian style, so she obviously didn't mind decorating in natural simple furnishings, but even in the simple furnishings of her townhouse he remember seeing colorful pillows strewn about the place.

He made a silent vow that if she stayed with him, she could have free reign to change everything. Still, from the looks of the entire home in general, Mary was a girl use to a loving home with a yard big enough to hold, from what he could tell from the pictures, a huge family. Alec realized that there was much to learn about Mary. Marrying her was only the beginning of discovery between them. His heart ached at the thought of not having the opportunity to find out what awaited them in the future.

There were pictures of holiday dinners and cookouts. It was much like his and his younger brother's upbringing. He wanted their home to be a place where both families could congregate and blend together.

"What will I do if I lose you, sweet Mary?" He mumbled.

Walking back to stand beside the bed he looked down at her sleeping form. She had turned over and kicked off most of the covering. One short brown leg

with its dimpled knee and thick thigh rested in a sprawled position while the other was bent at the knee beneath the covers with only her pedicure foot with its gold toenail polish sticking out. He remembered the first time he noticed she painted her toenails with gold polish he was sucking her big toe into his mouth. His cock hardened from the thought.

He took a seat on the edge of the bed and ran a hand along her leg. Silently he longed for a sketchpad and pencil so that he could sooth his urge to draw her and make her forever immortal on canvas. Since being around Mary's voluptuous presence on a daily basis he felt the urge to bring his artistic person "Marceau Rubenesque" out of retirement.

He was known for his paintings depicting big beautiful women in romantic settings and in spite of the critics negative opinions, his paintings were accepted with gusto by the public and he sold every painting for ridiculously large amounts of money. It was *this money* that had enabled him to open his own advertising business and expand to other avenues that made him the multi-conglomerate business mogul he was today.

He lived with the secret admiration of loving curvy women like Mary, yet dated the complete opposite by strictly choosing the most beautiful super models, actresses and socialites to sport on his arm at public functions. Alec had done what he thought others would expect for the magazine's "Most Sexy and Eligible Bachelor" for three years straight.

He stopped listening to others and started listening to his heart and last Christmas, Mary was sent to him. So if he were to do another exhibit, the entire show would only feature drawings, paintings and sculptures with Mary as his inspiration.

He wondered if she would sit for him after he broke her heart. He wouldn't be surprised if she were to oust him from her life completely. She might even quit working at Mercer's Corp. and then he would never have any chance running into her. What if she chose to stay in Alabama again, just to put distance between them?

Alec's agonized expression deepened. Fear, stark and vivid, glittered in his green eyes. He gulped hard. A hot tear rolled down his cheek. He closed his eyes.

"Alec?"

The heavy dark lashes that shadowed his sculpted cheeks flew up. His reflex was to cover his emotions. He quickly washed a hand over his face and drew in a deep breath through his nostrils.

"Mary," his voice cracked.

She stared wordlessly at him. They both froze in a stunned tableau. He was embarrassed to have been caught being so emotional.

Mary was the first to break the spell as she sat up and threw herself against him. Her arms stole around his shoulders and she pressed her unhindered breast against his chest. Only her simple cotton nightgown and his shirt came between them.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you are here. Please don't tell me I'm dreaming you being here because I miss you so much," she cried passionately.

He tried to pull back to look at her face and she tightened her hold.

"If you are about to kiss me don't. My mouth taste really funky, I need to brush my teeth first," Mary muttered.

Alec chuckled. "As if we haven't kissed this way before; it's okay sweetheart."

"No, it okay when we both have stinky breath. But when it's only one of us, you will notice the stinky burps."

"Stinky burps?" He laughed. Her southern twang was more prominent since she had returned back home to her family.

"Do yah know what the definition of a stinky burp?"

"I'm afraid not." His grin grew wider. His hands smoothed up and down her back.

"It's called a stinky fart with manners."

"Huh?"

"You don't get it?"

Her sleep filled voice was raspy and adorable to his ears. His gut tightened even more so at the idea of losing his right to hold her this way.

“I think I’m going to hate asking this.” He shook his head and asked anyway. “Go ahead and tell me why it’s a stinky fart with manners.”

“When you burp and it stinks you apologize, but when you fart and it stinks you don’t say a word because you don’t want anyone to know it was you. So that makes it a stinky fart with no manners.”

It was a silly and childish joke but still he laughed because it was like Mary to try and cheer him up. Most women would have immediately asked him what was the matter, but his sweet Mary made him laugh first and he knew that she would wait patiently until he chose to tell her why he was upset

With a deep sincere chuckle he squeezed her tighter to his chest, thankful she couldn’t see it when another tear glided over his cheek and dissolved into the material of her modest nightgown.

“Mary, I received a call from a woman I used to date. She told me she was pregnant and it’s...*my child*,” he blurted out before he lost his nerve.

If he allowed himself to continue holding her without telling her the truth, he would lie to her to keep her by his side and he never wanted lies to come between them.

He felt her hold loosen and knew she was preparing to withdraw from him. The thought of him losing her was more painful then he imagined. His hold tightened.

“Alec,” she breathed his name in a whisper. “*Nooo*, Alec.”

“Mary, don’t pull away from me. Not yet,” he pleaded. “While you’re still mine let me hold you just a little while longer.”

“Alec,” she sobbed against his shoulder and he felt his shirt tighten across his shoulders as her hand clutched and fisted the back of his shirt. “If you are about to break our engagement because you prefer to be with this woman, how could you, if you love me?” She paused and drew in a shaky breath.

“Mary--” Alec murmured her name disengaging her arms from his neck so that he may lean back to look into her face and make sure he was hearing her right. “What are you saying?”

“Finding out you are having a child with another woman shouldn’t make you stop loving me overnight unless what you are saying is that you don’t want to spend the rest of your life with me anymore.”

“Mary--”

“I mean,” she interrupted. “If you want to end what we have just because of this baby, shouldn’t we be sure it’s yours first? Shouldn’t we have a paternity test done before we decide to put our future on hold?”

Did she say “we”? Alec was stunned silent. He expected anger, disappointment and her demanding that he get out of her life, but he hadn’t anticipated Mary’s logical reasoning.

“What are you saying sweetheart?” He asked cuffing her full face in his hands. “Are you saying you aren’t going to leave me over this?”

“Did you have sex with her after you met me?”

“I would not do that to you.” His voice was rough with anxiety. “She said she was in her sixth month.”

“In her sixth month,” she repeated her voice rising. “And she contacts you now? Why?”

Alec released her face and ran his finger through his dark hair. “She said she has been having problems with the pregnancy. She didn’t want to contact me until she was sure because she has a history of miscarriages.”

“Which means she’s been pregnant before by God only knows who else. So, there is no way I’m going to give up my shot at happiness for her sake.” Mary said in a harsh raw voice. “No sir, for once in my life I wanted something and I got it and I ain’t giving it up unless it’s over between us! I’m not talking about a third party coming between us and we part just to make *them* happy.”

“Do you mean that; even if the third party is...your father?” He chanced asking.

“Alec, if we succeed or fail it will be because of what happens between you and me. My father blows a lot of hot air but in the end his only concern is for my happiness and my well-being.” Mary reached out and caressed his lips with the padding of her thumb. He grasped her wrist and pressed kiss to her open palm.

“Besides, I’m a firm believer that no one can come between us unless we allow it. It’s as simple as that,” she finished.

“I agree but this will just give your father one more reason to believe I’m not good enough for you.”

“You’re not.” She grinned and winked at him. “But I’m hopelessly in love with this good for nothing man. What am I to do?”

He smiled even though his heart was still heavy with the added burden he put upon them because of his promiscuous past. “Just trust me and know that I would never betray that trust, Mary.”

“I can do that,” she nodded. “But you have to have a little faith in me too baby. I could see it all over your face when I woke up. You thought I was going to just kick you out of my life didn’t you?”

Alec gathered her into his arms and he held her snugly. “I wouldn’t have blamed you if you had. I don’t remember ever having unprotected sex, but there is always the possibility. If this child is mine--”

“If the child is then...what’s her name?”

“Francesca Faustina.”

“Isn’t she the Italian model and actress I see in the magazines dating as heavily as you did?”

“That’s the one.” Alec cleared his throat. “Who would have thought someone that dated as much as I did would have been careless enough to get pregnant?”

“It happens. But in the end it doesn’t matter if it was intentional or not. What matters is the welfare of the child,” Mary said logically.

“It’s a boy, Mary.” He supplied. “What if he is mine?”

“We sue her for joint custody and pay child support. We will work it out for the child’s sake. It’s no longer about what is comfortable for any of us. It’s about making the boy feel, whether he is at her place or ours, he is in a safe and loving environment.”

“You would go through all of this for me?” He smoothed the nightcap from her head and her hair tumbled to her shoulders. “You would help me raise another woman’s child?”

“I would do all of this for *us*.”

Her head fit perfectly in the hollow between his shoulder and neck. Her breath was warm and moist against his throat that she exposed by releasing the first three top buttons of his shirt.

“Thank you,” he whispered into her hair. “Thank you so much.”

“Baby, how can I hold your past against you when I came into this relationship with eyes wide open?” She pushed his shirt off his shoulders and nipped his uncovered flesh. “Unless you can look me in the eyes and tell me you want to be with Francesca Faustina instead of me, I’m in this with you one hundred percent.”

Alec groaned as Mary shifted and straddled his thighs. His hardening penis pressed almost painfully against his zipped up jeans. “Never; I love only you.”

“I love you too and I want to marry you as much today as I did when you first asked me,” she confessed openly.

The bold caress of her lips against his collarbone and along his throat set him aflame. He dipped his head and seized her mouth with his.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In spite of the foreboding news Alec brought with him, she was happy to wake up and find him in her room sitting on her bed. Mary had fretted all night over whether something had happened to him until she fell into an exhausted sleep.

They had been apart too long. Even though she could see the stressed etched-in lines around his tired eyes and mouth, it was her Alec. His chiseled, angular face was in need of a shave, making him look primitively masculine. She ran her fingers through his dark silky hair.

He returned her stare with brilliant green eyes from beneath lowered heavy lids. His smile was weary but it didn't stop him in his haste to pull her nightgown over her head and take their loving a bit farther than heated kisses and clumsy touching beneath the constricting clothing.

"Mary, I missed you." His breath whispered over her lips as he brought his mouth closer.

Mary's blood rushed in time with her heartbeat. Her pulse bounded and her throat went dry. Raising her arms, she curled them around his waist. She grinded her naked moist pussy against his hardness and in frantic movements reached between them to unfasten and unzip his jeans.

Trembling from the havoc of sensations that were rushing through her, she pulled him free of his jeans and undershorts. She took hold of his member and slowly began to pump the hot silky foreskin back and forth.

The sensation caused Alec to release her mouth with a groan and he leaned his head against hers as they both stared down at her brown fingers fisted around his fullness. He was so hard her fingers couldn't breach the width to touch.

Mary enjoyed looking at his cock; she loved the heady sexual muskiness that came from his aroused state even more. She welcomed Alec's fingers between her spread knees as she maintained her seat astride his thighs. The wider he spread his knees the wider her pussy opened up to his touch and when he inserted two

fingers she was ready for him.

“I...I don’t think I’m going to be able to wait until I take my clothing off. I want to fuck you so bad.” Alec’s voice was raspy and his face was beaded with moisture.

“Then fuck me,” she moaned riding his fingers. Tugging his cock towards her open slit he blocked her with the hand between her legs. “What?” She stilled an agitated scowl on her flushed face.

“Do you have condoms?”

“We’ve both been tested,” she reminded him spraying kisses over his face.

“I know, but if I get you pregnant now with so much going on...” He wavered. “Hell, Mary I wish I didn’t care, but I really do want your dad to like me.”

Hearing his sincerity, Mary paused and pulled back to look at him. “I’ve seen my old family gynecologist since returning here and you don’t have to worry about me getting pregnant,” she assured him.

“Good,” he nodded. “I know it sounds selfish but I want you to myself a little while before we start having children.”

“I suppose that is going to be difficult if that baby turns out to be yours. We will then only have the duration of planning our wedding before we would become parents,” Mary said saucily. “So are you really worried about what my father thinks or you just don’t want to have a baby with me just in case you’re already having one with *HER*.”

Their turn of conversation should have dampened their ardor but it didn’t. They had been separated too long and the discovery of lovemaking between them was still new, causing the anticipation to ride the both of them hard.

“If you would want it I would give you a house full of babies. You think that it doesn’t fucking turn me on to think of your belly swelling with my kid?”

Mary knew it turned him on because she could feel his penis continuing to lengthen against the palm of her hand. The thought of it turned her on too, as if she needed any help. Her knees pressed into the mattress as she squirmed to impale herself on him.

“I think you talk too much for a man,” she muttered, silencing any more protest with her mouth.

She released his lips with a yelp as his broad hands clasped her full hips, aligning her to fit his own. Without effort he impaled her in one deep thrust causing her to cry out. It didn’t hurt as much as losing her virginity but there was still a moment of stinging sensation as her tightness adjusted around his fullness. She didn’t remember him being so big. Maybe it felt that way because he had nearly spread her thighs into a split by opening his knees wide.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” He managed to ask through gritted teeth.

She bobbed her head with closed eyes and gripped his shoulders. He released a grimacing grin when she started to glide up and down the length of his shaft. “Oh God, I forgot how wonderful it felt to be inside you.”

“Were you always so big? I don’t feel as if I can take all of you in me this way,” Mary panted in short puffs. Her thick thighs quivered from the intensity.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little if you go too deep, but oh...oh shit, you’re hitting my spot when you do it that way.”

“You mean like this?”

“Oh...Oh,” she cried out throwing her hand over her mouth praying no one had returned home early. “Shit!” Mary gave herself over to him and ceased thinking. All she could do was feel a churning building sensation. Her breathing came in gasps.

Alec eyebrows shot up and a smug smile came to his lips. There was something sexually decadent about making Mary curse during sex. She rarely if ever said a cuss word, but he noticed it was something she did regularly when making love. She also was very vocal and he found it sexy as hell.

All he could think of was making love to her long enough to make her make those sounds again and again. It was times like this he was thankful for his advance experience. It aided him in assuring that his partner got her satisfaction before he did, even if he couldn’t last as long as usual.

“There you go, Alec.” Her eyes rolled and closed. “Just like that.....*oh yeah...THERE...don’t stop...don’t stop...oh yeah...fuck* yeah; I’m I...I’m coming!” Spasms shot up her pussy and wetness gushed. The muscles of her puckered ass hole pulsed and beat to the tempo of her heart that felt as if it was about to burst. Her mouth dropped wide and she hadn’t realized Alec’s hand was over her mouth until she heard her muffled screams. She rode out the orgasm with trembles and shudders as she fell forward against his chest in a swoon.

Alec found it a hard task but he continued to move with shallow strokes until she whimpered and bit his shoulders. He chuckled realizing she needed a moment of stillness to recover but he couldn’t stop his cock from pulsing and jerking inside her.

He wanted to come something fierce but he wanted to prolong her pleasure just a little longer before he gave into his needs. He was so tired he knew the moment he gained his release he would fall asleep. The rippling of her wet and tight inner walls was milking him, encouraging him to come with her. He bit down on his back teeth and willed himself to be patient.

He spent the past month without her, losing sleep and praying that the few times he had made love to her wasn’t so intense because she had been a virgin or because his love for her clouded his imagination. There was no way two people could be this good together. Although he was sexually experienced, his powerful ejaculations made him feel as if it was the first time he had orgasm. Mary brought out a vulnerability in him that was disconcerting.

When she started to move again, Alec gripped the bedding. His jean clad ass scooted when he increased his pace to match the one Mary set. He stopped moving. At this point all he was doing was holding on the best he could while Mary rode him. They had started their sexual adventure vicariously close to the edge of the bed for Mary to be getting so carried away.

Preparing to cup Mary under her full heart shaped bottom to flip her over onto her back onto the mattress, Alec realized it was too late. Mary had found her spot again with the head of his cock and she was going for G-spot orgasm number

two.

He was strong enough to hold up under the pressure of the first one, but there was no way he was going to keep from shooting his wad when she comes again and start rippling along the length of his cock. Alec braced himself as she became frantic in her movement. What he hadn't expected was her fingernails cutting crescent shaped moons into his furred chest. He hissed out in pleasurable pain and reflectively grasped her wrists.

Suddenly Alec no longer felt the mattress beneath his ass and his long fingers closed tightly upon her arms. She gasped and cried out in sudden alarm as they slid off the bed. It was Mary that got the brunt of the fall while he landed still between her spread knees and the cushiony softness of her plump body.

They looked at each other stunned for a moment and began to giggle like foolish teenagers. It took a good moment before Alec could inquire if she was okay or not?

Mary could only manage a nod. Bringing around his left arm he folded it beneath her head. Rising slightly until he cast a shadow over her from the sun peeping through the cracks of the window blinds, Alec lowered his head and stole a kiss from her laughing mouth.

Deliberately he took his sweet time. Her mouth parted and he plundered the arousing nectar that was Mary's taste alone. Their fervor easily mounted. He rocked against her, able to go deep within her in the missionary position and he partially own his side. He smoothed his hand along her thigh, feeling the smooth spot where skin had been grafted. It was like the skin of a newborn. It was so soft to the touch. He guided her leg over his lean hip and held it with his hand.

It made him happy to see she no longer felt inhibited by her scars, weight, and imperfections when making love to him. He imagined that was also why this lovemaking session had been even more pleasurable then the others. She was opening herself up to him completely; holding back nothing. His eyes burned and shimmered with emotions. He was so proud of the confidence she exhibited.

A soft sigh slipped from her as his lips caressed over her chin, down to the

side of her neck before latching onto a hardened nipple and suckling. He wished he had a mirror so he could see the erotic picture of his fully clothed body rocking against the brown nakedness of her limbs wrapped about him.

Unconsciously Mary threaded her fingers through the short-cropped hair that rested damply on his nape. He released her nipple with a wet “pop” to look up into her pretty face. The heaviness of her lids and the growing smile told him all he needed to know.

He released her thigh and moved until he was flushed between her spread knees and his eyes bored into hers, their noses nearly touching. He reached out and his long fingers clasped with her brown fingers in an unspoken communication of love and commitment. His hands looked very pale against hers, but the fit was perfect.

Moving against her softness he contemplated the site of small, white teeth against her bottom lip. She sucked that lip into her mouth as he slowly withdrew and released it when she moaned out her pleasure as he seated himself deep until his balls slapped at her ass.

He loved how Mary’s stout curves could take the grinding of his hips against her and he didn’t have to suffer the agony of bone against bone. If he weren’t so tired he would have greedily stayed there forever and eventually passed out from exhaustion.

“I could lose myself in you forever, sweetheart.” He drew in a ragged breath.

“You don’t know how much it means to me to know that I please you Alec. I was afraid my lack of experience would turn you off,” she admitted truthfully. Lifting her hips, she met his slow rolling movements against her.

He let go of each hand long enough to allow her to ease his opened shirt from his sweat glistening body. His mouth blended with hers once again as their hands rejoined and they answered the call of the driving need to appease a burgeoning, primitive need.

She met his strokes with vigor and a pleasurable spiraling sensation in his

groin blossomed. In the stillness of her bedroom he could hear his own hoarse ragged breathing as his hands clutched her tightly. Her turgid nipples pressed and brushed against his chest as the moisture of skin against skin areas slid and wetly slapped together in an erotically musical sound.

When Alec felt as if the vein in the side of his neck would burst from the strain of holding back for so long, his world reeled off its axis. He saw fireworks displayed behind his lids as he closed his eyes and buried his forehead in the perfect place between her ear and shoulder. It was the roaring muffled sound of waves crashing in his hears that signaled his orgasm.

“*Arrgh!*” He grunted and jerked against her as his testes tightened and his ejaculation shot forth in a burning mind blowing penis-jerking release.

Collapsing on top of her, he felt her legs and arms envelope him in a cocoon of loving warmth. He felt all the worries and concerns he had experienced while being apart from Mary easing out of his twitching frame.

Alec understood, while lying in her arms, that instead of them growing apart due to their forced separation and unforeseen tribulations, they grew even closer than before.

He was even ready to face Mary’s father, Joseph.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joseph was agitated and rightly so. He was sitting down at the dinner table with two guests; an unexpected Alec Mercer and a personally invited Cedric Thomas. Noting that Miriam had thawed out an adequate amount of steaks to feed the extra company, it was obvious his wife had kept it from him that Alec was coming to Alabama for the wedding preparations.

He realized being on the other end of the spectrum that he was playing the starring role of the father, Spencer Tracy in *Guest Who's Coming to Dinner* and suddenly it didn't feel entertaining at all.

I'm not a bigot? Or am I? He thought to himself. No, can't be. I just think Mary doesn't need a man who's never proven he could faithful to one woman.

Joe glanced over at his daughter and Alec with their heads together. His biddy baby girl was practically glowing. He didn't recall ever seeing her smile so much; at least not the kind of smiles that made her eyes twinkle like they were now.

Alec leaned in and the two of them exchanged a loving peck like he and Miriam often did. Joe grimaced as their lips met and decided he may be a bigot after all. It never mattered to him when he saw someone else's daughter with a White man, but for some reason it perturbed him royally when it came to his own girl.

He reckoned he was envious of the fact White men had always gotten their way without their fellow man trying to break down their dreams. It was why the Mercers in the world were millionaires several times over. They took what they wanted including a Black man's woman. If he must be honest with himself, he must admit it did hurt him that his daughter wasn't taking *his feelings*; not as her father but as a Black man, into consideration.

Stealing a look at Cedric, Joe saw the man was gripping his salad fork so tightly he was surprised it didn't fly across the table and put Mercer's eye out. He

wondered if his daughter's health would hold up under the daily stress that an interracial marriage will bring to her life.

He and Cedric cared about her and felt disturbed seeing the two of them together. He could only imagine the reactions that were to come from complete strangers, especially since she was marrying not only a wealthy man sought by many single women, but also a man whose bachelorhood was very publically known. There was even a rumor on the internet that he had been approached by one of those "Reality" TV shows to find a perfect love match for him.

"Err, Mercer, how long will you be staying?" Joe was the first to speak up.

"I will be staying until after the wedding, Sir."

"You can stay away from your *responsibilities* that long?" Cedric piped in a question of his own.

"Yes, I was wondering the same thing myself." Joe leaned forward in his chair placing his folded hands on the table in front of him. "Don't you have an empire to run?"

Alec grinned and shook his head. "Not quite an empire; however I have enough responsibilities to not be able to abandon them entirely. I will be making a trip to my southern regional offices in Atlanta at least twice a week. My more important meetings and responsibilities have been rerouted there for the time being."

Mary looked from Cedric to her father and exhaled. "Have you checked on the steaks, Daddy? Alec and I like our steaks medium-well."

"The steaks are in the warmer, dear," her mother answered instead. "I take it with all this yapping at my blessed table everyone is ready for their steaks and potatoes? Mary, come and help me in the kitchen."

"I--"

"Go ahead sweetheart, it will be okay." Alec squeezed her hand, that was resting on the table, reassuringly.

Even though she didn't think it was a good idea to leave the three men alone while the tension was evident, she slid her chair back, stood quietly and followed her mother out of the dining room.

In the kitchen Mary absently prepared plates while straining to hear any unpleasant noises coming from the other room.

"How is your health holding up? I know this stress you're under could easily cause your HS to flare up." Miriam soothing voice broke the lulling silence. With oven mitts she removed the twice-cooked potatoes from the oven and placed the glass dish on one of the wooden trivets on the countertop.

"I've had some burning sensations beneath my skin, so that's never a good sign," Mary confided. "Mommy, what am I going to do about Dad?"

Mary reached and opened the cherry wood cabinet door and removed several dinner plates.

"I'm so sorry darlin'," Miriam began. "I had hoped that tonight we could have a nice family dinner and get past whatever is going on with your father. I didn't know that he invited Cedric to go fishing with him this morning and invited him to dinner without telling me. Well, he will hear about that later."

"It's okay, because Alec showed up unannounced." Mary shrugged. "Alec and Cedric were bound to meet sooner or later, but I don't like the idea of the two of them teaming up against Alec."

"I don't either. Your young man is a guest in our home and it wasn't quite unannounced. I knew he was coming and he wanted to surprise you," the older woman admitted. "I just think Joe needs to remember we owe Alec the same comfortable hospitality that he and his family showed us during the Christmas and New Year's Holiday."

Miriam turned and opened the oven door to check on the thick cut garlic toast she'd placed in there after removing the potatoes.

"I don't know what's up with Cedric. You said he's been separated and divorced from his Monica for three years. So why is he now just acting like a jealous lover?" Mary frowned. "I was a single woman up until a few months ago and I

would have given my soul for him to have noticed me romantically at least once. I haven't changed only my single status and here he is flirting with me and acting as if we had something more than a friendship."

"Child, I can't even begin to tell you I know what men are thinkin'," Miriam chuckled. "I can only surmise that now since you are unavailable, it makes you more attractive and not to just any man, but one of the most publically known eligible men in the United States."

Mary rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Well, does that mean he is jealous over me or of the fact that Alec is successful?"

"Sweetie, I don't know if it's jealousy over you or..." Miriam hesitated to speak her thought.

"Or what?"

"Well...Mary, your father and I were born and raised in the south during a time when we weren't allowed to share a water fountain with White folks. We boycotted the busses and participated in protest sit-downs at the counters of restaurants that wouldn't serve "Colored" folks. So I can understand why your father wouldn't feel comfortable with the idea his only child, the child that was a pleasant joy to have been conceived late in life when we had gave up all hope, is marrying into the race that showed us so much disdain and bitterness."

"I grew up looking at all the pictures and reel-to-reel footage of all that you've done for the rights of Blacks in the south, but I also saw in those pictures it wasn't only Black folks fighting and dying for our rights." Mary reminded. She removed forks from the utensil drawer and placed them on top of the plates.

"Mommy, there were White people in those pictures too," she reminded. "Tell me, what is the point of you and Dad gaining all this freedom for me and others if you are going to treat Alec with the same attitude that some White people use to have for us as a people?"

"Mary--"

"I want to know why the both of you raised me to demand respect while being respectful to others and their differences; to understand that there is equality

in all things, including love; and when I finally found that love, to hold onto it with both hands.” Mary moved the plates and forks to the rolling service cart.

“Sweetheart, I know we did, but--”

“But what, Mommy? I’m asking you what was the point of it all if when a situation that calls for that open understanding behavior you demanded of others isn’t being implemented. It’s embarrassing when my own father is being completely disrespectful with the man I love simply because of the color of his skin.”

“Mary, it’s more than color and you know this. “You also know how your father felt about you having sex before marriage.” Miriam eyebrows lifted. “I’m sure of the fact he feels you were seduced by a man that is more experienced in such matters would also be an issue for him,” Miriam reasoned.

“Still,” Mary murmured. She worried her bottom lip in agitation.

“Mare, I’m sure it riles your father a little bit that Alec is White. He after all is a Black man first, but I like to think his anger has more to do with the fact he believes you were disrespected by Alec’s actions.”

“I wasn’t forced into sex with Alec, Mother.” Mary spoke softly. “I wanted him to be my first even if marriage wasn’t on the table. It was *my choice*, so Dad should be upset with me for disappointing him.”

“Dear, you waited until your thirties,” Miriam reminded. “Couldn’t you have waited until you married? I mean...really.”

“When we discussed this when I was thirteen, you didn’t say wait until I married. You said to make sure my first time was with someone that I loved so that I wouldn’t have any regrets about it later, preferably after I married the person I loved.” Mary reached over and squeezed her mother’s hand. “I waited and after thirty-two years, I fell in love. Even if he hadn’t proposed to me I had no regrets about making love with Alec. He was gentle, loving and kind.”

Miriam eyes watered with deep emotions. “I’m so glad to hear that, dear.”

Mary smoothed a soothing hand up and down her mother’s back, their heads together. “I waited because I wanted what you and Daddy have. I *know* it

won't be easy with people disapproving of us being together, but Alec and I have the foundation it takes to build our home and family."

Miriam nodded and touched her daughter's face with a soft and loving hand of understanding.

"Mommy, I don't want to have our family and friends chipping away at our foundation. Strangers can't hurt us half as much as those we love. I need you and Dad helping me to stay strong over those who oppose our union."

"Because of Alec's standing in the public eyes, there will be more issues than race coming at you, darlin'. Women can be jealous just because you got a man and they don't. It's ten times worse when you luck up and get a 'good' man." Miriam clucked her tongue. "We women are our worse enemies when it comes to relationships."

"Well, I don't expect other women to be loyal to me. They don't owe me nothing but sisterhood. However, I do expect my man to be loyal, not only to me as a woman, but to the promise he makes to me by marrying me or choosing to make a home with me." Mary pulled away from her mother and donned the oven mitts to remove the bread from the oven.

Miriam reached over and shut down the oven. "I completely understand. Don't know why women beat each other down over a man, as if he doesn't have a mind of his own." She finished spooning green beans into a serving bowl and placed it on the cart. "Most of the time the other women don't know the man is married because he's lied to her. So sisters' beating down sisters is just childish nonsense."

"I guess we better get the food out there and make sure all the steak knives are still on the table where we left them," Mary chuckled shaking her head. She pushed the cart, laden with food to be placed on the table, so that everyone could serve themselves.

"I still haven't had the chance to speak long and thoroughly with your father but I will make sure I do so tonight. He is gruff around the edges but his heart is good and in the end he is going to want what I want...your happiness."

Mary nodded her appreciation.

The meal continued in companionable silence with only praises and appreciation for the blessings of the food being served. Unfortunately the peace only lasted until the table was cleared and the dishes were put in the dishwasher. Once they entered the family room all positive progression faded with a simple statement.

“Alec, I do believe we have a mutual friend,” Cedric was the first to speak. The statement seemed innocent enough.

Alec now sat relaxed on the camel colored leather sectional sofa with one leg cross over his knee and an arm draped behind Mary’s shoulders as she pressed into his side. Atop his knee their hands rested with fingers intertwined.

“Do we?” Alec cocked a dark eyebrow in question. “Is it someone in the medical field; a co-worker of yours perhaps?”

“Actually, it’s the daughter of a patient that I was called in on as a second for her treatment.”

“Really.” Alec sensed this was leading up to something and he wasn’t going to like it. “I’m sure we probably have more than one acquaintance due to the different Commerce I’m associated with. But that is not here nor there is it?” Alec’s green eyes narrowed on the other man. “You brought up this particular associate because you had a purpose didn’t you, Dr. Thomas?”

“What’s going on here, Cedric?” Joe asked.

“The daughter of my patient and our mutual acquaintance is Francesca Faustina,” Cedric smirked. “You do recognize the name don’t you...Alec?”

Alec felt Mary’s fingers tightened on hers and he looked at her with loving reassuring eyes. “It’s bound to come out sooner or later sweetheart, I’m sure Francesca will see to it. If not her, then someone else.” He returned his hardening gaze to the man who was obviously making it known he was in the running for Mary. “Isn’t that right Dr. Thomas?”

“Here...here!” Joe cleared his throat. “I demand to know what’s not being said. Who is this Faustina woman?”

“I would like to hear the answer to that myself,” Miriam voiced moving to sit on the oversized footstool in front of her husband’s chair.

“Mr. and Mrs. Christmas, Francesca is the woman that is claiming to be carrying my child.”

“What the hell...”

“Oh my goodness,” Miriam stared at Mary. “I can see you aren’t surprised by this news daughter.”

Cedric’s forehead creased into a frown. He noticed for the first time Mary wasn’t responding to the news like he had hoped. When she opened her mouth to speak it her words dashed ice water on his hopes.

“I’m not surprised. Alec isn’t one to keep things from me, Daddy...Mommy. We discussed it and don’t see any reason to change our plans. Once the baby is born we will have a paternity test done and if it’s Alec’s, we will take care of the child of course.”

“Of course,” Joe mimicked. “What has gotten in you gal, do you hear what you’re saying. The man cheated on you.”

“I did not, Sir! I would never cheat on Mary; I have too much respect for her to hurt her in such a way.” Alec defended himself. “Francesca is six months pregnant and for some reason she has found it necessary to inform me of my pending fatherhood after announcements have gone out in the news that I’m engaged.”

“Which makes me and Alec suspect to the authenticity of her claims,” Mary added. “I’m afraid if this woman thinks I’m going to give up on the man I love so easily she is sadly mistaken. So are you Ced, if that was your intent. How could you? I thought we were best friends at one time.”

“We were. Hell, I still believe we are, Mare.” His voice deepened with emotions. “This is why I thought you should know the truth.”

“If you were truly concerned about my welfare Ced, you would have pulled me aside and told me privately. If Alec hadn’t told me already don’t you think

finding out such a thing would have broken my heart and to do so in front of my parents? I just don't know what to say to you for you to accept you were wrong."

"Mary, I think this is just one of many things you will have to deal with if you marry this man." Cedric spread his hands out hoping she'd understand his reasoning.

"Baby girl he is right. How many more women are going to be coming out of Mercer's revolving closet door?" Joseph asked gruffly and sat back in the chair when he felt his wife's hand on his knee.

Alec bit down on his back teeth leashing the anger that threaten to spill forward. He wasn't accustomed to having his character called into question.

"Sir--"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think it's necessary for me to answer the question. I know Alec's character or I wouldn't be marrying him. I think my biggest mistake was coming back home in hopes that I could make everyone I love see reason," Mary cried. "This is supposed to be the happiest time of my life! And because of all of you it isn't!" Mary released Alec's hand and got up from the sofa rushing out of the room in tears.

Alec immediately came to his feet to follow and felt Miriam's hand on his arm.

"Let me. You men folk need to stay in here and decide what is more important. Who is right? Who is being selfish? Who is being stubborn and who will be the first to apologize and let bygones be bygones'." She looked at each man in turn. "If I were all of you I'd be more concerned over what will make the person you're fussin' over *healthy* and happy? I mean, we can all agree that Mary's health is very important. Right?"

All the men watched Miriam leave the room before they turned to stare at each other.

"Well now," Joe said gruffly. "Mrs. Christmas, a genteel Southern Woman in every way, does know how to put a man in his place and do so gracefully with a sweet smile and a saucy wink."

“Now, I see where Mary gets it from,” Alec lightly chuckle with a nod. He shoved his hands in his pockets but he didn’t sit back down. A part of him still longed to go to Mary.

“I know what you are thinking, boy.” Joe looked him. “But I wouldn’t go up there right now if I were you.”

All three men nodded in agreement and grinned sheepishly at each other.

“I’m only thinking about it,” Alex admitted. “But you see my legs haven’t been able to move from this spot don’t you?”

“Yeah, well trust a man who knows. Being double teamed by both of them,” Joe murmured. “They can shrivel your manhood to two inches with a few tears. Never seen two women that can break hearts when they cry. Most heart wrenching thing I ever heard. Also when you deal with one of them they will set you thinking; but when you deal with them both, you will give them everything and more. *Nooo*,” Joe exaggerated a shudder. “Don’t go up there.”

Alec and Cedric laughed.

“*Women*,” Cedric snorted. “You can’t--”

“Live with them and you can’t *live without them*,” Joe and Alec joined in and they all spoke in unison. They laughed again.

Alec drew in a deep breath, blowing it out softly. “Look gentleman, no one knows better than me that I’m not good enough for Mary. Hell, I don’t know if they make a man good enough for her because I’ve never met a woman like her and yeah, I admit I’ve had my share of experiences with women.”

“As we all have,” Joe admitted staring down at his feet.

“I swear I was settled with my life being what it was and I had resigned myself to marry for convenience because I suspected that elusive thing called *love* I’d heard so much about didn’t really exist,” Alec continued.

“Then along comes Ms. Mary Christmas. What a name.” Alec grinned and shook his head. “Straight away she’s telling me, her boss, what she can and cannot do because she wasn’t missing Christmas with her family to spend it working for me, no matter how much money I was offering her.”

“Just like her momma,” Joe snickered.

“It’s been a long time since I got shot down by a woman. When you have money like I do, you never know when a woman is being sincere because she likes you or just sounding sincere because she likes what you can do for her.”

“That happens even when you don’t have your kind of money, but enough to catch certain type of women’s attention. Being a doctor, I’ve met such women. They have this way of making you think you are suddenly too good for that woman that stood by your side during the lean times. You mess up a good thing just to hold on to that feeling,” Cedric piped in. “Before you know it, you’ve lost everything that meant anything and it was all for...*nothing* because when the next bigger and better thing comes along, that woman trades your ass in like used goods.”

Alec nodded his agreement.

“That’s when Mary came along with her loving unassuming ways; she caused me to look twice at what she tries to hide behind the glasses, conservative clothing and the subdued hairstyle she likes to wear at work.” Alec removed a hand from his pocket and used it to smooth back his hair out of his face.

“The more I got to know Mary, the more I wanted to know about her. Then it nearly broke my heart to learn that behind that strong smiling happy persona she showed everyone else at the office was a woman that thought because of her weight, surgically scarred body and illness, she was unworthy, unbeautiful and unable to be loved by men.” He shook his head still unable to believe it.

“I had no idea,” Joe murmured. “I thought it was because she was busy mappin’ out a professional life for herself in your company. She led us to believe she had a healthy social life.

“The more vulnerable I saw Mary as being, the more protective I felt of her, and the more protective I felt, the more I realized it was because I was falling in love with her.” Alec gave Joe a beseeching look. “Sir, I know my reputation precedes me, but honestly, Mary is the first woman I ever truly loved and the *only*

woman I've ever wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I will give her anything within my power that she wishes for."

"What about the baby situation?" Cedric spoke up. "You expect Mary to help raise a child by another woman?"

"Dr. Thomas, if this child turns out to be mine, which would be the only time I've been careless because I went into my affairs knowing they were temporary and because of it, I was very careful." His voice was hard and exact. "However, what about you? You have two children from your ex-wife Monica, don't you? Wouldn't you expect Mary to care and accept your children if she were to be with you?"

"How--?"

"You're not the only one to do your homework, Dr. Thomas. When I called and Mr. Christmas told me you were out with my fiancée, I decided to find out why my future father-in-law seemed to be delighted by the prospect."

Joe looked away from Alec's accusing stare. "Well, if my baby girl's affections shifted so easily then it would have meant she wasn't as in love with you as she thought. I admit I thought Cedric would be the one to make Mary happy."

Alec's head dropped. "With all due respect, Mr. Christmas, I don't understand what you want from me Sir? Is my falling in love with someone as wonderful as your daughter wrong?" His green eyes misted with emotion. "Sir, if you can tell me why you think I'm incapable of making Mary happy for the rest of our lives then I will walk out that door right now. But the one thing I refuse to do is be the reason Mary is upstairs crying because of a riff between her and the man she adores above all others."

The older man looked at him as if he was trying to determine his character along with the sincerity of his words. The expression on his dark aging face wasn't readable to Alec, but he was relieved that instead of an outright "get out," Joseph Christmas was carefully considering his words.

Alec's hands fisted at his sides. He was preparing himself for the worse. But after seeing Mary so upset, he realized he would not be the reason for any

unhappiness and stress in her life, for Mary wasn't like other women. Her condition was her lot in life and he knew what he was getting into when he offered his love to her.

Mary's stress caused her body physical pain and knowing she was hurting caused *him* physical pain. He realized as the silence in the room became almost deafening that he had his answer. Whatever Joseph's reasoning for not liking him was, it outweighed any reasoning that *he* would be the man that married Mary.

"I will get my things." Alec murmured. "I'm sorry for intruding on your hospitality."

"Wait, Alec." Joe called out. "I was wrong."

"Sir?" Alec's head cocked to the side in unexpected surprise.

"I said I was wrong," he repeated. "To be honest, I've never seen Mary more open and aware of her womanhood as I did tonight at the dinner table sitting beside you. I've never seen her so happy. It's not easy for a man to admit that his daughter is well...what some would consider *average*." He shook his head and continued with a grim expression.

"With Mare livin' in Seattle, I could pretend she was livin' happily and dating like other more *healthy* girls her age. But with each passin' year that she remained alone, I realized she wasn't living a carefree life. Her *Hidradenitis* was making her shy away from intimacy with the opposite sex. So I suppose I imagined if she were to marry a doctor, there would be no problems in the future when her condition worsens, since there is no cure."

Average? Who in their right mind would ever consider Mary, who dressed up for every holiday in the office and gave out baked goodies to everyone, average? Average women didn't remember birthdays and anniversaries of every fellow employee nor did they mask their pain so well, that if Mary ever had a bad day at work, it never showed and she never missed a day.

He knew because most of the time he admired her attitude from afar and he's seen her employment file when she agreed to become his assistant during the long Christmas holiday when all others were on a two week holiday leave. No, her

father was mistaken. His Mary was more *exceptional* than average, Alec thought to himself.

“I had hopes for her. But along with her illness, she started pouring on the pounds. She would come home in tears from other kids making fun of her and her mother put her on every weight loss plan imaginable, but the success was brief. Being average in high school was hard on her and that was one of the reasons I was so grateful that Cedric had befriended her since grade school--”

“I let Mary down during high school,” Cedric interrupted softly. “After meeting Monica, Joe, I practically tossed the best friend I ever had aside.

“I don’t know why you keep calling Mary *average*.” Alec frowned. “How many women do you know would break a nail while shoveling snow off the cottage walk of an old woman she just met without being asked? She did that for my grandmother. How many women you know don’t mind looking childishly foolish by dressing up in costumes to give out gifts?”

Alec’s voice grew louder. “Also Mary is healthy, Sir. Yes, she can’t enjoy hours outside in the sun and she doesn’t do well under stress. Yes, she has scars from surgeries and from the places where the heat boils come upon her skin. None of these things she wanted to happen to her, but it’s how she must live her life. When you love her like I do, it’s not a hardship to accommodate her needs.”

“Son, calm down.” Joseph closed the space between them and placed his hand on his shoulder. “I’m not puttin’ my girl down; I’m just voicin’ some truths that have been hard for me to accept over the years. It’s been frustratin’ seeing her in pain and not knowing what to do because there is no known cure.”

“I understand. I have money and I can’t think of a better cause to donate to than funding research for Hidradenitis.”

“You would do that?” Cedric asked. “Because I can get you in touch with the right people, if you’re serious.”

“I’m very serious,” Alec voiced his determination. “Mary and I have already discussed it. She told me since she was marrying a public figure, she

couldn't see a better opportunity than to become a spokesperson and a visual role model to other women and men who suffer an illness that no one talks or know about."

Cedric nodded. "That's because it's a disfiguring illness. A lot of it concentrates in private areas of the body and those unknowing of the disorder assume it's a contagious sexually transmitted disease; which we can only blame on ignorance. There just isn't enough information about it."

"I would be very interested," Alec nodded.

"Let me apologize to you Alec," Joe gave him a begrudging grin. "I assumed you were interested in my girl's innocence and once you got bored, you would move on to those supermodel types again."

"That was me doing what the public expected from me."

"Yeah, but did there have to be so many of them, Son? I just didn't want my girl to be another name on that long list of yours," Joe admitted his fears. "Mare got real withdrawn and quiet when Cedric married Monica. I suppose I imagined if she loved you as much as I suspected, then you breaking her heart would be really devastating and I didn't want to see that happen."

"I suppose if someone like me was dating my daughter I would be upset too. But Mary made me see reason. Those women and sex for me was like a drug. I used women to make me forget that I was still alive and living well while my brother died in Iraq trying to do something worthy. I felt so guilty. I was the older brother. If anyone was going to serve their country, it should have been me and maybe then he wouldn't have felt the need to go."

"Nonsense," Joe waved a hand. "I'm an ex military man myself, even though I was drafted way back when I would have proudly enrolled to serve because it was what I wanted. For a Black man in those days it was one of the few opportunities opened to you to better yourself, get an education and see the world. Because of that, it delayed my marriage to Miriam, but it also afforded me the opportunity to go to Veterinarian School and open my own practice."

"But still,"

“Still nothing. Your brother saw you as a role model making a difference in the world and he most likely joined to serve because he wanted to do the same. He has done so for those people and you don’t need to bring shame to his memories by your shameless actions. You must live proudly and productively so that his death is not in vain,” Joe spoke bluntly. “You understand what I’m sayin?”

“Yes Sir.”

Squeezing Alec’s shoulder he added, “Might as well call me Papa Joe, you about to be my son-in-law ain’t ya?”

Alec was so relieved all he could do was nod and pump the older man’s proffered hand with gratitude.

“I suppose that’s a welcome to the family,” Cedric conceded gracefully.

“Are you sure I’m not going have to watch my back around you Dr. Thomas? I know I called and left a message for Mary last night and she said she didn’t have a message on her phone. Something tells me it had a little help disappearing?” Alec cocked an eyebrow at the other man.

Cedric grinned and made no apologies for his actions. “I admit I did it. Mare has always been there for me when I needed her. When I found out she was engaged, I felt as if I would be losing the one thing I’ve come to depend upon through the years,” Cedric confessed.

“I see now I was being selfish. If I truly thought of Mary in that way, I wouldn’t have allowed the last few years to pass without me telling her I was divorced. If I truly saw her as being something more than my best friend, she wouldn’t have been available for you to fall in love with Mercer.”

“I’m glad you see the error of your ways and I hope that means if you can’t be happy for us, you will at least not interfere with our happiness,” Alec said in a firm voice.

“I’m afraid I’ve done all the damage I’m capable of doing,” Cedric looked down at his feet with pursed lips. “I’m the one who called Francesca. I had hoped I could use her old feelings for you to cause trouble; but I swear I just found out about the baby when I called.”

“Now that the engagement has been made public, she was bound to find out sooner or later. I’m glad she did so before the wedding. This way I was able to give Mary a choice to follow through with the wedding or call everything off.”

“Yet, she still wants you Alec. So what can I say, as long as Mare is happy with her choice?” Cedric looked him in the eye. “No hard feelings?” He held out his hand.

Alec looked at it a moment before accepting his apology with a handshake. “No hard feelings.”

“Well now, I think this calls for a couple of beers.”

“Joe, now you know Miriam will have a fit if she catches you drinking after the scare you gave her before Christmas,” Cedric teased.

“Miriam, knows when to let a man be a man and she wouldn’t let me bring it in the house if she didn’t expect me to drink it; just in moderation of course.”

“Of course,” Alec and Cedric laughed.

“Now Alec, when you take our Mary as your own, it will be you she will turn to first as it should be. Miriam and I might as well start getting use to the idea that our bitty baby girl isn’t our baby anymore.” His voice cracked with emotion.

“You won’t regret trusting Mary to my care Sir...I mean Papa Joe,” Alec assured him. “But Mary will always need her parents, as I need mine. So please continue being there for her.”

“You are a good guy after all young man. I’m supposin’ I won’t need my shotgun after all.” Joe chuckled playfully. “Tell me, Alec, do you like fishin?” He put an arm around his shoulders and ushered him towards the kitchen.

“Mostly deep sea fishing,” Alec nodded.

“I’ve always wanted to try that.”

“Let me know when. We can invite friends and take the yacht out.”

“Well, I heard those things can be expensive.”

“No worries. I will take care of everything,” Alec assured him with a smile.

“Well, I think I can get use to you after all, Son.” Joseph chuckled. “While we’re in the kitchen, I’ll show you the catch I got this morning. You can help me clean them for dinner tomorrow night. You are stayin’ here in the *guest room*, right?”

The “guest room” part wasn’t lost on Alec. He just silently prayed there would be more opportune moments like the one he and Mary had that morning.

CHAPTER NINE

Mary thought after Alec, her father and her oldest friend, Cedric, began to get along everything else would go smoothly up until the wedding. Of course the pending birth of the child was always over their heads. But until now, she hadn't realized how much she loved her "normal" life. Every move she made, reporters were on her heels snapping her photo.

She had never been one for taking pictures and hated seeing herself more than anything. But her discomfort level was at a high. Seeing her chubby face plastered on the covers of magazines along with the size of her ass becoming fodder for the late night talk shows, she spent more time dealing with her illness than usual.

Mary thought the days of the cool kids picking on the not so cool kids were over with, but she suppose it was something the bullying types never grew out of. They now just get paid for hurting those that are different than themselves and the entire world encourages the behavior by buying the magazines and tuning in to their shows.

If she had thought the world finding out a "Common Jane" like her was taking the most eligible bachelor off the market caused an uproar, it was nothing compared to the press conference the infamous Francesca gave announcing Alec as her "love child's" father. Alec had been furious because they had not done a paternity test yet. The doctor thought it would be better for the child to wait until after he was born to do the testing.

Mary thought it would be best to postpone the wedding until after the testing. Alec argued the point wondering why it would matter because either way she was going to be his wife. It was true, but Mary just didn't want him to take one look at his son and decide he wanted to be a full time father, which would require being with the mother full time.

The stress of everything had Mary temporarily on bed rest with a flare up and she wasn't handling it well, especially when she had to miss the final fitting for

her wedding dress. During these times she couldn't tolerate the restriction of a bra or panties and he wasn't leaving the house without either.

"Sweetheart, are you sleeping?"

Mary turned over from her side and sat up in the bed, adjusting the sheet to cover her naked breasts. "No, just lying here thinking too much."

Alec released a long sigh. He placed the juice on the bedside table and sat on the side of the bed.

Mary reached for the juice and swallowed the antibiotic pill she had to take every eight hours. She returned the glass back to the table and Alec reached out with a hand to cup her flushed cheek. She couldn't help but lean into his touch.

"God, that feels wonderful," she admitted aloud; her eyes tearing up in her vulnerable state.

"Feels good to touch you," he admitted. "It feels as if I haven't touched you in forever. Between wedding and being your dad's new best friend," Alec chuckled. "We rarely get any private time together. Joe thinks I don't know he's trying to keep me from sneaking in here and having my way with you."

"It's working too," Mary pouted.

He leaned over and took advantage by pressing what should have been a chaste kiss to her large luscious lips. But once their lips met, he realized how starved he was for her.

Kissing her took away his ability to think. Her lips were soft and accepting, tasting of orange juice. He realized he should pull away while he still could, but Mary sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her fingers buried themselves and massaged his scalp in that way that drove him wild.

Alec felt bereft when she broke the kiss and leaned her forehead against his. The sheet had slid down to reveal her heaving large breasts and it took all in him not to lift one and draw her hardening nipple into his mouth.

"As much as I want you, you know when I'm like this I'm limited to how far we can go."

He could hear the frustration and embarrassment in her voice. His thumb smoothed over her bottom lip. “It’s okay as long as I can be in here with you. When we were alone those times during the holiday, I could help you cleanse the areas and dress them. It made me feel as if we were in it together. But here your mother is accustomed to caring for you and I feel a bit left out. Even though I hate to see you in pain, I enjoyed how you didn’t shut me out when you were this way.”

“How could I. I had to make sure you knew exactly what you would be getting into by asking me to be your wife,” Mary reasoned. “But know, baby, just knowing you would help me through this, if you could, is enough for me.”

“You think your parents would mind if I get in there with you and hold you for awhile?” He asked. His large hand massaged the back of her neck. “Pressing a kiss to her forehead he closed his eyes and inhaled her scent even though it was tinged with the medical ointment that had been applied sparingly to parts of her body. Yet it was something he was becoming accustomed to.

“So, what if they do?” Mary said against his lips. “I’m just a reporter away from eloping.”

“I knew it was going to be disruptive once the reporters found out about the baby situation sweetheart, but I didn’t think they would say such cruel things about you. I’m sorry that you have to go through this because of me,” Alec murmured before returning her kiss. He toed off one shoe then the other.

Slipping his tongue out to urge her lips apart and then thrusting it forward to take hers he eased into the bed beside her. The kiss continued as she scooted over to accommodate his muscular frame dressed in black tailored trousers and a dove gray silk shirt.

Mary groaned deep in her throat and he felt her hands clutch feebly at his arms as she rose up in bed, pressing her breasts against him. One of his hands accepted the invitation and kneaded a naked breast before tugging on a hardening nipple.

When his searching fingers touched one of the tender inflamed area beneath her skin she cried out in pain and he tensed. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I *hate it* that my body isn’t normal like other women,” she sniffled. Her frustration was evident on her pretty flushed face. “I feel like my body has been possessed by something alien!”

“Shhh,” he crooned holding her against him when she would have pulled away. “Don’t withdraw from me, sweetheart. We are going to have a lifetime of moments like this unless they find a cure. You can’t distant yourself from me when it happens.” Lying on his side he spooned her against him while his arm pillowed her head.

“Alec--”

“Just sleep, the antibiotics will work its magic and you will be your vivacious insatiable self again in no time.”

“That’s not me,” she protested. He could hear the smile in her voice and relaxed. “I think you need to see if you have a sexual addiction. We don’t always have times for those all day marathons you need some times.”

Alec chuckled. He tightened his hold about her in a loving hug. “Then you shouldn’t be so accommodating. Your sexy thickness drives me crazy.” His cock pressing into her backside emphasized his point.

“Hmmm, I think it would be okay if I lift my leg and put it over your hip, then you can slide inside me and we do it slowly so the bed doesn’t squeak and alert the folks.”

He groaned as she grinded her bottom into his groin to push the point. He bit down on his bottom lip praying for the strength to not accept her offer.

“Are you saying you aren’t having a flare up below the waist this time?”

She hesitated before answering. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Liar,” He nipped the side of her neck and she laughed softly. “You call me insatiable when you’re willing to make love while in pain.”

“An orgasm can be better then pain pills,” she practically purred. Mary stretched against him and stifled a yawn. He knew at any moment her medicine would kick in and she would sleep.

His free hand flipped the covers off her naked body back over his pant covered legs to give him access to her nakedness. His hand stole between her thighs, alert to any signs that he hit another tender spot as she opened her thighs to accommodate.

Alec pressed his fingers firmly to her fleshy soft hair covered mons and applied a circular motion as she grinded against the pressure to gain her release. She turned her head so his mouth could swallow her moans and whimpers.



“What are you up to woman?” Joe called to his wife. “Is Mary awake?” He asked coming up beside her to peep in at his daughter.

“No, she’s sleep. They both are.” Miriam smiled.

“What the hell is that boy doing in there?” Joe squawked.

“Shhh!” Miriam hushed him, pushing him back as she pulled the bedroom door shut again. “Will you hush old man; Alec’s sleeping on top of the covers and Mary is under the covers.”

“But her shoulders were naked.”

“You know how difficult it is for her to wear clothing when she is hurting. Besides the young man is where he should be.” She turned her husband in the direction of heading downstairs. “It makes me feel good to know that when she gets like this and I’m not around to help her through it, he will.”

“Yeah, he does seem to take great care of our girl’s welfare, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, he does.” Her smile widened. “You seem to be softening towards Alec I see.”

“Even I have to admit he’s a good guy, Miriam. Our Mary has done well for herself, hasn’t she?”

“We couldn’t have chosen any better for her. The way he’s been trying to protect her from the media and the way he goes in there like now and lays with her when he thinks we don’t know it, says a lot for his character.” Miriam nodded. “But I knew after meeting and spending the holiday with him and his family that they were a good family.”

“I suppose I was the only stubborn fool in this equation, huh?” Joe quirked his lips in a half grin.

“I knew you would come around if given time.” She looped her arm in hers husband’s and leaned into him as the strolled to the kitchen. “Now we must be realistic. These are modern times and they are already lovers. As a matter of fact they would have already been wedded if they weren’t tryin’ to please us. The least we could do is turn our heads and pretend we don’t know they are sneaking around and sleeping together.”

“I don’t mind it if they’re just sleeping,” Joe muttered.

“Joe, you of all people should know better. Did you just sleep when you sneaked into my bed before we married?”

“Hush now woman before the kids hear us.”

“They’re sleeping,” she reminded.

“So they are,” he growled softly. Backing his wife up against the kitchen counter he nuzzled against her brown throat. “I love having the kids here but they hamper our extracurricular activities.”

“You haven’t seemed to be slowin’ down to me in any way, Joseph Christmas,” she moaned.

Joe grasped her around her waist and lifted her to sit on the kitchen counter.

“Joe, your heart; now behave,” she chastised,

“It’s still beatin’ hard for you Mrs. Christmas, along with other body parts,” he teased. Joe caught his wife’s girlish giggles in his mouth as he spread her knees and moved between her legs. “Now as I was sayin’...when was the last time we had kitchen sex?”

“We weren’t sayin and we ain’t having it in here now that I’ve got dinner started.”

“Come on, Miriam.”

“How about we compromise?”

“What kind of a compromise?”

“We take the can of whipped cream and make our way down the hall to our bedroom?”

‘Hot damn! I’ll get the whipped cream.’ He aided her down from the kitchen counter.

“I’ll cut everything off in the kitchen so nothing will burn and meet you there.”

Before releasing him Miriam gave Joe a preview kiss of things to come and his toes curled with all thoughts of the two youngsters alone upstairs forgotten.

CHAPTER TEN

“Mare?”

Mary looked up from the table of ladies panties at her cousin. “You know I can’t get my big ass in that Kim. Don’t even play with me today; I got too much that needs to be done. Why did you bring me here anyway? They don’t have a thing over a size fourteen.”

“Okay, but I like this place. Plus you still have a couple of months to get some weight off before the wedding.” Her beautiful cousin, with her expensive perfect teeth, flashed a smile at her. “I’m just sayin’ you need something *like* this for your wedding night to stir your man’s juices.”

“My man don’t need any extra stimulation, trust that.” Mary laughingly shook her head. “Besides, I wouldn’t be marrying a man that couldn’t accept me the way I am. I don’t know why women go starving themselves for their wedding. Think about it, would he have asked at all if he thought you weren’t perfect for him the way you were?”

“By the way, is Alec Mercer as good in bed as they like to hint he is?”

“Oh Lord, you ain’t going to get me telling you about my sex life.”

“Well you did wait a long time to give up the goods.” Kim reminded. “Are you sure you want to marry the first man you slept with? I mean what if there is something better out there?”

“Are you kidding me?” Mary put a hand on her hip. “Look at me? It wasn’t as if men were knocking down my door before Alec, Kim. I like to think that God was a bit busy, so he sent me the best in the lot of men to make up for the delay.” She chuckled.

“So what you’re really saying is you’re marrying this man because you don’t think you can do better?” Kim snorted. “You’ve always had low self-esteem.”

“And you always made sure of it by comparing my shortcomings to you every chance you could get, didn’t you cuz?”

“I work hard to stay in shape and to better myself,” Kim retorted. “You could do the same if you’d quit your “poor pitiful me” attitude every chance you get.”

“Excuse me,” Mary’s head reeled from her cousin’s bitter attack. “Why did you invite me out shopping today? I thought you said you wanted to bond and mend old fences?”

“Do you really think this man loves someone like you Mary? I mean seriously.”

“I’m marrying Alec because I’m in love with him and I’m sure he loves me.” Mary’s irritation grew. “Why are you asking me such stupid questions? You’re as bad as these crazy reporters!”

“Can you tell me you don’t care about his “love them and leave them” past? You’re not in the least bit worried that once the newness of you wears off, he will drop you like all the others?”

“I’m not like the others, Kim. He didn’t ask them to marry him.”

“At least that is what he says,” Kim cocked her eyebrow at her. “Mare, you got to wonder if this man has the ability to be faithful. I mean really, do you think you have enough experience with men that you will have what it takes to hold on to a man like him?”

Kim’s nasty tone wasn’t loss on Mary and it hurt her feelings that even some in her own family would berate her like the rest of the world.

“I get these insulting questions from reporters every time I walk out the door; I shouldn’t be getting it from family.” Mary turned and walked away from the display table with her statuesque slim cousin on her heels.

“You’re only angry because you’ve been thinking the same thing.” Kim taunted.

“Alec loves me and I wouldn’t be marrying him if I didn’t trust him,” Mary argued. She pushed up her glasses as they slipped down her sweating nose. “Just get me back home. I knew this was a bad idea.”

As Mary opened the door of the shop to leave, camera flashes of light assaulted her with questions being yelled at her and microphones being shoved in her face.

“Leave me alone, please!” Mary yelled and ducked back into the store.

“You’re safer in here, Miss Christmas, because its private property and they aren’t allowed to come in here and harass you.” The store clerk stepped forward, opening the door to yell out at the flock of waiting reporters, “I will call the police! You aren’t allowed to harass my customers. You don’t have to leave, but you can’t block my door that way.”

She shook her head and came back inside.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mary mumbled.

“Not your fault, but I guess you better get used to it, sweetie,” she shook her head once again before moving on to help another customer; both stealing glances at her as they spoke.

“Why now?” Mary turned to look helplessly at Kim. “I don’t know how they know where I am all the time. Finally, it was dwindling down to one or two reporters after the frenzy behind Francesca’s announcement. What stirred them up again?”

“Probably, because of the latest tabloid news,” Kim supplied.

“What news?” Mary asked.

“I know you can’t tell me you’re not the least bit flattered by all this attention,” Kim smacked her heavily outlined lips with their red lipstick tint. “You are going to pretend innocence until the day you die, ain’t ya?”

“Kim--”

“Haven’t your man told you yet? The news is reportin’ that Alec Mercer saw a lawyer recently to prepare a prenuptial agreement,” Kim said snidely. She crossed her arms over her breasts and laughed softly, “Lordy, girl! To be your age, you sure can be stupid,” the younger girl mocked. “How much love does this man have for you if he is already thinking about protecting what’s his?”

Mary's surprise was evident on her face. It was the first time she had heard any mention of a prenuptial agreement. Why hadn't Alec told her instead of allowing her to find out through the media like everyone else?

She didn't have a problem signing a contractual agreement if it made him realize the extent of her love for him. She knew women with him for all the wrong reasons were something he had dealt with in the past. Still, it didn't bode well for her if he was suspecting she might be one of those women. Nor did she like him thinking that they weren't destined to last.

The musical theme song indicating Alec's call chimed from her purse. Removing the phone from her purse, she answered. "Hey honey. Are you on your way to Atlanta? No...no, I'm fine. The reporters? No, they aren't bothering me much today." She lied thinking there was no reason to make him worry.

"I'm shopping with my cousin at *Rose Boutique* downtown; yeah the place with all the reporters hanging...wait how did you know--"

She pivoted on her heels to look at the entrance seeing Alec standing in the door of the shop. The reporters were calling out his name to get his attention but due to the burly bodyguards that stood behind Alec, they couldn't get any closer.

His slow sexy grin was all she needed to shed all the doubts and worry her cousin was putting in her head.

"Hey bride to be, you lied about the reporters."

"I know," Mary muttered. "I didn't want you to worry about it because I was about to call it a day anyway. Alec, what are you doing here? I thought you had to go to Atlanta today." She smiled up at him as he came closer to tower over her.

"That's why I came here." His deep voice spoke quietly while his big manicured hands cupped her face with both hands to press a soft kiss to her lips.

After Alec's tender lingering kiss ended, Mary felt a burning sensation from her cheeks, to her ears spreading down her neck and across her shoulders as her embarrassment grew. People should leave their kissing and intimate touching in the privacy of their home or so she thought.

Now that she was one of those people, she found there was something exciting about knowing others were watching them make out. She had to fight the urge to really give them a show. She wondered how they would react if she were to slide her hands around Alec's hip and grip his ass cheeks; and he'd grasp her and they do it hot and heavy with deep searing tongues-a-dancing type kisses they do in the kitchen at home. She found out the best way possible that Alec got extremely aroused was watching her be domestic in the kitchen.

She had mistakenly thought he fantasized she was his maid and he was a dirty employer taking advantage of his African American help, which by the way he got a big laugh out of the idea. It warmed her heart when he told her it made him imagine they had been married for years like both their parents and she was fixing dinner for him and their children. He said he could imagine loving her as much, if not more, thirty years from now as much as he did at that moment.

Mary would never have thought this man was a big romantic when she used to admire him from afar and see him run through women like underwear while working for his company.

"My love, if you keep looking at me that way, I'm going to drag you into one of those dressing rooms and kiss you properly," Alec murmured. His already deep voice had become husky with desire. She couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses but she knew the green color would look nearly black from as his pupils dilated with his growing arousal.

Mary's blush spread to her scalp and her breasts, making her nipples feel sensitive against the material of her bra cups. Mary cleared her voice nosily as her eyes darted about. A feeling of smugness filled her heart for the look on her cousin's face was priceless.

Now Kim really had something to be jealous about and good enough for her. Her cousin had pretended sincerity in her offer to help her shop for her wedding trousseau and in the three hours they've been shopping not once had Kim taken her to a clothing store that carried one item of clothing for women over a size fourteen. Some didn't go higher than a size 12.

“Baby, why are you here? Has something happened?”

“My meeting during this visit is going to take longer than I had anticipated due to a very important client. He insisted that I personally oversee a new marketing campaign and I want you to come with me.” He dipped his head to kiss and nibble at the corners of her mouth before kissing her once again.

The sound of someone clearing their throat made Alec smile against her lips, linger a moment longer before pulling back and turning around to face the interruption behind him.

Mary, embarrassed to her curling toes in her walking shoes, took a step away from Alec but not too far for his hand shot out and grabbed her hand only to intimately lace his fingers with hers; their palms now kissing instead.

“How rude Mare, aren’t you going to introduce us?” Kim asked. Her lashes fluttering as she stepped close enough that Alec actually had to take a step back to keep a respective distance between them.

“Alec, this is my cousin. Kim, Alec...Alec, Kim,” she murmured bracing herself for Alec’s reaction to her loveliness.

“So this is the crowned family beauty queen your mother was speaking of? Your father’s side of the family, I believe.” He looked at Mary when he spoke but it was Kim who spoke.

“That would be me,” she practically purred.

Mary rolled her eyes and looked down at her feet.

Most men became bleating idiots when Kim came around with her light skin, long hair and beautiful exotic grey eyes commanding attention whenever she entered a room.

She had been the “darling” in Mary’s family since the day she popped out from her momma a beautiful baby. It is said that she got her cream colored complexion, straight long auburn hair and light gray eyes from their great-great grandmother. She had won several local beauty contests and two internationally before retiring to enroll in law school.

Unfortunately, all other women that had to be in the same room with her cousin Kim usually were all but forgotten by any men that happened to be in the same room with them. Kim was what one would call the “total” package.

“So you are the man that has been causing a stir in our family lately?”

“Nice to meet you,” Alec inclined his head. “I do hope my being in town hasn’t been too much of an imposition on everyone. I know that Mary and her parents have had a time of it and I had to hire security to keep reporters at a respectable distance.”

Mary’s eyebrows raised a fraction. Her cousin was actually flirting with her man in her face. She was fluttering her lashes and licking her lips. She did that old trick of crossing her arms over her breasts to give them higher visibility in the “V” neckline of her sheath styled dress.

“It’s been no bother at all. I was just telling my cousin here, how happy we are for her. We can’t wait until the big day.”

Mary snorted on a laugh.

Alec looked down at her over his shades and gave her a playful wink that caused her heart to patter frantically. The stirring arousal that seemed to strum her body whenever he touched her was in full effect and she wanted him right now in the middle of the shop with her cousin getting a front row viewing. As if knowing how what she was thinking, she felt him squeeze her hand.

“If it was left up to me, Mary and I would have been married New Year’s and we would have avoided this circus outside the door. However, I want Mary to have the wedding of her dreams,” Alec stated.

“You mean the wedding of my parent’s dream,” Mary murmured. “All I want is you. I don’t need a big wedding to make me feel like a wife.”

“It stands to reason your parents would want only the best for you. I just keep telling myself that our wedding day is quickly approaching.”

“I can’t believe you’re actually here. Were you just driving by and saw the reporters?” Kim cocked her head to the side; her eyes making a lazy perusal of Alec dressed in a dark blue business suit with pale blue shirt and a blending silk tie. The

complete assemble was finished off with a pair of expensive sunglasses that were perched on the bridge of his nose.

Mary saw her cousin's tongue snake out to moisten her perfectly shaped lips once again. Shaking her head at her cousin's boldness caused Mary to shift from one foot to the other with dread. She wouldn't be able to blame Alec if he started to fawn over her. Most men did, why would he be any different?

To Mary's delight when Kim reached out to shake his hand he lifted their clasped hands to show her his right hand was in use. Mary tugged to let go of his hand, but his hand tightened about her.

"Sorry, I would have to let go of my girl's hand to shake yours and I'm not ready to let go of her yet," Alec said bluntly. He was polite enough that the others in the shop didn't take it to be rude, but romantic.

"No Kim, I wasn't just driving by," Alec answered her question. "I actually was looking to kidnap my beautiful fiancée." He removed his shades and placed them in his inner suit jacket pocket making a point to look at Mary. "I knew how to find her because I check in with her bodyguard from time to time."

"What?" Mary was stunned by that bit of news. "I didn't notice a bodyguard."

"That's the point sweetheart." Alec smiled. "I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable. I'm aware that it's something you have to get use too."

"I never noticed you have any bodyguards before today," Mary stated.

"If I can manage to keep my travels private, I don't feel it's a necessity, but I always have security around when I find myself in the news a lot. The more publicity you get, the more nuts will come out of the closet."

"Is it one of the guys that is standing out there now? You could at least introduce him to me so I wouldn't think some strange man is following me," Mary scowled at him. "Being with you is too surreal to believe at times." She shook her head.

"I hope that is a good thing, darling." He chuckled.

“That still remains to be seen,” she murmured. “The thought of someone watching me all the time without me knowing is disquieting.”

“If you wish you can make your bodyguard your best friend as I have with the guys I use all the time.” Alec looked over her head and nodded.

She turned to see who he was motioning to.

Mary’s mouth dropped wide in surprise as the woman speaking to the store clerk earlier about lingerie stepped forward. “Miss Christmas, I’m Jenny, your personal bodyguard. Just pretend like I’m not around if it will make you more comfortable.”

“Uh...hello,” Mary managed. She gave her a timid wave with her free hand. “I don’t think it’s necessary for you to waste your time, but if it’s what Alec wants...okay.”

“Sweetheart, I know loving me has been a trial, but I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life making you happy.” He gave her a heart melting smile and squeezing her hand reassuringly once again.

“YOU, already make me happy.” She reassured him not wanting to make him feel she was unappreciative of his concern. “I just don’t think you should be paying anyone to watch over me. Trust me, no one hardly notices me. Once you are no longer the latest news, I will blend back into the background again.”

Mary looked away from his searching eyes as his forehead puckered in a frown.

“What is this?” He crooked a finger beneath her chin to force her to look up at him. “I haven’t heard you talk like this since way before Christmas. What has happened to bring this on?”

She shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“Okay, I won’t push.” He looked away from her face and she followed his gaze when a big grin spread to his lips. “Whoa, I just noticed what kind of shop we are in.”

Mary cocked an eyebrow at him as he released her hand to remove a skimpy lacy piece of material one would call a “thong” hanging from a display rack.

“Sweetheart,” he breathed. “Are you in here picking out some things to wear for me?”

“Well--”

“What about a pair of these?” He wiggled her eyebrows at him.

“No thank you, I already have dental floss in my purse.”

He chuckled shaking his head. “Oh now this...” He walked over to a red and white Christmas theme teddy and lifted it up high. “Now something like this...” he nodded with a grin that flashed all of his beautiful white teeth. “I think all those boys at the orphanage will never be the same.”

“They’re already orphaned; you want to torture them too?” Mary shook her head.

“Okay, now I’m being serious. Let me see what you picked out? A beautiful flowing concoction would be fine. Hell, even flannel pajamas with the feet in them would look sexy on you. Though it would require more work in getting them off.”

“Alec--”

“What? Why are you blushing?” He winked moving back to her side and retaking her hand in his.

“Honey, I don’t know if you noticed, but I can’t wear anything in this store.”

“Huh?” He looked momentarily confused.

“They don’t carry my size.”

“Then what are you doing in here?” He asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be spending the day with your wedding party shopping for...you know wedding stuff?”

“That was the plan and if I were, you would have interrupted it wouldn’t you,” she gave him a teasing look.

“Well, I had accounted for that.” He tapped her nose playfully with his finger. “Wait a minute. What do you mean ‘IF you were?’ Speaking of, I know your wedding party is more than one. Where are the other ladies?”

“Um...” Mary began.

“I’m afraid the misunderstanding is my fault,” Kim spoke up. “I led Aunt Miriam to believe that my intentions were to call Mary’s wedding party and surprise her with a girls’ day out. But I really wanted to take this opportunity with my cousin because of a misunderstanding we had before she moved away to Seattle.”

“Did you know about this?” Alec asked Mary.

She shook her head.

“So this day isn’t about Mary at all.” Alec turned an unsmiling gaze on Kim. “It’s about you?”

“Well, it’s for the both of us. I’m sure Mary has been as upset by this tension between us as I have,” Kim reasoned. “As a matter-of-fact, my mother said that Mary probably wanted me to sing at her wedding as I have done for my other relatives in the past, but because of the rift between us she didn’t feel comfortable asking me.”

“What?” Mary eyes widened.

“Yeah,” Kim gave her one of her most dazzling smiles. “I thought this would be a good chance to get everything cleared up between us and to let you know I would be happy to sing at your wedding, cuz.”

“Did you want her in the wedding?”

“Well, I hadn’t thought about it,” Mary admitted.

“Good,” Alec said bluntly. “Because if you had this would be the one time I would have to exert my right as the groom and tell you I don’t want her in my wedding.”

“What?” Kim eyes widened with surprise. “You don’t know me like that?”

“Alec--”

“No.” He interrupted shaking his head. “The only reason I’ve stood back and not protested the fact that I would have preferred our initial intimate plans we had made together, was because I thought this time would be special, fun and a happy time for you. Today and everyday up until your wedding should be about YOU.”

“I’m okay, baby,” Mary tried to ease his concern.

“Not today you aren’t. *Today* I see all that self-doubt of the old Mary has returned. You didn’t think I’d notice you making the ‘I’m too fat’ jokes with the ‘dental floss’ remark and the ‘orphans suffering?’ I though thought we agreed you wouldn’t do that anymore?”

“Do what?”

“Laughing and making fun of yourself before others have the chance to make fun and laugh at you,” he reminded. “My love, any fool that cares for you can see the pain in your eyes when you say those things even when you are laughing aloud. Mary, you have the most expressive eyes I’ve ever seen. You may let a lie slip through your lips, but your eyes always speak the truth.”

“Alec...”

He touched her face gently with his hand. “Remember, sweetheart? That was the first thing among many things that caused me to fall in love with you.”

Mary felt her eyes tearing up with emotions.

“I also told you when someone hurts you, they hurt me and I won’t stand for it.”

“Now look here, I’m family!” Kim yelled. “You ain’t even married into it yet and you think you can butt in.”

“I am butting in,” Alec said calmly. “Mary, can you call the ladies of your wedding party and see if they can free up this coming weekend?”

“I’m sure I can,” Mary answered. “Why?”

“You can make the calls from the limousine during the ride to Atlanta.” He started walking towards the door, tugging her along behind him. “Tell the ladies there will be spa treatments, hair appointments and shopping on me for the weekend. There will be more shops to cater to your needs and make sure that you feel like the bride-to-be that you are.”

“Alec, you don’t...”

“Don’t argue with me. Now I’ve made up my mind that you are going to enjoy every minute of this, even if I have to call in MY mother to make sure of it.”

Mary looked over her shoulders at her cousin unable to refrain from the smug look on her face. “I told you he loved me!” She yelled and shrugged her shoulders helplessly as Alec paused for a bodyguard to open the glass door.

Alec placed his hand on the small of her back and ushered her through first mumbling, “Of course I love you. I’m marrying you aren’t I? Why would anyone think otherwise?”

“Mister Mercer! Is it true you had a prenuptial agreement drawn up by your lawyer?” A reporter called out.

Alec paused at the opened limo door and allowed Mary to get inside first. Before he entered, he turned to face the media.

“To answer the latest tabloid gossips, I will confess that I did indeed speak to my lawyer recently in regards to my marriage to Mary. However, I have no need for a prenuptial agreement.” He gave them the playful and photogenic Mercer smile that made camera flashes go off in continuous sequences.

“Do you think that is wise with marriages being so unsuccessful these days?” Another reporter asked.

“Well I think its best that my future wife has access to my money because she is going to need all of the wealth I possess and more to pay me to let her go. I know a good thing when I see it! Have a good day, everyone!” He waved and ducked inside the car.

“You do that so well,” Mary snuggled into his side as he drew her into his arms.

“Practice sweetheart,” he kissed her mouth. “I used to get so frustrated about the entire public thing until I played squash with a very well known son of an ex-president who grew up as a public figure. He told me if I act like I’m running for office and everyone else is a potential voter, it will be easier to be polite; even when I don’t feel like being polite.”

Mary nodded thinking it was good advice that she too would have to consider adopting in the future.

“You know if you want a prenuptial agreement, I wouldn’t be against it.” She looked into his eyes. “I wouldn’t be offended either.”

“You should be.” He thumbed over the shape of her lips. “It would feel as if I would be okay with you leaving the marriage instead of working out any problems we may be having. Our parents have good marriages and they never needed such a thing. I don’t know why people think I should have one just because I have more money.”

She smoothed the frown away from his brow. “Like a true hero you came in and saved me from the wicked witch. Thank you.”

Alec chuckled. “I’m afraid you will have to thank your mother for that one.”

“Huh?”

“She told me that when it came to your cousin Kim, beauty was only skin deep. She also told me that Kim’s snide behavior towards you is when she first started noticing your self confidence dwindling.”

“I suppose that is true. Even though she is younger than me, from the moment she could talk, she’s been spiteful. I suppose it’s because her parents spoiled her because she was such a pretty child.”

“No excuse; trust me, I’ve met my share of beautiful people in the world and not all of them have felt the need to berate someone else in order to build themselves up,” Alec remarked. “I correct anything negative a reporter says in my presence and I will do the same with your family, Mary. The only person I want to please is you. The others, I listen to and try to blend in with because *of* you.”

“Including my parents?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Your parents I desperately wanted to please because without them there would be no you and for that alone, I’m eternally grateful.”

“Damn, you sure know how to say the right things.” She giggled and opened her mouth to accept his exploring kiss.

He lifted his head and pushed a button. The privacy window between them and the driver went up. He hit another button and Steve Perry's smooth sexy voice singing, "When you Love a Woman" flooded through the speakers.

"I'm the king of seduction, haven't you heard?" He nuzzled against the shell of her ear. "I can talk the panties off a woman by whispering four words in her ear."

Mary gasped as she felt his hands easing up her thigh, lifting the hem of her dress. He grasped the waistline of her panties and tugged them off until they were dangling on one of her ankles. She bobbed her foot a few times and it dropped to the floorboard of the spacious limo.

"Only four words you say? Let me see..." She grinned touching her cheek; pretending to be thinking about it before saying, "What's your going rate?"

Alec slapped her fleshy bottom and squeezed it before lovingly rubbing the spot. Mary squealed from the spanking and sucked on his bottom lip after he went in for another kiss. Their laughter mingled between kissing.

"You're full of jokes, huh, Miss Mary Christmas? It's a shame your last name is going to change. Every time I say your full name, I can't help but smile."

"Mrs. Mary Mercer," she winked. "Now, *that* makes *me* smile. Okay, don't go changing the subject. I want to hear what those four words are that you whisper in a woman's ear to get her naked and throwing herself at you."

Alec whispered the words in her ear.

Mary crinkled her nose. "No way," she balked. "That can't possibly work." Her eyes stared at him in open disbelief.

"Every single time," he answered with a nod. "Women would go wild, taking off their clothes and then throwing themselves at me."

"Well, that wouldn't work on me," she glared at him.

He smiled removing her glasses and safely setting them aside before bumping his nose against hers. "I know, but you are special like that."

"Awe, you really think I'm special?"

He nodded.

Mary felt his mouth so close to hers his minty breath blew hot against her lips. She lifted her head to capture his mouth in a kiss and he teasingly pulled back and held her hands pinned down to the leather interior of the limousine seats so that she couldn't touch him either.

She moaned her frustration. "Maybe if you whisper the words to me again like you mean it, it will work this time."

"There is no way I can say 'you aren't my type' into your ear. It wouldn't work because you know it's a lie. I adore everything about you." He leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to her lips. "That's why I went ahead and removed your panties myself."

"How can you adore everything about me with my illness always hanging over our heads? We never know when it's going to be a good day or a bad one."

"Everyday is a good day with you sweetheart and how can I lay fault for something that if you could help it, you wouldn't be dealing with it at all. Mary, all I want is you. Don't you know that by now?"

"Okay now. You see, saying *those words* to me will make me strip naked and throw myself at you." She laughed and he seized the opportunity to insert his tongue in her mouth and kiss her in a way that left her gasping for air.

The blood in her veins was racing and she moaned loudly. With a gasp she slapped her palm over her mouth and released a nervous giggle.

"What?" He chuckled as her face grew red and she looked away.

"The driver probably heard that," she whispered.

"Doesn't knowing someone can hear us turn you on?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "*No!* No, how could you even think such a thing?" She pulled a face at him. "No, that's too sick to think about it."

"You're turned on by it aren't you?" He gave her a knowing look.

"*Hell yeah,*" she laughed out loud. She pulled his mouth back down to hers and kissed him with all the heat and passion she felt inside. Her hand reached down between them and she released the belt on his trousers and unbuttoned the top button. "Oh damn, I want you inside me so *fucking* bad!"

“I want you too sweetheart!” He growled through gritted teeth.

Alec fanned her hands to undo his zipper and she was grateful because her hands were shaking so bad she was likely to cause some damage with the zipper. But when they were down and he released himself from the shield of his underwear, she was holding his silky smoothness in her hand and spreading her knees wider to accommodate him on the smallness of the seat.

After several slippery attempts to enter her and nearly rolling off the seat onto the floorboard of the limo, she heard Alec curse softly before she found herself being lifted as he sat up. He moved her to straddle his knees.

Mary's knees bit into the leather seats as she came up, holding onto his broad shoulders for balance and lowering herself onto the hard cock he held in his hand. She groaned and bit on her bottom lip as she felt him fill up and overflow her inner chamber. Finally reaching their goal, they became still and sat there a moment just holding each other feeling humbled by the beauty of being one.

“Alec, I swear you're making me as big a sexual deviant as you are,” she whispered and touched his face with loving hands.

“You say that like it's a bad thing,” he wiggled his dark eyebrows at her.

She kissed him and her mouth opened on a gasp as she felt his penis moving inside her as he flexed his muscles. When her pussy tightened about him in answer, he moaned and held her face in place so that he could ravish her mouth with a kiss that let her know the time for playing and talking was over.

They had reached Atlanta before Mary was able to speak another coherent word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So how is the sex?”

Mary choked and sputtered the Chocolate Martini the ladies of her wedding party had insisted on her trying. Her friend’s blunt question came out of the blue even though she expected it; but after dinner, not before.

“Dang Olga, can’t you wait until the girl gets her buzz on first?” Lori chastised.

“Wait?” Olga shrieked. “Most of us lost our virginity early in life--”

“Speak for you only,” Gina interrupted.

“Anyway,” Olga rolled her eyes. “I’ve waited a long time to ask Mary this question.”

“I want to know too, shoot.” Dot piped in. “Girl, is the sex good or not?” Everyone laughed.

“You have to admit it’s not every day someone gets to share a bed with one of the most wanted bachelors in America,” Kay voiced.

“If he slept with every woman they claimed he dated, then there have been more women to share his bed than I would be willing to deal with,” Karen piped in rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her breast.

“*Karen*,” her sister Gina reached out and lightly tapped her thigh with her butter knife. “You can be so rude.”

“Please, I’m just saying what everyone is thinking.”

Mary’s long standing friends were made up of a diverse group of women: Dot, African American; Olga, Cuban American; Lori, Caucasian; and Kay, Caucasian.

In addition, there were her cousins Gina and Karen, who were sisters and gave her an insight to what it felt like to have sisters every summer she spent at their house. This was the first time she got them all together at the same time because their interest and personalities was diverse.

Each of them was very special to her and all of them brought something substantial to her life. If they could make it through this weekend together without killing each other, everything they had to do for the wedding should go off without a hitch.

Mary realized Karen was right and it stood to reason that everyone would be curious about how much of Alec's life was fact and how much was fiction. But she would no more apologize to her friends for Alec's past anymore than *he* would have felt the need to justify his past to them or anyone else. It was his love for her that had caused him to speak to her about the fact he had used women for solace after losing his brother in the war. She wasn't going to betray his trust.

"All I will say in regards to what you've read or heard about Alec's past is those *without sin* at this table can be the first to cast an insult," Mary spoke quietly.

"Well that would be me," Kay joked. "But see...sinless people don't judge people. So I will say what Mary is too nice to say, it's none of your business. got to be a great guy or Mary wouldn't be marrying him and hey he's paying for this great weekend for all of us to be together."

"Here! Here!" They cheered raising their glasses high in a toast to Alec.

Mary released a long sigh of relief and sipped her drink. This time it slid down easy and spread like liquid warmth in her chest. She was grateful for the laughter that eased the growing tension the question had left in its wake.

"Happily, I can say I am now a most sinful woman. I admit I was sinful the entire world," Mary started out and shook her head as her girlfriends hooted and made *woofing* noises at her before falling into fits of laughter.

"Dish the dirt, Mary!"

"Yeah, we want dirt, girl."

"Okay, I'm going to say this and then we need to move on to wedding talk." Mary smiled. She worried her bottom lip.

"Come on, just say it! We are all adults here...well, I take that back, some of us are adults while others are old enough to talk about s-e-x." Gina teased elbowing her sister.

“Bitch,” Karen rolled her eyes at her. “You know I’m grown. Go ahead Mary. What were you going to say?”

“I was just going to say, if the limo ride from home to here had been any longer I wouldn’t have been able to walk once I got out of that car.”

“Oh shit! You go on with your bad self.”

“Damn, no she didn’t.”

“*Awe man*, I’ve always wanted to have limo sex. You know your bootie shaking like in those music videos...”

It was several more stories all around of sex escapades and two more rounds of drinks later before they got around to placing their first order for food starting with appetizers of shrimp cocktails, stuffed mushrooms, calamari rings and fire wings with everyone sharing and sampling.

“Mary, how is your boy Cedric handling all this?” Dot asked.

“He is going to be one of Alec’s groomsmen.” Mary answered licking the wing hot sauce off her fingers.

“I didn’t expect that,” Olga said.

“I thought since he and Monica divorced--.”

“Say what?” Lori piped in chewing on the shrimp like it was trying to swim away from her. “I...I...didn’t...hear--”

“Girlfriend, will you please finish chewing that shrimp first. You’re such a country ass white gal,” Karen laughingly shook her head.

“She’s country?” Dot laughed aloud which caused several heads to turn their way. “We *all* are *country* as hell...don’t even front!” Dot injected as she snatched up the last stuff mushroom with her fingers before Karen could fork it.

It went on like that for the next few hours. By the time Mary made her way back to the presidential suite she shared with Alec, her jaws were sore from all the smiling and laughing.

Pushing open the door, the aroma of roses wafted up in her face. Her eyes widened in surprise as she saw the trail of red rose petals leading from the suite

entrance to the bedroom. “What is this?” She beamed and tossed her handbag and hotel keycard onto the entrance table.

Removing her silk beaded walking flats from her feet, she left them by the door. Lifting the long flowing skirt of the floral kimono styled Maxi dress, Mary buried her bare feet in the softness of the petals.

Having Alec making such a weekend with the girls possible for her was a gift in itself. For the first time since becoming engaged she felt like her wedding day was really going to happen. Now the gorgeous dear man had done this!

A long appreciative sigh escaped her lips from the decadence of the act. She followed the rose petal road into the bedroom and saw there were more shaped into a heart on the bed and another trail leading into the marbled bathroom and still there was no sign of Alec. The bathroom was illuminated in flameless candlelight all over the place. There had to be at least a hundred of them. Soft jazz music was playing in the background and the tub was filled with water in the temperature controlled bath with more red rose petals floating atop.

Mary had never experienced such luxury. She tried not to think about how wasteful it was to kill a bunch of roses for her pleasure but she wasn’t one to allow the gesture to go to waste. She stripped off her clothing and put them in the supplied laundry chute in the bathroom. Mary took off her glasses and placed them on the vanity. Lastly, she wrapped a white towel around her head tucking the corners in to secure her hair from getting wet.

She paused just to take it all in a bit longer before she stepped over into the sunken tub. Noticing the bottle in the ice bucket she lifted the bottle to see what it was and was thankful to see it was sparkling cider because unlike a few of her friends she wasn’t one for drinking and the one martini she did have, had her feeling lightheaded.

Pouring some cider in a champagne flute Mary grabbed a chocolate covered strawberry and washed it down with the cider before sitting the glass aside and resting against the tub cushion.

Her eyes drifted closed with the sweet and satisfying thoughts of the great weekend she had and the realism of how much she was coming to be dependent on Alec's love. The thought that she was living the love she always read about and dreamed of thrilled her and terrified her at the same time.



Alec's face split into a wide grin as he saw Mary's shoes by the door. She must have enjoyed the surprise he had the hotel to set up for him. He didn't think he possessed a romantic bone in his body until he fell in love. Now all he could think about was ways that might please the woman he loved. He placed his leather satchel holding his sketchpad, pencils and the notes of changes he needed for the latest Advertising Campaign down.

Unlike his competitor, Alec liked to do all his artwork by hand before implementing it in 3D graphics on the computer so that he could utilize both for his clients' benefits. Most of his clients were old-school and did business with the same old Mom and Pop form of business they started out with. Working on computers was easier and quicker for him. The client didn't care about *his* time or inconveniences; if they were intimidated by modern technology, he couldn't use it.

He too eased out of his shoes and placed them beside hers before removing his black socks and tucking them inside his shoes. He held up his trouser legs and stepped onto the path of petals and chuckled at the silliness of it all. He had searched online for ways to romance a woman and some of the ideas that were posted he found corny as hell, but this he had to agree was a fantastic idea.

The trail of flower petals leading to the bedroom truly was lovely to behold and if he, being a man could appreciate it, he imagined Mary had been pleased. He had hoped to be back to their room before she returned from her last outing before the ladies returned home in the morning to see her reaction to his surprise; but one crisis after another had needed his personal attention.

Alec shrugged out of his black linen suit coat and loosened his red and black silk tie before tugging it from the collar and pitching them both aside on the empty bed. He saw the trail of rose petals continue to the adjoining bathroom and

he cocked a deeming eyebrow because Mary wasn't waiting for him in bed, she must still be enjoying her bath.

Naked Alec padded softly across the plush carpet and petals pausing at the door of the large bathroom to look at Mary. He had envisioned catching her gliding the washcloth along her arms, belly, washing over the fullness of her hips and thighs before soaping the honey sweetness between her legs. But what he found was his bride-to-be immersed up to her chin in floating rose petals...asleep.

Suddenly feeling inspired Alec did an about face and strode back into the other room and retrieved his sketchpad and pencils. He returned to the bathroom and took a seat at the vanity crossing his ankle over his knee to brace the pad while his hand moved in rapid movements.



Mary was surprised to see a naked Alec sitting in the bathroom with his sketchpad in hand and his head bent, so intent on whatever he was working on. She wondered briefly if it was good for his eyes to be working by the soft lighting of the candles. But since there were about a hundred of them and the light wasn't blaring, she could make out his features and expression really well from where she sat in the bath.

She adored the way his dark hair curled in the back. She treasured the smell of his skin, a male scent unique to Alec, discernible even through his bath soap and aftershave. She prized the way his pale green eyes were alternately thoughtful and loving as he stared at her. She held dear the way his long fingers held hers firmly and possessively when they strolled down the street or through the hotel lobby. She loved everything about his face...and the pain he tried to hide when he saw something or someone that reminded him of his younger brother. She appreciated how he reassured her when her insecurities got the best of her.

In truth, she loved everything about this man and if anything should happen in the future to take him from her, he will forever remain her first love.

When he finally looked up from the pad and noticed she was awake, his lips spread into a slow lazy grin.

“Hello beautiful, you must have had a long eventful day.”

Mary returned his smile. “You look comfortable...and naked. How long have you been sitting there letting me sleep?”

“Long enough because I’m dying to get my kiss that is usually waiting for me,” he spoke softly. Closing the pad and placing his drawing materials aside he stood and came to stand above her head.

Leaning back all Mary got was an eye full of penis, and it wasn’t a bad view from where she sat. It grew from being limp to a semi-erection under her smoldering gaze and she gave him a knowing wink as he came down on one knee and leaned over to kiss her lips. Mary slid one wet hand behind his head and held him to her.

Once the kiss broke he took her hand and looked at her fingers. “Sweetheart, the pads of your fingers are indicating you’ve been in here awhile. You ready to come out of is it asking too much to get a back washer.”

“My man works hard all day so that his woman can lounge lazily in a bath full of roses all evening after footing the bill for her to have a delightfully indulgent late lunch with the ladies; it’s the least I can do.”

“Wow, sounds like you got some kind of man.”

“I think so.”

“Well, warn me before its time for your man to get home. He probably can kick my ass if he’s that great.” He pressed a smiling kiss to her laughing lips.

She still feasted her eyes upon his wonderful lean muscular body as he stood and stepped down into the bath. He completely dunked himself before he turned his back towards her and glided back to rest between her spread legs

She opened her knees wider and suppressed an erotic shiver as the shifting water tickled at her exposed clitoris. When he leaned back against her, she had to resist the urge to rub herself against his hard back.

Mary silently thanked the hotel for making a bath wide enough to accommodate people who were larger than average.

Alec smoothed his wet hands down the length of her shaven calves and

guided her legs around his waist while her heels rested on top of his thighs. Her full breasts and cushiony softness was perfect for giving a man comfort.

Men that didn't appreciate a full-figured woman did so not having any idea of what they were missing in the loving department.

"Hmm, this is nice," Alec released a tired sigh. "I've never bathed in a bath of roses before."

"You haven't?" She asked in surprise. "If you've never done it before, how did you know to do this for me?"

"I looked up ideas on romancing a woman on the computer. Does it disappoint you that I didn't think this idea up myself?"

"Of course not," Mary shook her head. Her fingers massaged and kneaded his shoulder muscles until she felt him relax beneath her touch. "It actually makes me happy that you aren't the 'Corporate Casanova' the media likes to call you. I like being the first to share things with you."

"What the media doesn't know is the women I dated never expected anything more than what money could easily buy and that doesn't require much forethought from me."

"Not even with the one you had actually considered marrying?"

Alec grimaced at the reminder. "Just think, I was about to settle for a marriage of convenience to get my mother off my back when suddenly my mother's Christmas wish was that I would find a woman I'd love and spend the rest of my life with, brought me you."

He reached up and caught her hand on his shoulder and brought it to his lips to kiss her palm.

"Last Christmas was the best Christmas I ever had," Mary murmured against his ear and nuzzled the space behind his ear. She felt him shiver and grinned because she knew it was due to cold bathwater.

"I promise you it will pale in comparison to the ones we will have from this year forward. Soon I hope we can build a family of our own," he admitted openly.

Mary stomach flipped flopped happily at the thought of carrying Alec's

children.

“You know Alec,” she began. “I’m happy that you brought up the subject of our future. Now that we have time to ourselves, I think there is a lot we need to talk about. The wedding is only weeks away. Once we return, it will get crazy again and we’ll barely have any time alone until after the wedding.”

“I agree.” He released her hand and leaned forward enough to give her better access to his back. “Ah, thank you baby, that feels wonderful.”

Mary ran the scented soaped washcloth along the breadth of his shoulders and down the length of his spine. “We need to think about how many children we want and how soon we can start.”

“Well, I don’t know if trying for a child on our wedding night would be a good idea. We should at least wait until the thing with Francesca blows over, don’t you think?”

“If that baby is yours I’m sure there will always be a “thing” with Francesca.” Mary closed her eyes and bit down on her bottom lip. It was the first time she allowed her bitter feelings about this woman being a possible part of their future to come out.

“Sweetheart, even though you said that none of this changes anything between us,” Alec’s voice was low. “That’s not quite true is it?”

“Alec--”

“Honey, how could it not change some things? We aren’t talking about an indiscretion that will pass. This is something that is going to be a part of our marriage for the rest of our lives.”

“I don’t hold any ill will towards the child, sweetie,” she assured him. “I’m just worried his mother won’t allow me to be an active part of his life, which will cause a separation between him and the children we will have.”

“When you say it like that, there is indeed much I have yet to consider,” Alec admitted. “The one thing I’m sure about Mary is you would be a great and positive mother figure for the child.”

“I think that would be expecting too much understanding on his mother’s

part for that to happen,” Mary admitted sadly. She had to keep a realistic mind about the situation or risk being disappointed in the future.

“If Francesca is still as shallow as I remember her to be, I can’t see her taking her motherly responsibilities seriously. She probably will dump my child on a nanny and ship him off to boarding school when he comes of age and no *Merv* child will be treated with such disregard.”

Mary’s hand stilled. It was the first time she heard Alec speaking of the child as if it was already determined to be his. Even though that was a possibility, it hurt to hear it aloud.

“*When!* You were right. I’ve practically turned into a prune. I’ve been in here so long my butt is aching.” Mary forced lightness into her voice.

“Is your HS acting up again?” Alec asked his voice deep with concern. “I’d hoped this weekend to be a relaxing one for you, sweetheart. It would kill me if I only made the situation worse.”

Situation, she silently repeated. She cringed even though it was the truth. If he was marrying Francesca, he would never have to ask this question or wonder if his kindness was more of a hindrance than help. Alec was healthy, athletic, and socially active. He deserved a woman that could be a full-time partner in every aspect of his life.

Mary kept her eyes averted so he couldn’t see her tears as she stepped up and out of the tub. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me, honey. It’s nothing that a good night’s sleep won’t take care of.” She assured him, proud that she could keep her emotional state out of her voice. She turned her back to him and shoved her arms into the terry cloth robe securing it closed by tying the belt at her waist.

“I’ll be done in a minute.”

“Do you want me to order up some dinner for you?” she offered. “I’m still full from earlier.”

“Choose something light on the stomach from the menu, if you don’t mind sweetheart,” he answered.

Mary nodded feeling a little more in control. She turned and smiled at him.

“Your eyes are all red,” Alec’s brow puckered. “Baby, you were in this heated tub too long.”

“The bath was perfect. The rose petals were perfect. *You* are perfect.” She blew him a kiss. “It’s been a perfect day all around and I will remember it always. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me, baby.”

“It’s easy to please you.” He winked at her. “Besides...my making you happy makes me happy, Mary. I love you.”

“I love you too.” That was the truth. She just wondered if it was enough to raise happy children and to build a life together while dealing with the constant outside interferences.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mary had all the things she and Alec had accumulated during their stay in Atlanta in the sitting area waiting to be loaded up and carried to the limo once they were ready to go.

Staying in Atlanta the past month had made time fly by. It felt as if she and Alec were already married and settling in a comfortable routine together. She would wake up when he did every morning so that she could share breakfast with him. In the evenings they would cuddle on the sofa and watch movies while playing the movie kissing game, which meant every time there was kissing in the movie, they would kiss. They rarely finished a movie.

The good thing is their wedding day was three weeks away and Alec had freed up the next two months by wrapping up the important accounts and delegating the less troublesome campaigns to his associates.

Her mother, the saint she was, had finished all the wedding plans back home. Mary was to pick up the wedding gown and the bridesmaids' dresses from the seamstress before leaving Atlanta. Once they got back home, she and Alec had to decide on which cake they wanted to go with. She told her mother to go ahead with the final menu they had discussed before she left.

Alec's parents were coming down a week early so that they could visit some of the tourist spots in Alabama; such as the *Space and Rocket Center* in Huntsville, the *Eichbold-Henstis Medical Museum* in Mobile and Alec's mother was itching to get to the *Unclaimed Baggage* in Scottsboro. Her dad had also promised a few great fishing spots and Mary was happy she had her parents to play host and hostess.

Mary couldn't believe it. Everything was coming together and soon she and Alec would belong to each other officially for the rest of their lives. A thrilling anticipation fluttered from her heart to her stomach and down to her toes.

“Honey, I got to go and take care of some last minute things and we can head out,” Alec called out to her coming up short. “Damn, I’m such a lucky man.” He moved up behind her and slid his arms around her waist. “What are you staring at out there?”

“I was thinking that no matter what city you are in and you’re looking at it from way up here, it’s always beautiful,” Mary confided. She turned from the Atlanta landscape in her fiancée’s arms and wrapped her arms about his waist.

“You know if you want, we could relocate to Atlanta. We would be closer to your family.” Alec suggested.

Mary shook her head. “Thank you for the thought but the reason I moved to Seattle is because I could no longer take the high humidity of the southern summers.”

“Ah, I should have thought about that. What about an apartment that we can spend the winters here with the exception of Christmas of course.”

“I suppose that will work out.”

“We don’t have to make a decision now, sweetheart. Just think on it.” Alec kissed her temple. “That brings us to whose place we will be living in when we get back from the honeymoon?”

“The Honeymoon! Oh gosh, we haven’t even discussed where we want to go.” Mary worried her bottom lip.

“Your parents said you’ve always dreamed of a cruise through Asia. Are you still interested?”

“You really mean it? We can do that?”

“You got a passport?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s do it,” he whispered against her ear.

Mary turned in his arms and leaned her face against his chest as she squeezed his waist tightly with barely contained excitement. “I still can’t believe all of this is happening. It’s a bit overwhelming.”

“We aren’t finished making decisions yet,” Alec reminded. “Are you moving into my place or do you prefer I move to yours until we decided if we want to find a new place together or what?”

“I...I don’t know,” Mary pulled back to look up into his face. “Oh my God, we are weeks away from making a commitment to each other and I haven’t even been to your home in Seattle.”

“It’s no big deal sweetheart, just space. I have a nice penthouse apartment similar to the hotel we have happily called home the past few weeks together, but more spacious--”

She pushed away from him and put some space between them.

“Mary--”

“Maybe we are rushing all of this,” she murmured. “This is just one of many things we haven’t taken the time to discuss.”

“Honey, you can ask me anything. I’ve already told you that.” Alec closed the space between them.

She moved away again holding up her hand to halt him when he moved to follow. “Stay over there! I can’t think when you’re near me.” Mary grumbled.

Alec’s concerned agitated frown became a satisfied smile. “I get under your skin, huh?”

“Under it, around it, over it and in it,” Mary admitted. “We aren’t having any problems with the *physical side* of our relationship.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, sweetheart.”

“It is when I know what your favorite sexual position is but not what things you are allergic to!” She snapped.

“Well, knowing which sexual position I like isn’t difficult because with you, I like all of them.” He gave her a wink.

Mary felt that wink all the way to her toes by way of her nipples and vagina. “Don’t do that either.”

“Do what?”

“Wink at me.”

He chuckled. "I'll try."

"So, what are you allergic to?"

"Conversations that cause me to be on one side of the room and you on the other," Alec muttered.

"Alec!"

"Okay...okay. Do you realize how moody you've been lately?" He asked not expecting an answer, just making an observation.

"Maybe it's because my man can't answer simple questions without givin' me attitude." She turned on her heels to leave.

"Mary, don't you dare walk away from me!" Alec shouted.

Mary stopped, more startled than afraid by his unexpected tone. She turned to face him once more. His face was flushed and his sexy straight nose was flared at the nostrils while his beautiful full mouth compressed into a single line. It was rare to see Alec angry but she has worked in the same office building with him long enough to know it when she saw it.

"Thank you," he grumbled. "Now sit."

Mary crossed her arms over her breasts and cocked her head to the side in question.

"Please." His tone turned pleading.

She nodded and moved over to the sofa and took a seat. "Okay, I'm sitting, now what?"

"Now we must get some things straight if this marriage is going to work," he began. "I can say I've learned a thing or two along the way from watching my parents."

"Such as..."

"Such as...neither one of them ever left a room angry with their feelings unresolved because when you do, it gives your emotions time to fester and grow into resentment towards the other."

"I--"

"Let me finish," he interrupted.

Mary quietly nodded.

“Since I’ve been staying at your parents, no matter how heatedly they disagreed that day over one thing or the other, I noticed that every night they would kiss outside their bedroom door and smile at each other before they went inside and closed the door.”

“Oh God, you’ve seen that? It’s has always been that way between those two.” Mary smiled and nodded. “*Geeze*, it used to embarrass me so much when I was younger. My friends would come for sleepovers and see them not only kiss but also grab each other’s bottoms and squeeze while grinning at each other like idiots. The next day the entire school would be laughing about it.”

“They still do that part too.” Alec laughed and cleared his throat. “I just didn’t think I needed to tell all of Joe’s and Miriam’s business to make my point.”

Mary groaned washing her hand over her face.

“Mary,” he called her name lovingly. “That’s the type of marriage I want us to have. We don’t leave a room with things left unfinished between us.”

“I want the same type of marriage too.” Her eyes caught with his and held. “I’m sorry for walking away like that when all I really wanted to do is *speake with you* and not *at you*.”

He crossed the room and dropped down beside her. He took her hand in his, linking their fingers together. “Also I hope my touch always affect you the way you say it does. I feel the same way, but we are both capable of doing more than one thing at a time.”

“You’re right,” she nodded in agreement.

“Sweetheart, you know that part of strengthening a marriage is discovering something new about each other every day. There is no application for a perfect partnership. We’ve conquered the hardest part which is making a decision to share our lives with only each other.”

“I think it’s my nerves. As we get closer to the wedding. I don’t even have much of an appetite lately. I’m ready to get this over with so we can relax into our lives.”

Alex leaned over and kissed her tenderly before pulling back to look at her. A thoughtful smile curved his mouth at the corners.

“I’m allergic to house cats they make my back itch but nothing drastic like cutting off my air passage. I’m a dog man. Big dogs not little ones, but if you want a little one I’m okay with it as long as we have two dogs in the house; one big and one mutt.” She lightly elbowed his ribs and he laughed. “Aspirin makes me sick to my stomach and I’m not allergic to okra but I just don’t like them unless they are fried. That sliminess thing they got going...” He suppressed a shiver.

Mary laughed. “You didn’t complain when you were eating my Momma’s Louisiana Chicken Gumbo.”

“Okra was in that? Well baby, you cook gumbo like your momma and I will take okra off the list or at least say, I don’t like *stewed* okra or *pickled* okra like my Mummo fixes it.”

“I’m tellin’ your grandmother what you said when she gets here for the wedding,” Mary warned. “She is going to make you sit at the table and dare you to leave it until you eat all you veggies.”

“You tell on me and I will tell your parents that you like it when I...” He whispered the rest into her ear.

Mary blushed and hid her face in his shoulder with a giggle as he eased her back to commence the demonstration.



The knock on the hotel room door brought a smile to Mary’s face. Alec must have forgotten something. At this rate, it would be late in the evening before they got back to Alabama. She probably needed to call her mother and let her know they were running late so she wouldn’t hold dinner for them.

“Honey what...” Mary’s words died on her lips. “*Uhm...* Alec isn’t here,” was all she could say in her surprised state.

“I know. I waited until I saw him leave. I believe it is time for you and me to talk; don’t you, Miss Christmas?”

“You might as well come inside.”

Mary stepped back and allowed the very pregnant red haired woman to enter. She needed no introduction to know the beautiful woman was Francesca Faustina for she has seen her in enough in magazines, commercials, billboards and television interviews. She also towered over her like Alec did and the three inch stilettos she wore wouldn't have made a difference. Mary would still have to look up at her.

"I've always loved this hotel," Francesca grinned removing the elegant floral print wrap from her shoulders.

Mary's eyes immediately dropped to the protruding belly in the form fitting navy dress that brought out the color of the woman's lovely eyes. She was even more beautiful in person; enough so that Mary swallowed back the bitter bile of jealousy that threatened to choke her.

As if she owned the hotel, she took a seat on the sofa without being asked, placing the wrap and her clutch purse on the sofa beside her. "I see your bags are packed. Are you returning to Seattle?"

"No, we're leaving for Alabama tonight."

"I have a close *friend* from Alabama."

"I heard that we actually have a mutual friend," Mary sat on one of the chairs across from the sofa. "Dr. Cedric Thomas."

"Yes, that is who I was referring to and I do believe he mentioned a little something about knowing you a long time ago." Francesca fluttered her long lashes; her accent becoming less prominent as spoke.

"Actually, we've been friends most of our lives and we still are. Cedric is even going to be one of Alec's groomsmen," Mary announced. She secretly enjoyed the surprise look on the other woman's face. Obviously she hadn't spoken to Cedric recently or she would have already known this. "Would you care for a soda or perhaps I can order us up a pitcher of sweetened iced tea."

"*Gads!* Absolutely not. Every time I come to Atlanta and see people drink that stuff, I cringe. Nothing for me thanks. As you may know by now, this isn't a social call."

So that's the way it's going to be, Mary thought. Blunt talking. So be it.

“Why are you in Atlanta? I would think you are too close to your due date to be flying and last I heard in the media you were still in California, Miss Faustina.”

“True, it is ill advised that I fly this close to my due date but since I got in town the same day you did, it was fine then.”

It was Mary's turn to show her surprise.

“*Tsk...tsk...*our Alec has been a bad boy.” She swept her long hair over her shoulder. “I suppose some things will never change. Alec always had a gifted way of juggling more than one woman at a time and making us both feel as if we are the only one he wants to be with. What I can't figure out is out all of us, why is he marrying you? Are you pregnant too?”

“Of course not,” Mary balked.

“Ahhh, so your ass is really that fat? Hmm, maybe it's the virginal thing that makes my Alec feel obligated to follow through with this wedding.”

“How did you...”

“Alec told me of course. He felt really guilty for taking your virginity, seeing how you waited so long and obviously your papa didn't take it too well, so he thought marriage was in order. He didn't need any more bad publicity with contractual renewals' hanging in the balance.”

Mary felt nauseated. “I want you to leave.” She stood.

“I...” Whatever Francesca was about to say she halted to answer the cell phone chirping in her from her purse.

Mary noticed except for saying hello, she said nothing else before closing the phone and settling it back into her purse.

“I don't think there is anything else to be said between us,” Mary added as Francesca stood with wrap and handbag in hand. “At least not until the baby is born and we know for sure if it's Alec's child.”

The woman walked and stopped in front of her. “From one woman to another Mary; you know that a child should have two parents. My son needs his father on a full time basis and you are coming between me and my son's happiness.

What gives you the right to put your needs over mine? I've dated Alec off and on for years."

"You and many other women," Mary returned. "The only difference is he asked *me* to marry him and not you."

Mary turned her attention towards the door as the familiar beeping of a card key being used sounded before the door opened. What happened next happened so quickly Mary was left speechless looking at Francesca heaped at her feet moaning and wailing something awful while clutching her belly.

"What the hell?" Mary mouthed.

"Mary! Francesca!" Alec rushed forward dropping to one knee before the crying woman. "What's going on here?"

"I...I..." Mary began.

"SHE tripped me as I was walking by to leave!" Francesca wailed. "She said she wished the baby was dead and that I would go away and leave you alone." The tears were flowing earnestly; even Mary would have believed her if she hadn't known she was lying.

"Francesca! That isn't true," Mary protested finally finding her voice again.

"If it's not true why I am I on the ground with you standing over me? Thank God you came in Alec!" Francesca threw her arms around Alec as he helped her to her feet.

"What are you doing here Francesca? I thought we agreed to meet in the lobby," Alec said gruffly. He picked up her purse and wrap from the floor.

"I thought it was time I met Mary, since she is going to be a stepmother to our baby and she came at me. She was upset after finding out I've been here in Atlanta and you hadn't told her."

Mary saw the guilt look on Alec's face and felt as if the wind had been knocked from her. If it was true that Alec knew she was in Atlanta all this time. Was everything else she said before he arrived true too?

"Mary, I can explain." Alec held Francesca to his side with one arm while imploring her to understand with his free hand.

Mary was speechless and numbed. After all they talked about, how could he not tell her that the mother of his child was in the same city? How many times had he left here in pretense to handle business only to spend it with her?

“Ouch! Ouch!” Francesca’s face twisted in pain. “Oh my God...oh Alec, I really feel some pain...we need to get to the hospital. Something may be wrong with our baby.”

“Mary...” Alec began.

“Go,” Mary said. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Come with me,” he pleaded.

“NO!” Francesca yelled. “I don’t want that crazy Black bitch near me or my child ever again! I swear if you turn away from me and your son now Alec when we need you more, you will never be a part of your son’s life. I will disappear and you will never find him!”

Mary squared her shoulders willing herself not to fall apart. Not in front of this woman. “We agreed Alec, the welfare of the baby would be put before all else because this could be your son. I couldn’t live with myself if I thought that something happened to him because of me.”

Mary saw Francesca face and realized that if the woman was still pretending to be in pain, she was doing a damned good job of acting. But the facts remained. Whether it was pretense or not, Francesca could truly have the baby at anytime and she could have hurt herself or the baby in her swan drop to the floor when she heard Alec’s key in the door.

Mary suspected the call on her phone had been a warning from someone in cahoots with her plan. It was neither here or there because the fact remains that Alec had not been completely honest with her and it hurt more than anything Francesca could do to her.

AlecAlec’s eyes locked with hers she could see he was torn between what he wanted to do and what he felt was the right thing to do. She forced a reassuring smile and pressed a kiss to his lips while touching his face.

“Be sure you tell the driver to drive safely. I’m sure everything will be okay.”

“Okay with us or the baby?” He asked.

She couldn’t answer.

“We will talk when I get back,” Alec promised.

Mary still didn’t answer as she watched Alec escort Francesca out the door and it closed behind them with a resounding click. There goes the vow to never leave a room with things unfinished between them, she thought.

Suddenly the room seemed very empty, still and quiet. Mary dropped to her knees and cried.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was well after two in the morning before Alec returned dragging his heels. He was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. He was surprised to find out once they got to the hospital that Francesca was had indeed gone into labor. However he didn't believe Mary had anything to do with her falling to the ground one bit. He knew Francesca was prone to dramatic displays and she wasn't above lying to get what she wanted. It was why every time he would forget and call her, he was soon reminded why he dumped her in the first place.

He unsuccessfully tried to call Mary on the hotel phone and her cell phone and each time he didn't get an answer. Because the media frenzy over him and Mary had dwindle to nearly nothing on the back page of a gossip rag since they've been in Atlanta, Alec had temporarily let the bodyguards retreat until the actual wedding when he knew they would become big news again.

Seeing the wedding stuff and luggage still stacked in the middle of the floor made him feel somewhat eased. Mary hadn't left him after all. He had some explaining to do, but their ordeal with Francesca had come to a head and now the truth could be revealed about the parentage. He was anxious to speak with Mary. The birth of a child was an experience like none he could ever explain. It made him even more anxious to begin a family with Mary.

Alec headed straight to the bedroom. He didn't want to wake her, but this was something they needed to discuss. He would not go to bed with this misunderstanding between them.

Alec hit the dimmer switch to ease on a little light and his heart lurched into the back of his throat. He cut the light up full blast. The room was empty, the bed turned down by maid service but it had never been touched otherwise. Alec rushed towards the bathroom but he knew before he threw open the door.

Mary was gone.

Alec stumbled back against the bathroom door as if he'd been suckered punched.



"I knew it would be beautiful here in the springtime." Mary smiled warmly at Alec's grandmother on his mother's side, Ava Zhender, who preferred being called Mummo. Mary couldn't think of anywhere else to go that Alec wouldn't immediately think of except here in Leavenworth, Washington. The architecture of the small town here was structured after a Bavarian Village.

Ava lived in a beautiful Victorian home where she had married and raised her children. After her husband died, she had renovated it into a bed and breakfast called Ladybird Cottage. It was as lovely as she remembered, only more so without the snow and with the flowers blossoming in the white picket fenced enclosed courtyard.

Sitting in white washed painted porch swing and sipping freshly squeezed lemonade, Mary felt like all her stress and cares were far behind her. For the first time in a week she was at peace. She still hadn't decided if she was going to marry Alec or not, but she was at peace for Mummo's television only got game shows and no news. After being hounded by media since meeting Alec, no news was good news to Mary. She did however wonder if Francesca has made him a father of a new baby son.

"Dear, you know you can't hide out here much longer. Alec has called a few times to update me that he hasn't found you yet. It breaks my heart to hear the anguish in my grandson's voice." Ava admitted.

"I know and I'm sorry to put you in this position. I didn't have anywhere to go that Alec wouldn't have easily found me. Was he still in Alabama?"

"No, he said he was in Seattle hoping you would eventually return to your townhouse there. Your parents had promised to call him once they heard from you. You know it is not fair to make them lie for you too sweet girl. Your wedding is only a week away, you know." The older woman looked at her from out of the

corner of her eyes. “You know the longer you wait, the harder it will be for your mother to cancel; that is, if you want the wedding to be cancelled.”

“I don’t know what I want.” Mary released a guilty sigh.

“I think you do and that is why you’re so troubled.”

“It’s not about what I want anymore. I have to think about what will be best for the child too; don’t I?” Mary pondered.

“I don’t know dear. Do you?” Ava shrugged. “I’m just saying, don’t you think it odd that Al hasn’t brought up the baby, not once, to me when we spoke?” Her cherub face broke into a grin and her green eyes twinkled like a child with a secret. “I would have suspected regardless of the circumstance of this baby, he would have at the very least told me I was a great-grandmother.”

Mary didn’t admit it aloud but she had been thinking the same thing. Alec wasn’t the type of man that would keep such a thing to himself. Even though he claimed to not want to be with Francesca, he made it clear he wanted to be in the boy’s life if he turned out to be his. What if the child wasn’t his? Would they know such a thing so quickly? Or it could mean that the baby hadn’t been born or worse Francesca lost the child.

She imagined if that had happened he would be looking for her to tell her how much he hated her for tripping Francesca, which was far from the truth. Still in her hurt, she left the hotel taking only her bags and leaving his luggage and all the stuff they had acquired for the wedding behind. She should have at least left a note telling him the truth of what had happened.

“I can see you’re dealing with a lot of regrets child. It is not good to live your life wishing you had done this and wishing you had done that.” Ava spoke softly. “Unless you feel as if Al was doing more taking in this relationship than giving, you should hear him out. Did Al treat you bad?”

The swing moved slowly as Mary used her tiptoe against the wooden floorboard to push it back and forth.

“No, that’s not it at all,” Mary protested. “I don’t think I ever felt so cared for. He took care of me when my illness had me bed ridden and he doctors on the

areas I can't reach. He doesn't complain or feel repulsed by my scars or open drainages. I don't believe I have ever felt so loved in my entire...Oh God." Mary broke off on a sob.

"What is it?" Ava asked.

"I've made a mistake, haven't I?"

"There is a chance, you've done just that. Even though I must say Al has given you reasons to doubt him."

"Yeah, but he's never given me a reason to not trust him. His past is what placed the doubts in my mind, but everything he's done since being with me has not warranted my taking Francesca at her word. She lied about my tripping her. She could have lied about Alec knowing she was in Atlanta all that time."

"He asked me to go along with him. He told me it wasn't what I thought and we needed to talk but I wasn't listening. I was just so infuriated that this woman could be carrying his first child and had the right to ask things of him that I couldn't."

"Now that you are carrying his child, doesn't it give you the same rights you think it gave that woman?"

Mary gasped as she looked at the older woman. "How did you know? I barely just realized it myself."

"I'm of European peasant stock. I know when a woman is breeding," Ava chuckled. "I also saw the positive pregnancy test in the garbage can of your bedroom's bathroom when I emptied it."

"It must've been the antibiotics. It must have counteracted my birth control," Mary muttered an excuse. "How can I tell Alec? He wanted to wait until we were sure about Francesca's baby. Also we wanted to enjoy married life a little before we started building our family. There is also still so much to learn about each other."

"Sweetie, it doesn't matter how the blessing comes to be. As far as I see it, this child was created from love and you two should go ahead with the wedding.

It's not like my grandson isn't doing everything but signing a contract with the devil to find you."

"Let's go inside and pack your things. I will keep your rental car and you can take my car and return it when you come to get me. That way the three of us can fly to Alabama together. I do hate flying alone, even if the plane is a private one."

Mary eyed the classic aqua-green 1957 Chevy, practically drooling at the thought of getting behind the wheel and driving with the top down. "You got a deal!"

Arriving at the building that Alec resided in, Mary didn't know what she expected. The luxury high rise was more appealing on the inside than the glass and metal ultramodern exterior.

There was no way to surprise Alec for they wouldn't allow her access to the private elevator without calling first. She supposes she should be surprised that he allowed her to come up. She wouldn't blame him if he was furious. She should have waited and they should have talked about it. Then if she needed space, she was sure he would have given it to her.

The elevator opened and she walked out seeing there was only one door on this floor. She didn't get the chance to knock before the door was thrown open and Alec was dragging her into his arms.

"You crazy woman; you scared the living hell out of me," he murmured into her hair. "Mummo called and said you were on your way. She told me you had been with her all this time. Thank God! I was so relieved that you hadn't spent all this time alone, thinking I had betrayed you and making yourself sick."

Still holding onto her, Alec moved them farther inside kicking the door closed with his foot. Mary didn't get the chance to even look around at his home. All she could see and feel was Alec. He leaned over until their faces were level and slowly placed his lips against hers—softly searching at first, then more daring as his tongue glided into her parted lips.

His hand brushed against her tender breast before moving to press into the small of her back and mold her firmly against his hardness.

When he drew back to look at her, she opened her eyes drowsily unaware that she'd even closed them. Hot moisture grouped between her legs and she feared she might come just from his kisses alone. For a moment she wondered if he could tell her breasts were a little fuller and the swell of her abdomen a little firmer.

"Why are you staring at me that way?" She asked breathlessly.

"I just can't believe you've been practically under my nose and I didn't know it. I hadn't planned to go to Mummo's until I picked her up to leave for the wedding. There is still going to be a wedding isn't there Mary?"

"I think we need to clear the air first, don't you?"

"We will. Just let me taste you once more to believe you are real. I have imagined you being here like this so many times since we've been apart."

He bracketed her face with his hands and then placed his lips over hers softly, screening and aligning his mouth to get that familiar perfect fit. He kissed her and kissed her and when she thought she was going to faint in his arms, he kissed her some more in every way imaginable. Alec understood how much she enjoyed prolonged kissing and he was making up for lost time.

When he finally pulled away, he kept her hand clasped in his and showed her about the place. Except for a few minor changes she would make, she could imagine making this place her home. The view was to die for and like at the hotel, they had a wonderful bathtub big enough for the both of them together. There were two additional guest rooms with baths of their own, a modestly large kitchen; not as large as she would have liked, but larger than the one in her townhouse.

Still, with a baby on the way she would like to have a home with a back yard and no glass enclosed balcony high enough to give a nose bleed when looking down. This was great for the two of them but not for children.

Moving back inside Mary took a seat on the leather chase. "Alec..." she began.

“Would you like something to drink? I have bottled water, juice, milk, soda pop?”

“Bottle water would be great.” She boosted up her nerves while waiting for Alec to return with two bottled waters. Handing her one, he sat down on the coffee table in front of her.

“Mary.”

“Alec.”

They both laughed nervously.

“You first,” she suggested.

“No, you can go first.”

“Is Francesca and your son okay?”

She saw the quickening of his muscles in his jaw. Mother and child are doing well.”

Mary let out a relieved sigh. “When it seemed as if Francesca had truly gone into labor, I was worried that she had hurt the baby when she dropped to the floor. I didn’t trip her Alec.”

“I know you didn’t trip up Francesca, Mary. You would never do such a thing. Is that why you left before I could explain why I was meeting Francesca in the lobby?”

“The way Francesca tells it you both had been meeting up the entire time we were in Atlanta,” Mary retorted.

“If that were true sweetheart, why would I have invited you to spend the four weeks in Atlanta with me? Wouldn’t it have been easier on me if I had allowed you to stay in Alabama or encouraged you to return home with the other ladies? Did I make love to you like a man that had been having sex with another? I know my reputation, but I am only a man.”

“I know I shouldn’t have believed her but when you said you were going to meet her in the lobby--”

“You thought the worse.” He finished for her.

She nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“I am too.” Alec murmured. “Mary, I swear that day was the first time I got a call from the office telling me Francesca had called looking for me. I didn’t say anything because we had had such a wonderful time, I didn’t want to spoil it. I went downstairs to find out what she wanted and send her away. When I got down stairs one of the bellhops told me she had gone up to my room.”

“Where she proceeded to put on that little show for the both us after she had time to fill my head with lies,” Mary added. “So is it too soon to find out if the baby is yours or not?”

“I found out that day and I came back to the hotel to tell you everything, but you were gone. I contacted your parents who contacted your cousins and friends, and none had heard anything from you. I checked at the office with your coworkers. I hired investigators and I practically camped outside your townhouse.” He ran a shaky hand through his hair. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put me through?”

“I don’t think saying I’m sorry is enough.” Mary leaned over and took his hand in both of hers. “Just know that I have been miserable without you and I will never do anything like that again. I stupidly worried a lot of the people I love because I allowed my emotions to get the best of me; now I’m home.”

“Which means what exactly Mary?”

“ means....if you still want me, I want to go ahead with the wedding and hopefully within time Francesca will let me be a part of your son’s life too once she realizes I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mary, Francesca will no longer be a problem for us.” Alec said somberly and if Mary hadn’t asked if they were okay she would have thought by his tone something bad had happened.

“You said both of them were fine.”

“The child isn’t mine.”

Her heart ached at his obvious disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” Mary murmured her eyes misting over. “I can see how disappointed you are that you and Francesca aren’t going to be parents.”

Alec shook his head. “Is that how you see it Mary?”

“What? Stop raising your voice at me Alec Mercer. I can see you’re disappointed. Are you saying you aren’t?” She finished in a softer tone than she started out with.

“Sweetheart,” he released a tired sigh. “I don’t give a damn about Francesca, but I would be lying if I said the thought of having a baby wasn’t something I was getting use to.”

Mary wiped away the tears that ran down her face.

“*Awe* honey, I’m sorry I didn’t mean for you to come home only to upset you all over again. I guess I’m not saying anything right these days.” He sat aside the water bottle and took hers from her hand and set it on the table next to his.

Sitting on the chase beside her, he guided her to the back rest and leaned back. Both of them put their feet up. Mary rested against his chest, one knee crooked over his thigh. Alec removed her fogging glasses and leaned over her to put them on the coffee table. He held her like that for awhile gently stoking her hair while she cried away the tension she hadn’t realized she was still carrying around.

“I’m sorry,” she hiccupped. “I really needed that.”

“I know sweetheart; sometimes a woman just needs to cry.” Alec nodded against her temple.

She tilted her head back to look at him. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No.” He assured her sincerely. “Even though I think of Ally as one of the guys because she acts like one, I’ve held her when she cried for no apparent reason at all. Or at least none she was willing to share with me. I assumed it was a hormonal woman thing.”

“Oh *Lordy*, don’t say that around any other women, even if it’s true; you’re likely to get hit,” Mary chastised.

“Yeah,” he grinned adding, “Especially if she’s being a *hormonal* female.”

Mary poked him in the rib with a finger and he started giggling, grabbing her hand. She went at him with the free hand and he grabbed that too and wrestled

them over her head as he shifted to where she was on the bottom and he was on the top with only half his weight pinning her down.

“My sweet wonderful Mary Christmas, I missed you.” He murmured in a deep husky voice.

“I missed you two,” she admitted. Even if she hadn’t said it, the love for him was evident in her eyes.

“When you were gone, all I could think of is how wonderful you smell, how beautiful your skin is, the silky smoothness of it beneath my fingertips. Do you have any idea how sexy your innocent exploration of my body is? You’re like a kid on a new discovery. I like how when you discover a new a new mole or old scar you tenderly kiss it.” Alec confessed.

“Alec...”

“Even though the sex between us is unbelievable, it’s the tender intimate moments where we talk afterwards while eating frozen orange sherbet out of the carton naked, holding you in my arms buried deep and yet we don’t move.” He let go of one of her hands and cupped her chin with his fingers. “All I thought about is if you didn’t come back to me, I would lose all of that. There is no one else I can imagine doing that with, but you Mary.”

“Oh Alec,” another tear fell and she thought she was done. It had to be the baby hormones. Should she tell him now or gift him with the news on their wedding night? She didn’t want him to think the fact that they were having a child could replace the one he thought would be his.

No. Mary thought. She would wait until after the wedding and give him this time to grieve over the disappointment of the other baby. Meanwhile she would make a doctor’s appointment to confirm what the over-the-counter test showed and make sure everything was progressing okay since any of the medications she was taking before she realized she might be pregnant may have caused a problem to the fetus.

Instincts made her want to touch her stomach protectively as she thought about their child possibly growing inside of her but she didn’t want to bring more

attention to herself and hoped Alec hadn't already noticed the changes her body was undergoing.

"What are you thinking? I can see the wheels of your mind churning."

"I was thinking that we need to get back to Alabama. I don't know if we are still going to be able to pull everything together in time now," Mary lied, a little. She really was also concerned whether they could keep the scheduled date.

"Mary, all the stuff you left in Atlanta I delivered to your mom's place. I told her to finish up anything that you were supposed to be deciding on and confirm for that date. We are getting married on that date. Do you hear me?"

"All your neighbors probably heard you," she laughed.

He grinned. "The entire top floor is ours. You don't mind selling your place and moving in here do you?"

"For the time being, but I think for our children sake, I would feel better if we were in a house with a big back yard they can play in. I love being this high up and even though the balcony is safety glass enclosed, it still makes me nervous when it comes to children."

He pressed a kiss to her mouth and whispered against her lips. "Why don't we start practicing on all those children you keep talking about?"

Mary chanced asking, "If I were to get pregnant sooner than we had discussed would that be a problem for you?"

"Are you kidding me? I would love to start having babies with you?" His eyes took in her face.

"I didn't feel that way when you thought you were about to have a child with Francesca," Mary reminded.

"What do you mean? If you were to get pregnant, now or later I would be happy Mary. It has been only you that I saw as the mother of my children. Especially after I saw you with the children at the orphanage, I was even going to ask you if perhaps even with the ones we have could we adopt a few."

Mary was surprised. It was the first she had heard this. "You want to adopt too?"

“It was something I had been considering even if I never married because there are so many children without parents in the United States. I know the popular thing seems to be to adopt from other countries, but you see all those kids in the local orphanage Mary. They need homes and families too,” Alec reasoned.

“I can imagine, sweetheart, every time they see on the news some big shot entertainer is adopting overseas, they feel a little more rejected; not feeling they are good enough. I know it’s more difficult to obtain a child in the states, but it will be easier if we are willing to take in children that are older.”

“God, I love the way you think. How could you have kept this part of you hidden so well behind the picture the media painted of you? It had to have hurt you to read all that stuff about yourself.” Mary lovingly touched his lips.

“Not at all. I admit my reputation was earned. There is just more to me than what is newsworthy. I’m hoping to change all that. I don’t want my past to keep us from being able to adopt. I feel with you this will be a new beginning. I’m also thinking of selling my advertising firms while keeping an investing interest since they are interested in keeping my name.”

“Are you okay with this?”

“I have more than enough money,” he answered.

“I’m not talking about money, honey. I’m talking about you. I don’t get the impression that you would be happy being a house-husband,” she pointed out.

“I will as long as I can walk around naked in an apron and you goose me every time I bend over at the oven,” he teased.

“Now I didn’t look at it that way. You got a deal.” She moaned aloud as he tugged and sucked her bottom lip into his mouth.

Breaking the kiss he bumped his nose against hers. “You didn’t say you agree with me about adopting. This would have to be something we agree on together as a family. I can afford to hire help and also to make sure they get the best education.”

“Not on a house-husband salary you won’t.” She cocked a playful eyebrow at him. “I suspect you need to start painting again mister.”

“I already have.”

Mary eyes grew wide with excitement. “You have! Have you finished something? I want to see it! Oh my God, when did you start? Do you have enough done for a showing or...?”

“Whoa, baby slow down,” he chuckled. “I haven’t thought that far ahead. At this time I’m just trying to wet my paintbrush again and I’ve only been working on one piece.”

“Can I see it?”

“Not until it’s finished.”

“Well, when will that be?”

“I never realize I was marrying such a pushy woman. Maybe I should be rethinking the situation.”

“Too late, you shouldn’t have called Mummo sounding like a lost little boy. Now there is no way I would ever leave a man who is bereft without me,” Mary said smugly.

“Oh, I think my pathetic state has changed you in to a b--”

“Don’t you dare say it,” she interrupted.

“Say what?” He feigned innocence. “BOSSY woman is what I was going to say. What were you possibly thinking I was going to say?”

“All I know is that better had been what you were going to say.” She laughingly turned her head so that he could have better access to the nibbling little kisses he was planting against her neck and behind her ear.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes, I want to make love,” she sighed and closed her eyes for the kisses to come. When they didn’t come, her eyes opened and she cocked her head to the side in question. “What is it?”

“Did you always want to be an Administrative Assistant?”

That was a surprise. No one had ever asked her that question before. It was a given that she was happy to have a good job. What else could she possibly want? But she had wanted more before she got sick and needed the medical

insurance. She had a need for a job more than a career or a dream. Her time was limited to the fact that she needed to have insurance before the one her parents had her under expired a few months after she graduated from college.

“What are you asking exactly?” Mary shrugged. “I enjoyed working at Mercer Corp. and I enjoyed the short time I got to work with you. Seeing you in action is sexy.”

“So that’s why you kept jumping the bone every time you assisted me Atlanta. I finally had to start going to the office just to get some work done,” he half joked, for it was also the truth.

“Guilty as charged, which proves I literally ‘suck’ as an assistant,” she managed to say but laughed at her own innuendo.

“Then I know you aren’t assisting anyone else. You didn’t give your boss that I stole you from...”

“*Yuck!*” Mary face scrunched up at the thought. “I should sock you one for saying that, but I don’t know if your face will heal in time for the wedding and I want your mug lookin’ handsome for the photos.”

“You didn’t answer my question? What did you dream about growing up? I don’t know many little girls growing up saying I want to be a glorified secretary,” he pointed out.

“Hmm, I wanted to be Cinderella, but the position was already taken,” She laughed as he tickled her ribs. His hand rested on her stomach and a light frown came to his broad forehead. “But honestly,” she grabbed his hand rubbing her belly and held it. “I dreamed of being a fashion designer. I wanted to create clothing for big women. I took fashion and design as a secondary study, but I wondered if my body could hold up under the stress of interning and getting my foot in the door.”

“Do you think if you can bypass all that and go right establishing the dream that you would still want to do it?” Alec asked her.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that Mercer Corporation has sponsorship in a lot of things including the fashion business. Why do you think models were so hot to date me?”

Besides the obvious she reached between them and crassly grabbed his crotch. To her surprise his cock was already semi-erect. She felt it grow harder beneath her fingers and grin. “Hmm, somebody thinks they’re going to be getting some.”

“This somebody knows he is going to be getting some. I’ve spent too many nights tossing and turning thinking about it. I just know that we needed to talk first so we can quit having these misunderstandings between us.”

“So you really just wanted me back for the sex is what you’re saying?” She feigned insult.

“Hell yeah, I wanted you back for the sex.” Alec eased his hand down the side of her gypsy skirt and guided it up the length of her leg as his fingertips brushed her skin. He paused and swallowed deeply. “You don’t have on any panties.”

“Oh, did I tell you I wanted you back just for the sex?” She grinned.

He gifted her with a slow sexy smile before dipping his head to ravage her lips only to stop before he touched them. “Wait; before I let you distract me from all reasoning, you didn’t say if you would be interested in the offer. We both can have a studio and work from home.”

“While raising our babies,” she added with a secretive smile.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Yes, I still would love to share the rest of my life with you, Alec,” Mary admitted. “Even though I felt hurt, I never saw me spending my life any other way.”

“Then why, Mary? Why did you leave me after we swore to work things out together from now on? Never go to bed angry.”

“Never leave a room with issues unresolved,” she said her eyes tearing up again.

“You were upset because I went to the hospital with Francesca?” Alec asked in amazement. “You told me to go.”

“I know,” she said softly looking away from his searching look.

“But you didn’t mean it.” He said numbly. “What would you have had me to do Mary? The baby could have been mine. I asked you to come with me even if Francesca was against it. Do you think I cared about her feelings?”

“Didn’t you?”

“I cared about two things, you and that innocent baby coming into this world healthy.” He turned her face so he could look into her eyes. “I was hurt and disappointed when you didn’t follow me. I even waited a moment longer than I should have with Francesca complaining and grumbling in my ear in hopes that you would come and be by my side, giving me a chance to explain.”

“You did?”

“Of course I did. We made a pact Mary and I meant every word I said. I want us to have a marriage and a loving home like we both grew up in. That begins with working through things together, no matter how horrible they are. Running away never solves anything.”

“Alec, this is the first relationship I ever had. Not the first serious relationship, but the first and only,” Mary reminded him. “I’m bound to make mistakes and I’ll probably make even more mistakes in the future.”

“Me too,” he spoke up.

“But when *we* do, we must do more than say we forgive each other. We got to mean it. That will mean no more throwing past mistakes in each other’s face every time we disagree or mess up.”

Alec nodded in agreement. “Plus, we are always open and honest, no matter how difficult the truth can be. We will talk about it and deal with whatever together.”

“Uh...okay,” Mary rolled her eyes and closed them with a sigh.

“Wait, why did you say it like that? You don’t agree?”

“No, it’s just I have a secret and I was hoping it was something I could hold off from telling until after the wedding,” she admitted.

He scowled. “Would you have been okay with that way of thinking if I had waited until we were married to tell you about Francesca?”

“As if you could with her telling your business to the media like she did? Is she going to retract the statement now that you aren’t the father?”

“I think you may not want to push the issue, Mary.”

“I know you aren’t trying to protect her. She needs to be dragged through the mud like she did you and the world needs to know that she was sleeping around or she would have known who her baby’s daddy was.”

“Her baby daddy is Cedric, Mary,” Alec snorted on a laugh. “Do you really want your best friend to go through what I did considering he had been trying to reconcile with his wife at the time he was sleeping with her?”

“Damn, that means that bitch is going to be in our lives forever.”

“I suppose so because I like Cedric now that he knows you belong to me. We don’t have any issues. However, it would have been nice to know that he and Francesca had been a little bit more than *friends*.”

“I agree.”

“Mary that has me thinking. What if I can’t produce children? I mean I’ve had my share of women and nothing has happened. Maybe I’m shooting blanks. Good thing you’re okay with adopting.” He worried his bottom lip; her habit that he’d picked up. “But you probably wanted to have children too.”

Mary smiled a secret smile and smoothed the worry lines from his face as she spoke. “You don’t have to worry about that one. Trust me you ain’t shootin’ blanks, Mister Mercer.” She slid his hand from her resting on her thigh beneath her skirt to the firmness of her stomach.

He paused pulling back to look at her with a questioning look. “You said you got a secret.” A hopeful grin played at the corners of his mouth. “Would you like to tell me what it is?”

“Haven’t you guessed?”

“You and me are having a baby?” He breathed grinning from ear to ear. “Really? How? Didn’t you say you were on the pill?”

“I was; and with the medicines I take also, I’m fearful about it being a healthy pregnancy until I see a doctor. So let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves, okay. I don’t want to tell our families until we are sure everything is okay.”

“Oh sweetheart, you and I are going to have a baby,” he moaned against her lips. Alec could show her how he was feeling better than he could say it.

Compared to all the other kisses, there was something different about her. He kissed her until she was flustered. He kissed her until she was boneless in his arms. He continued to kiss her until she wasn’t left with a coherent thought in her head, but still Mary was home and she realized home was wherever Alec was.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The wedding went off without a hitch. As Mary looked at the pictures of a proud Papa Cedric's newborn, she saw why Alec knew immediately the baby wasn't his. The child definitely had taken after his Black father.

Mary allowed herself to laugh after Cedric had moved on to show someone else his pictures.

"What's so funny Mrs. Mercer? I think the baby is a handsome little fellow," Alec whispered. She could feel his smile against her ear.

"The child is beautiful," she admitted. "What I was laughing at is what the doctor and nurses' face must have looked like when that baby came out and you were supposed to be the father."

"Forget their faces. You should have seen mine when I went in the room and Francesca was refusing to even hold the little guy. I was so angry I couldn't see straight." He admitted.

"I asked to be alone with her and let her have it. It was then that she confessed that she had been sleeping with another man as if I couldn't see that. It was when she told me the other man was Cedric, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I expected it to be someone I didn't know."

"You didn't know Ced when he was sleeping with her," Mary reminded. She reached out to wipe lipstick from his cheek. "That's not my color. Who has been taking liberties with my husband?"

"Your Great Aunt Josie," Alec made a face. "Every time she gets near me she becomes like a kissing fish. Her lips start puckering before she even swan dives towards my face."

"You sure she is puckering to kiss you. She might be adjusting her dentures because they have a habit of slipping." Mary laughed at his expression.

"Do you think anyone will miss us if we slip out now?"

“Yes, I do because it’s time for the father and daughter dance.” He pulled the chair back as she stood and shook out the long train of her empire waist wedding gown. She kissed him and took his hand as he escorted her around the raised wedding party table and down the steps.

“Okay boy that’s enough kissing. For one final moment she is my little girl, so keep your lips off her,” Joe blustered.

“Yes sir, but be warned, you take it easy on my wife on that dance floor and I will take it easy on yours,” Alec winked at him.

Alec’s parents Dr. Larson and Nessa Mercer laughed at the exchange from the sideline.

“What is that suppose to mean, son? You best be rememberin’ that’s your mother-in-law now! That means you better dance with her like she is yo mamma. Ya hear!”

“Daddy, *everyone* and the mamma can hear you,” Mary patted his lips with her fingers. The heart shaped engagement ring shimmered brightly. Every time she saw the diamond eternity band next to it, her heart swelled with happiness.

The old school song that her father requested, “Unforgettable,” not the Natalie Cole version but her father’s Nat King Cole version, came over the loud speaker. He did her a twirl and pulled her into a waltz stance.

“Don’t you think because you’re a married woman now, I won’t spank yo sassy backside.” Joe looked down at her with a wide white smile. His eyes misted over with unshed tears.

“I know you’re all hot air, Daddy,” she laughed softly. “You never spanked me. Momma did.”

“She spansks me to, but I like it,” he winked down at her.

Mary groaned, “Too much information.”

“Seriously, darlin’ have I told you that I think you did well for yourself? I think that young man of yours is fair-minded. He also has a good head for business and has told me his idea about getting you designing your own label of clothing. Along with your old dream wedding album, we have your old sketch pad too.”

“Just keep it. I’m sure all that is outdated now.”

“Nonsense, your momma called them classics and she said those never go out of style. Let your man believe in you if he wants to. Don’t stop a man from loving his woman baby girl. If he wants to do for you, you let him. Don’t complain, just accept the fact that he is a man and it pleases him to do and take care of his family.”

“I will Daddy, but thank you for coming around. Today would not have been anything without having you to walk me down the aisle.” They paused a few times to pose for pictures. Once the photographer stepped to the sidelines, others filed onto the dance floor and joined them.

“I realized Mary darlin’ it wasn’t about me. It was all about you and your happiness. I have never seen you more confident in your skin. I think you finally see what your mother and I have always seen. You’re a beauty and don’t you ever forget it.” Joseph leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Alec appeared by their side and they both realized the music had stopped with the announcement of the couple’s first dance.”

Alec took her hand in his and walked her out to the center of the Civic Center Ballroom dance floor. The place was larger than they needed but it was the only place where they could assure proper security to keep the event private and intimate for family and friends only. She was finding out that Alec had some pretty famous friends. She was glad now that she allowed her mother to take care of the guest list. She would have been more of a nervous wreck knowing some of these people were coming.

For a moment before the music started, Mary felt a surge of panic.

“What the matter, sweetheart? You’re stiff as a board.” Alec’s forehead creased with worry.

“It never dawned on me until now that there is a chance you can’t dance. Do you know how to dance? You don’t have White boy rhythm do you? If you do, my cousins are going to rib you somethin’ fierce for the rest of the evenin’.”

“Do I make love like I have White boy rhythm?” He wiggled both his eyebrows at her.

“Oh, I see. Are you suggesting we do this with one of us on our back? Or we can play some funky music from the seventies and you can get behind me and we can pretend we’re doing that old school dance called *The Dog*. I notice it seems to be one of your favorite positions.”

“If that is true, why are you the one that sounds like you’re howling at the moon,” he teased.

Mary laughed and he thought the dimples by her full lips were deeper than he had seen them in a long time. “Well, my love, you best get ready to be embarrassed because just in case you haven’t noticed, your new husband is Caucasian and you get what’s coming to you for marrying me.”

Mary’s playful groan turned into a loving smile as she heard the band play the introduction of Journey’s, *When You Love a Woman* and it was nothing compared to the surefooted way her husband guided her around the dance floor. Not losing his step, he danced them about each time the photographer took picture after picture.

She imaged at that moment they could have been on an episode of Dancing with the Stars; he was so graceful, his back straight and she felt as if her big butt was floating. Mary recognized she had her own Prince Charming and he wasn’t finished yet. He maneuvered her until they were in front of the stage.

“Stand right there, beautiful,” he murmured with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Mary watched him jog up the steps of the stage. He quickly shed his Black tuxedo jacket and bow tie leaving him in trousers, tuxedo shirt unbuttoned at the collar, a cummerbund and suspenders.

He looked around him and nodded at the guys as they cued back to the beginning and Alec grabbed a microphone and came to stand in front of her. Mary grinned from ear to ear. He could see the twinkling in her dark brown eyes since

today she wore contact lenses for the occasion. He was happy she no longer felt the need to hide behind her glasses, but he loved her face either way.

Mary laughed and clapped her hands together gleefully as Alec started to sing to her. For a moment it was like he was part of the band and she felt like a groupie, especially when her female cousins and friends bum-rushed the stage to stand beside her on the dance floor, caterwauling as Alec gyrated his lean hips and played air guitar.

It was definitely a “God I love Him” moment that she would never forget and if she ever did, there were plenty of pictures and video footage to remind her of how happy she was today. She touched her stomach and mentally spoke to their baby, *Look at your daddy actin’ a fool. Ain’t he cute?*



“Thank you for getting this hotel bridal suite for the night. This is so much better than flying back to Seattle tonight to prepare for the cruise.” Mary uttered leaning against her husband as he came up behind her to snake his arms around her waist and rest his hands on her stomach.

“We both had a long day. I didn’t want you to overdo things, sweetheart. Speaking of a long day...how are my bride and my baby doing?”

“We are doing fine, especially since the doctor said everything looks fine.” She arched her neck to accept his kiss. “I can’t say it enough. You look so beautiful today. When you were walking towards me I literally stopped breathing for a moment.”

He put a hand under her swath of silky hair and brushed it over her shoulder before gripping her by the nape of her neck. Tilting her head to the side, she gave him access to the sensitive spot between her shoulder and neck. His graceful long fingers slowly unzipped the ivory Regency styled wedding dress and it dropped to her waist.

Mary removed her arms from the hand beaded capped sleeves. The top heaviness of the gown caused it to do a whispery swan-dive and pool at her ivory

satin thick heeled slipper in a heap of satin, chiffon embroidered lace, crystal beading and sequins.

“Wasn’t it beautiful the way our families and friends blended together today?” Mary asked.

“If anyone was uncomfortable or objectionable to us marrying, they hid it well. Even that cousin of yours was on her best behavior. I do think it was sweet of you to allow Kim to sing at the reception.”

His fingers traced the line of brown flesh above the ivory corset she wore. He released the hook-and-eye closure at the back one by one. She held it up with her hand while he went down on one knee and released one garter. He kissed one laced covered butt cheek before releasing the other garter and kissing the other.

Mary released her hold on the corset and allowed it to fall away landing on top of her gown. She licked her lips and closed her eyes. Her breath was blowing hot and heavy from her nostrils as she felt his fingers smoothing her inner thighs, urging her legs further apart. His thumb brushed her pussy lips though the gauzy lace of her matching panties before he slowly rolled down one sheer silk stocking. Lifting and holding one foot, she used his shoulder to balance herself as he removed her shoe and eased the material over the heel of her pedicure foot. She opened her eyes to look down at his dark head bowed before her.

Alec returned her stare as he grabbed the material with his teeth at her big toe and proceeded to finish pulling the stocking off with his mouth. She felt a pooling between her legs. He took her gold tinted big toe in his mouth and sucked. She moaned reaching up to cup her naked breasts and tug at her nipples until they were extended. She heard a swift intake of air from him before he moved to do the same to her right leg.

“Baby, you’re so beautiful. You have the most perfect breasts.”

Still looking at him kneeling now on both knees before her, she gave him a slow grin. “They are already too big and heavy. I can already feel it’s getting worse now that I’m pregnant. Look how big my nipples are getting.”

“I’m looking and I love them.” He linked his fingers in the thin scraps of sexy material that amazingly was considered as panties. There was definitely less to them than what she usually wore. He had to admit they were a turn on but he imagined having to wear them all day couldn’t have been very comfortable. He tugged until he got them to her ankles and she stepped out of them. With her dress left at her feet, he took her by the hand and turned her so that her back was to the bed.

Crawling over to her, Alec grasped her naked hips and held her still as he rubbed his nose against her neatly trimmed mons. Her swollen clitoris was peeping from the thickened lips. He breathed in her scent deeply and his semi-erection became a fully extended hard-on, pressing uncomfortably against his zipper.

With his nose buried in her crotch, he shrugged off his suspenders. When his tongue flickered against the beckoning clitoris, Mary cried out and fell backwards onto the bed. Her thighs spread. She threw her head back in laughter pulling the floral and crystal studded head band from her hair throwing it to the other side of the room.

“That was graceful,” she licked her tongue at him.

“You were going to end up there anyway. You just saved me the trouble of pushing you there so that I can get down to business, sweetheart.”

"You have beautiful skin, like brown satin."

She moaned softly at the instant streaks of pleasure that ricocheted from the touch of his fingers pressing the top of her mons in a circular motion the way she liked it.

"Do you like that, baby?" he whispered as he continued to rub her dipping between her wet pussy lips to moisten his fingers.

She opened her legs wider to give him full access. “Oh yes, right there...I like it right there,” she heaved and moaned.

When his fingers were coated in the slickness of her desire for him, he made an uttering, male sound of gratification. Alec inserted one long finger inside her and she inhaled her surprise as her ass scooted on the gray comforter of the

hotel's bridal suite's king size bed. Her heels buried deeply into the soft mattress and she fisted the bedding. Everything about her body was in extra sensory mode since she became pregnant and the feeling could be addictive.

Alec's finger remained inside her as he was still on his knees, planted firmly between her legs. He proceeded to spread them even wider to accommodate his shoulders. He tugged her and removed his finger long enough to pull her towards him until she was closer to the edge of the bed.

For the next twenty minutes and three orgasms later, Alec used his fingers mouth and tongue to vibrate, suck and lick at her juices until she was making loud keened noises nearly bucking up off the bed.

After Mary's last orgasm, her clitoris was so sensitive she needed a break because it was becoming painful. She rudely buried her hand in his dark hair, moist from sweat and tugged hard.

He laughed, crawled up on the bed beside her and began kissing her, allowing her to taste and smell herself on his lips. He kissed her in every way imaginable; and before she became too lazy from his extraordinary loving, she wanted to give him a little pleasure of her own.

She pushed at his shirt covered chest and forced him to break the kiss. Coming up on her knees on the bed, she didn't take time to unbutton his shirt. She grabbed a side at the open collar in each hand and yanked. The buttons went flying.

"What the hell?" He laughingly reached out for her and grasped her big heart shaped ass in his hands. He couldn't resist with it jiggling like that as she bounced around the bed.

Mary slapped his hands away ordering him to lean back. He did so while balancing himself on his elbows so he could watch her shaking fingers work anxiously at unfastening his trousers. Alec was thankful she took more care when it came to pulling down the zipper over his blatant hard cock. His full erection sprang free; it's eye weeping and extended to his navel, hungry for attention.

Alec heeled off his black leather dress shoes before Mary pulled at his pants. He raised his hips off the bed allowing her to pull them off along with his boxer briefs in one swoop. Last off came his socks.

Mary spread his legs and came between them on her knees. She leaned over him her breast sweeping against his stomach as she twirled her tongue and sucked the hardening minute male nips. The muscles in his flat stomach tightened as she made her way lower, dipping her tongue in his belly button.

She gripped him at the base of his cock and licked at his opening with the curling tip of her tongue. His hips came up off the bed to meet her mouth as she opened wide and descended the length of the shaft before lifting her head slowly sucking on its head but not releasing him.

"Oh, my God! That feels wonderful!" Alec was feeling more excited than he had ever been with her....too excited to let her continue. He swept her hair aside and held it in place to watch her mouth on him a little longer before he managed to tell her to stop in a garbled voice that didn't even sound like his own.

She laughed softly. "I want to do it some more. I love that grunting sound you make."

He shook his head and urged her onto her back while he lay on his side. His lips slashed over hers and their tongues danced and mingled while his hands stole between her thick thighs. He began to strum her slickness then with a middle finger: a constant, fast-paced circular motion with enough pressure until a wail began deep in her throat and emerged. Mary moved, swerving her hips against his hand, the intense sensations caused her fingernails to automatically dig into his skin.

Alec inserted another finger and the moment he felt her convulsing around them he withdrew and placed himself between her spread thighs, spreading them even wider to accommodate his hips. Placing his hard cock at her dripping entrance he surged forward and she cried out again. He grew still.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Are you kidding me? I'm soaked down there. Can't you feel it?" She grinned up at him.

“All I can feel is that you feel very...very...good.” He leaned down to seize her mouth with his and began to rock slowly against her. Their fingers interlaced. “Sweetheart if you keep squeezing me like, that I’m going to come before we get going.”

“I’ve already come several times. You don’t have to hold back. Once you come the first time, you won’t feel overly excited on the next go around.”

“And when did you become so knowledgeable about sex?” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“I had a great teacher,” she said lifting her hips up to meet his thrust as he began pumping earnestly.

“Well your teacher is not going to give up that easy. This is our wedding night.”

Several minutes later the sweat poured off of him. Cords of tensed muscle stood out on his arms and neck. The memory of Mary leaving him and even with all his resources, not being able to find her was still fresh in his mind. Being connected to her like this eased that fear.

“I love you, Mary.” He rasped into her ear.

“I love you too,” she whispered back passionately. Tears rolled down the sides of her face from the sweet intensity of his lovemaking.

Alec’s strokes became long and exquisitely slow. He soaked up the feeling of her soothing hands running from his shoulders down to his buttocks and squeezing, then back again. Over and over she continued to touch him and coax him and in his ear she whispered over and over, “I love you” before she cried out once more.”

With a guttural roar he spilled himself in hot relieving spurts into her. She held him tightly as he jerked and shuddered against her. His heart was beating so fast she was scared for him. Rubbing her fingertips up and down his back, she hoped to ease him through his orgasm. She was always so engrossed in her own orgasm, she hadn’t realized coming could be just as intense, if not more so, for men.

She imagined if men could only have one earth shattering release to her three or more, it was a fair trade off.

Alec had become so still, she wondered if he had passed out, but moments later he lifted his head. She didn't know if it was the sweat or if he was crying but she smiled up at him and washed over his face with her hands.

"You okay?" she asked.

He smiled and nodded. "I'm more than okay. Boy! I'm so fucking lucky to be married to you. Whoop!"

Mary cocked her eyebrow at him. Did he actually make a *whooping* noise? She didn't know how to respond to that but it made her feel very smug about her *coochie*. She must be a pretty good lover. She often wondered if Alec found her lack of experience with men lacking since he was accustomed to more experienced women; but this confirmed that experienced or not it was the love that made the sex satisfying beyond words.

"I got it going on, don't I?" She allowed her smugness to show through with a playful smile.

"If I said no, you wouldn't believe it after that display of manly satisfaction would you?"

"Nope. I had your ass speakin' in tongues."

"Speaking in tongues?" His head leaned to the side in question.

"Never mind," she chuckled.

"Damn, why didn't you tell me I was still lying on you, Mary? I'm probably crushing the baby." He rolled off of her onto his side.

"You weren't concerned a moment ago when we were getting our freak on." She wiggled her eyebrows at him and when she saw he was really worried she reassured him. "Honey, I'm fine. See, that's an advantage in marrying a big woman. There is a lot of cushion between the outside world and the baby. She rubbed her fleshy stomach."

"You're sure I didn't hurt you?"

“Honey, if I’m uncomfortable with anything you do, you’re my husband. I have no problems telling you so,” she turned on her side to face him. Her eyes feasted on his handsome face. She would never get tired of this face.

“Husband,” he repeated. “I like the sound of that. Hello, I’m Mary’s husband Alec.” His face split in a wide lazy grin.

“Hello WORLD!” She shouted. “I’m Mrs. Mary Mercer. Why yes I am, the wife of THE Alec Mercer.” She mimicked in her best *Scarlett O’Hara* accent which wasn’t a big stretch for her.

Alec laughingly pressed his mouth to hers in a smiling kiss. “Do you know you make me very happy, Mrs. Mercer?” he voiced not expecting an answer for it was a fact that he wore on his face every time he thought about her and of how much she has changed his life.

His face still close enough his breath fanned her face.

“That all I ever wanted Alec,” Mary admitted. “I wanted you to look beyond the outside packaging and notice me. I knew that if you would give me the chance, I would love you like no other woman ever could and I would do everything within my power to wipe away the sadness I saw on your face when you thought no one was looking.”

“And all I ever wanted was you Mary. I will admit I was clueless to what capacity I wanted to have you in my life. But I knew from the moment you slid bare-assed down that stair railing and scared the hell out of me last Christmas that I wanted you to be mine in the worse way.”

“I knew because of my weight and the fact that I’m more average than pretty, my chances were slim to none with someone like you,” Mary murmured sadly. “I assumed like desiring any celebrity from afar, that is how it would remain with us, *especially* after I made a fool out of myself on that railing and displayed all my scars and imperfections in its unflattering glory.”

“You still feel that way?” Alec asked in surprise. “Even now knowing how much I love you.”

“You wouldn’t understand. If the world was made up of beautiful people in the west and not so beautiful people in the east, then there would be no doubt to where I would be placed and where you would be placed, baby.”

Alec looked at her in an incredulous manner. “You look in the mirror everyday but you truly don’t see yourself do you?”

“I glance in the mirror as long as it takes to do what I need to do, then hurry up and move on.” She shrugged and laughed off her embarrassment.

“Don’t move!” Alec ordered. She sat up startled by his abrupt movement as he rolled off the bed onto his feet.

Naked he walked out of the bedroom with the self-confidence that only a man like Alec could have. She imagined men and women just like him were born with the air that they were meant to be leaders in this world and not one of the many followers. She would be lying to say she didn’t envy him and others like him.

Mary sat Indian style in the bed and waited. She put her hands up to her face and inhaled Alec’s scent on them. A smile came to her face. She actually pinched herself just in case her happiness was a just a dream.

When the object of her dreams walked back through the bedroom door very animated with a determined look on his face and something big and elongated in his hands, she realized her life was very real.

“Oh Alec!” Mary gushed. “You finished the painting!”

“I know I should have gotten your permission first and if you don’t want it displayed anywhere but our home, I’ll understand...”

“Of course not,” she protested. Mary couldn’t stop grinning. She hadn’t seen it yet and she was blooming with pride. “You are the best artist I’ve ever seen Alec. Your work must be displayed so that the world can appreciate the voluptuous forms of women.” She waived at his expression and asked, “Baby, do you think because you haven’t painted in awhile, you’ve lost your touch?”

“I’ll let you be a judge.” Alec turned the painting face forward and placed the unframed canvas on the foot of the bed to give her a better look.

“Ohhhhhh...” Mary sighed and breathed his name as she stared in awe at the picture before her. “Alec, you’ve signed your real name to the piece noting the flourished signature.”

“I think it’s time for me to quit hiding in the closet. I owe the world no apologies for my appreciation of full figured women,” Alec explained.

“I’m so proud of you.” Her eyes shined with unshed tears.

Mary studied the painting. It was of a Black woman submerged in an old fashioned Victorian claw-footed bathtub. A towel was wrapped around her hair. The woman’s lovely face was heavy jowl and her eyes were closed with long lashes fanning her flushed colored cheeks.

The woman had a happy and peaceful expression in her restful state. Her full lips were also closed in a serene Mona Lisa smile on her lips. Her arms were fleshy, resting along the back of the bath while a dimpled knee and the hint of full heavy breasts was the only attest to the nudity that lay beneath the red rose petals that floated so realistically onto of bath water.

The back ground was a bathroom befitting the time Victorian time period. The portrait had been painted to portray with a stained glass mirror of angels and cherubs looking down from the heavens. There was a portrait within a portrait on the wall. It was of the woman in the bath and of a man that looked a lot like Alec.

The smile slowly faded from Mary’s lips replaced by suspended disbelief. She came up on her knees on the bed and crawled closer to the paint. On the woman’s hand she saw her engagement ring and the band she now wore.

Mary lifted her hand up to her face looking from the one in the painting to the hand in her face and back again.

“Now do you see Mary?” Alec’s eyes sparkled with emotions. His voice had become hoarse and deeper. “This is you.”

“It...it can’t be me,” Mary croaked. “This woman is...is *beautiful*.”

“Yes you are, sweetheart,” Alec nodded his agreement. “I can manipulate the surroundings and the time, but the women in my portraits are women that I have seen in everyday life.”

“Full figured women are a group of women that must be the most oblivious to how lovely they truly are. I suppose it’s the conditions we have accepted in society without questioning the reasoning behind it. I think it’s every man’s loss when they refuse to embrace this....one of many forms of beauty.” He waved at the portrait, “when it is staring him in the face.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Mary cried. Tears were flowing unchecked down her face.

“This is what *I see* Mary. This is the face I kiss everyday, the one I make love to every chance I get. This is the face I say goodnight to and the face I look forward to waking up to seeing every morning for the rest of my life.” He sniffed and with his the hand now holding up the painting, he washed it over his flushed face fighting to keep his feelings in check.

“Mary this is also the face of the mother of my children. It’s *your face*, sweetheart and *you truly are beautiful*.”

“*Alec*,” she could only smile her love and gratitude while shaking her head, finding it surreal to see herself in a painting by an artist she adored and could only afford to buy poster reprints of his work for her walls. There were no words to convey the cathartic richness she was feeling at this moment.

“It’s you Mary. It’s always been you.”

Alec managed to put the canvas on the floor and prop it against the foot of the bed before his wife threw herself against him. Her arms snaked around his neck and she squeezed him tightly, but it was a good tightness: like homemade baked bread and his Mummo’s apple butter.

He could tell from the soft loving laughter as she rocked him from side to side that her tears were happy tears and a happy Mary made him happy. He wrapped his arms around her waist and as usual his arms were just the right length to hold Mary close to his heart.

“I suppose this means I can call my curator and let him know I have the first piece for my new collection; under my new name?” He chanced asking.

“*You betcha!*”



SHIREE MCCARVER

Alabama native, Shiree McCarver, is known for her emotional interracial tales of action, romance and humor. Her innovative ideas speak of a new direction for romances and Ms. McCarver aspires to close the gaps of cultural misunderstandings and open the doors to new possibilities. She enjoys reading romances, watching Asian dramas, learning new languages, and believes compassion and imagination is everything. Ms. McCarver loves hearing from her readers. She can be reached at:

E-mail: shireemccarver@yahoo.com

Join her reading group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/shireemccarver/>

Join her MYSPACE page: <http://myspace.com/shreeree>

Information and sample chapters of my books are on the Internet at:

<http://www.shireemccarver.com>