



Dee Tengrio

All or  
Nothing

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In this game of love, winning is not an option.

*The Lonnigans, Book 2*

Lucas Lonnigan thinks he's finally gotten the best of his twin brother, until he discovers his half of a date-swap is none other than metal artist Belinda Riggs. A leather-dipped Goth queen who considers him a cross between a pin cushion and a science project—and the woman he's loved forever.

Belinda isn't exactly overjoyed to see him, either. In her opinion, love means becoming a punching bag, and she won't be anyone's doormat. Lucas is too dangerously tempting to allow within striking distance of her heart, but that doesn't stop her from wanting.

After one blazing night of passion, Lucas finds himself locked out of Belle's life with seemingly no chance to get back in. With nothing left to lose, Lucas makes a final play and appeals to the one thing Belle can't say no to—a dare. Winner take all.

Lucas may think this crazy game will decide their relationship, but she sees it as her chance to finally set him free—and maybe indulge in the sexiest goodbye of her life...

Warning: Story may sizzle your undies off. Includes pigheaded hero with a cranky heart of gold, bitchy heroine with a flamethrower, massively inappropriate behavior, make-up / break-up sex of the sinful kind...and a puppy!

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# All or Nothing

*Dee Tenorio*

## Dedication

For Maya Banks, who held her breath for this series almost as long as I did. Thanks for all the support...and for not committing justifiable homicide. No one would have blamed you. :)

# Chapter One

*Screwed again.*

It was all Lucas Lonnigan could think, standing in front of Vino's Italian Bar & Grille. At best, the grill provided pretty good steaks, maybe some chicken, but mostly happy-hour food for strong drinkers, serious sports freaks and the occasional wild party.

At worst, it was about to become his idea of hell.

The woman waiting inside would make sure of that. Unfortunately, common decency required him to walk in and let his "date" hand him his balls in a sling.

*Kyle is going to die.*

A long, torturous death, too, involving fingernail removal, hot metal and some liberal use of acid, if Lucas had any say.

He swore again. Bitterly. Lucas had come—even dressed up in a suit jacket—prepared to look for the date his twin had described. Never one to rush into a situation, particularly when Kyle made the arrangements, he looked through the glass door of the building, hoping to have an idea of where to direct his attention. Brunette, Kyle had said. Long legs, he'd said. Smarter than you, he'd added with a smug grin that only now began to make sense. The only woman sitting alone in the entire restaurant who could fit that bill was the last woman he should be expected to sit politely at a table with, least of all in public. Belinda Lynn Riggs: childhood tormentor, teenage fantasy girl, adult wet dream. More succinctly, the scourge of his existence.

He didn't rate particularly high on her list, either.

Belle sat in a booth, smoking a cigarette despite the clear signs she wasn't allowed, her ebony hair styled forward into her face with enough product to defy jet-wash. It gleamed all the way across the room, catching his eye in an instant. He hadn't seen her in a few weeks. He should have expected she'd cut it again. Fat layers of the fine strands were sliced at jagged edges in large chunks, looking like she'd colored it with magic marker instead of hair dye. Knowing her, ink was a distinct possibility. One of these days, he fully expected her to turn up shaved bald as a baby and call it style. In his opinion, it would be an improvement.

He stayed outside the glass door, standing in the shadows, staring into the bright room beyond, unwillingly mesmerized by the way she stared forward and sipped her longneck beer. For all her brashness, her nearly feline grace never failed to make his body leap to attention. Even when she was flipping him off,

he had to force his brain not to remember just how dexterous she could be with those hands.

She was mostly dressed tonight, he realized with a start. A black sleeveless shirt clung to her skinny form, outlining her small breasts, probably right down to the minute swell lifting the surrounding circles of her nipples. Even after all these years, he could still remember how soft they felt against his lips. The flavor of her in his mouth... He closed his eyes, hating the pull in his gut, wishing he couldn't remember so well. That ship had sailed years ago.

Plus, she'd tear him a new one if she caught him staring at her breasts like some sex-obsessed teenager. It wouldn't matter that when it came to her, *sex-obsessed* and *teenager* weren't exactly inappropriate. But allowing himself the luxury of remembering her naked—or at the very least, half-naked—was not his smartest move. He'd only spend hours aching because of it. Then again—he sighed as he slipped his hands into his pants pockets—everyone needed a vice. It just so happened Belinda Riggs was his. Always had been, always would be.

People walked around him to get into the bar, no one seeming to notice the woman alone in the booth. It was probably driving her crazy. Even as a little girl, she'd hated being ignored. She hadn't known then that people didn't see her on purpose, unwilling to take responsibility for the bruises and scuffs she shouldn't have had on her face or her arms. She knew it as an adult though, and she took every opportunity to make sure everyone saw her now, wearing her sexuality like a suit of armor while she declared war. It was the only explanation Lucas could figure for the way she dressed. He hated it, but he understood it.

Tonight's mask of choice was Modest Industrial Goth. Her shirt was typical, ripped across the midriff to make the young bucks think they had a prayer with her. God forbid she let a day pass without exposing her pale belly to the undeserving masses. Her pants were leather, the front connected to the back at the two-inch wide waistband. The sides of the legs were woven together with tiny leather lacings, baring her flesh all the way down her side. Good, quality leather, fitting her like the skin it was, traveled the near endless path of her legs before disappearing into the knee-high boots she wore.

Jack boots, she'd once told him, modeling them with a smirk, no doubt thinking he hated them. Covered with crisscrossing buckles, they were her only boots with a stiletto heel. All her others could be used to climb mountains or frighten midgets. He let her think he hated them. It meant she wore them more often.

Tonight, she wore them for Kyle, having no idea Lucas's dumbass brother had sent *him* instead.

She turned her head, her dark eyes finding him outside the door as if there weren't a single person milling around between them. He felt her gaze. He always did. She'd changed his life with that glare as often as she could. Probably *because* she could.

She gave nothing away, no surprise, no disappointment. She stared at him, pulled her cigarette to her darkened lips and inhaled with a nod. Her way of accepting what happened and letting him come to her.

He didn't question her understanding. They rarely had to speak, always knowing what the other meant

with a look or an expression. She fought it, as loudly as possible, but it was a fact they couldn't get away from, no matter how they tried. Lord, how they tried.

He'd known her since second grade, when her family moved in next door to his parents' suburban home. Back in those days, her nose was still pert and straight, her hair was the color of sunlight and she wore pink ribbons in it every day, with pink ruffles on her dresses and pink saddle shoes on her feet. The mulish look on her face was about the only thing that hadn't changed.

"The punk backed out on me, didn't he?" she asked when Lucas reached her table, putting her cigarette out in a glass of water. On the one hand, he was grateful. Ripping it out of her mouth and smashing it under his shoe always seemed to start them out on the wrong foot.

On the other hand...it was *his* water.

Lucas levered himself into the booth, less concerned about hurting her while he fit his legs under the table than he was about ripping his pants on her boots.

"Traded you," he corrected. He pushed the soiled water glass to the wall edge of the table next to the saltshaker.

She lost her practiced look of boredom. "Come again?"

*Wouldn't I like to?* Lucas hitched a shoulder. "We traded dates for the night. Sent each other out with just a place and a description of who we'd be meeting."

"You mean—"

"Kyle set us up." Impressive move, actually, for a man Lucas regularly referred to as a moron. He reached for a chip of her Irish nachos, stealing the black chili beans and sour cream with the flick of his hand. Her eyes followed the theft, probably measuring to the milligram how much he owed her.

"Why would he do that? He knows we don't do well when we're left alone together."

"He's not completely stupid, Belle." Despite most evidence to the contrary. But Kyle knew the score between Lucas and Belinda. Probably better than they themselves did. His only mistake was thinking he could force them to deal with their issues.

Some day Kyle would realize he needed an act of God to make them work out anything.

Lucas held no hopes for the night. He knew it was likely she'd yell at him, rail at him, possibly even smack him a time or two, then she'd leave him in need of an ice pack and go on about her day. Business as usual. But it didn't change the hunger he felt for her. Nothing cured that.

She glared at him, the black make-up beneath her eyes adding some death to the blades she included in her stare. "Why'd you go along with it? Aren't you worried he'll steal your goody-two-shoes girlfriend?"

He snatched another chip, nonplussed. "She's not my girlfriend. And no, I'm not. Jessica is more likely to cut him off at the knees and leave him bleeding in the street than fall for his line of crap. Kyle can stand a bruise or two."

Her expression managed to stiffen. "Sounds like you think pretty highly of her."



He'd think even better of Jessica Saunders if she put the dent in Kyle's ego Lucas anticipated. "She's extremely intelligent."

"I thought you only used that word in front of the bathroom mirror." She leaned out of the booth, biting her lower lip and whistling sharp enough to break glass. "Vino, I need a JW Black!"

"Sure thing, B. You want anything, buddy?"

"My foot up his ass," Belinda grumbled, righting herself in her seat.

"Whatever's on tap. And a steak. Medium-rare." Lucas shrugged off his brief irritation. Vino never remembered him. Almost no one remembered Lucas, no matter how many times he went anywhere. He must have come to Vino's with Belle and Kyle more than a hundred times over the years. Still, he was a general "buddy".

"What was your plan tonight?" he asked, meeting her deadpan stare. "Romantic dinner, seductive conversation and then the rest of the night at your loft?" He tried not to sound bitter. He had no right to be jealous or care who she took to her bed, but the thought of her with Kyle soured his blood.

Belinda wasn't amused. "So what if it was? It's not any business of yours."

It wasn't, but he still had to force his hand not to crush the chip. Hell, he had to force himself not to grab the table and fling it through the crowd to crash satisfyingly on the street in a rain of glass. She ought to be damn grateful he had that kind of control, but she wasn't. She never was.

She leaned forward, a predatory gleam in her dark eyes, her body curving over the flat edge of the table while she set her hand over his. "Maybe it should be."

She always had to push a little harder, take him that much closer to the edge.

"Maybe I *should* tell you what sick little games I had in mind for Kyle."

Only then, when the whole world knew he was miserable, was she ever satisfied.

"You know, since you're so goddamned interested."

The back of his hand burned under hers. She never touched him. It was a rule, with exception only to boxing his ears from time to time. Heat shot up his arm, warming his blood and shocking his heart into a breakneck pace. He pulled back, but she was strong from her daily hours of bending metal to her artistic whims. He proved no less susceptible to her power.

"I was thinking he and I would go back to my place and see how many square feet two people can sweat on in one night." She dragged his hand closer, her black-nailed fingers pulling him across the table until he was half standing and she was grasping his coat lapels so she could rasp her sex-laden voice in his ear. "There are special swings hanging all over the place. Handcuffs and black leather wristbands on the headboard. I've got pillows everywhere. Satin ones. Red with those little black bows you like so much. You know, the ones that get you so hard you can barely walk."

Damn her. He could feel her breast on his arm. A coat and a long-sleeved shirt had nothing on the round little pebble or her warm breath on his cheek. And she *had* to bring up that bow.

“You should see it, Lucas. It’s a candlelit friggin’ wonderland. A perfect erotic fantasy built just for Kyle.”

The burst of anger at her words was enough to break him free. He wrapped his hands around her wrists and yanked her loose. “Don’t play with me, Belle.”

Her eyes widened as he gave her a brief shake, which sickened him. Damn it, he hated when she feared him. She must have recognized his remorse because the fear was short-lived.

Fury flared bright in her eyes. “Don’t accuse me of things you know nothing about.”

They stared, a battle of wills because he didn’t want to admit she was right. He *was* out of line. Probably correct, but still out of line. He let go of her hands and they both slumped back into their respective seats, still staring at each other.

She looked away first. Which meant he got to win...and feel horrible for it. He tried to think up something to say, some way to be as remote from her as he was from everyone else, but that was a secret skill he’d never learned.

“Why do you have to make this so hard?” she asked, her voice a rare fragile whisper. So quiet, so...wounded. As if *he* were the one who inflicted all the pain in their relationship. Or whatever you could call what they had. “You make *everything* this way and it doesn’t have to be.”

“I wasn’t the one crawling on the table just now.” He looked down at his fists, balled together in front of him. Better to look there than at her. She was angry. Hurt. If he saw it, he’d take the blame. He might deserve it, but damn it, she was cruel with her retribution.

How often were they in this position? How many times over the years had they found themselves arguing over nothing? Unable to connect, unable to separate. Sometimes he wondered if he would be able to take being free of her. What would his life be like, better or worse? All he knew now was how much he loathed this limbo they lived in. Detested how the tables always turned, making him the bad guy. Despised how often he got pinioned into the role, just to keep her fantasies alive.

Still, no matter what she said, how she blamed him or the futility of their friendship, he wanted her. Wanted to devour her. Wanted... God, all these years and he still didn’t know exactly *what* he wanted from her. Everything maybe, if he could figure out what that was.

But *she* didn’t want *him*. She wanted to *choose* how and who she loved. Wanted to shape it, shine it, force it into a form she could accept instead of one she couldn’t control. She’d never been able to control him—not for lack of trying—and that meant she wouldn’t have him.

He’d tried, once, to be what she wanted. For an hour, it was the most incredible heaven he could ever have imagined. And then it was hell.

Unadulterated, unforgiving hell.

It still was.

“You know what I mean, Lucas.” She dared to glance at him but had to look away almost

immediately. Lying is probably easier that way. “We...we could be friends.”

He snorted, grabbing her beer and taking a deep draught. Hadn’t they ordered drinks? He looked over at the bar for Vino, who nodded and waved a towel at a waiter. So, Vino hadn’t missed their tense little embrace? Ah well, at least Lucas wouldn’t be forgotten in here again anytime soon.

“We could have been,” she insisted stubbornly. One might even say stupidly, but he hesitated to direct that word in her direction. She’d laugh if he ever revealed that little consideration.

“If we lied to each other.” *To ourselves*, he added silently. Not a stretch for her, she lied to herself every day. But he wasn’t in the practice of self-delusion. The cold, hard truth was with him every moment of every day or he’d forget himself and try for things he could never have.

Like her.

“What happened between us was a long time ago.” Her voice firmed, but it was still low, private. A whisper that reminded him of her lips against his ear while she gasped the last lulls of her orgasm. He sucked in a breath, forcing himself to concentrate on her words instead of his own foolish memories. “You have to let it go, Lucas.”

Did he now? “Because our past interferes with your planned love affair with my brother?”

“Yes!” she spat, as bitter in voice as he felt inside. Their gazes met and locked, angry and desperate.

God, they were a pair. She tried so hard to love an ideal. He tried harder not to love her. Neither one of them pulled it off.

“As long as Kyle knows how you feel about me, he’ll never—”

The waiter stopped at the table, dropping two napkins, placing her whisky shot on one and a frosted glass of hops on the other.

“Never what?” he asked when the kid was gone, a chill that shouldn’t happen in June snaking through him.

Her expression closed. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

“You brought it up, Belle.” He grabbed her shot and downed it. He should have let her brush her words under a rug. He should, but evidently he was a glutton for punishment. He had to hear the words crisp and clear, so he wouldn’t forget them. So he could play them over and over and convince himself they were true. If he were lucky, he thought, grabbing the beer, gulping deep, he’d be at least a little numbed before the pain hit.

She watched him, mouth pulled down at the corners, looking strained but determined. “As long as you want me, he’ll never see me as anything more than a friend. And that’s killing me.”

Nope, not fast enough.

The lash of hurt wasn’t kind enough to blind him, either, so he saw her head dip when his teeth grit with audible cracking sounds, saw the shine of her eyes before she darted her gaze away. He could take a lot from Belinda. Her pushy ways, the in-your-face attitude she wore to cover an inner fragility he craved to

protect. Hell, he could even take a few blows to the face when he had them coming. But he could not take her tears.

Especially when they fell for another man.

He slid out of the booth, yanked his wallet from his pocket and threw down a few bills to cover the drinks and the food he wouldn't eat. Belinda stared up at him, eyes still gleaming, the true pink of her lips starting to show through her black lipstick. Then he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. Not easy in those spikes, but she landed well, ending up eye-to-eye with him thanks to the four-inch help. Confusion showed on her face, probably all that was keeping her quiet.

"Come on." He pulled her behind him, opening the door and guiding her out.

"Where are we going?"

"Home." Her home, his home, he didn't care. They were only a couple of blocks apart. Just one more sign of their weird little symbiosis. Loving to drive each other insane.

But it was time to end it.

If it meant burning all the passion out of each other as fast as humanly possible, he'd do it. Odds were it was the only way he was going to stop wanting her. Stop craving her. Hell, stop loving her. Then maybe she could finally have what she wanted most in life.

His brother.

Neither one of them should be driving. He'd just thrown back a beer and a shot of Johnny Walker Black Label like they were glasses of cupcake sprinkles, and Belinda was shaking so badly from head to toe it was a wonder they made it to her car.

She unclipped her keys from her belt loop, forcing herself to open the driver's side door of her ancient LeSabre first. He didn't seem any worse for the sudden liquor infusion, but one couldn't always tell with Lucas. She leaned over to open his door lock, then came back to her seat with a snap. Leaving her feet outside the car, she found the zipper tab at the back of her boot and pulled it down her leg to the heel.

"What are you doing?" Lucas's impatience crackled in her ears.

"I can't drive in these. The heel makes it hard to push the pedals." Left leg free, she started on the next one. Fast from years of training, she tossed the boots to the backseat while Lucas ducked away from the stilettos as they passed between them. She rolled her eyes. "They can't kill you, Lucas."

"They can blind me." He pulled his seatbelt across his chest. She watched him move. Probably seriously buzzed but still so economical, so inherently graceful. Her worst secret habit was watching Lucas Lonnigan move. His hands, his body, any part of himself in motion could freeze her in place for a full minute if she let it. She'd probably get a rush watching him sleep, but she'd never seen it happen. For all she knew, he never slept. Just kept going on will alone.

His cool blue gaze met hers, none of his reserve there now. Her hands began to tremble again. He wasn't being distant or sardonic for once. Those eyes were burning and left little doubt where he expected this ride to go.

He made it her choice to get them there.

But why now?

The question had to be asked, but she was afraid to voice it. Why did he suddenly feel the need to take action? It wasn't that table dance earlier. She'd gone pretty far with that, but she knew his limits. She hadn't crossed them. She only punched his buttons because...well, because he deserved it.

He knew how she felt about Kyle—he'd known before she admitted it to herself, years and years and years ago—and he threw it in her face that his brother hadn't seen her as important enough to warn. The jerk.

But Kyle was everything she wanted. Someone to laugh with. Someone who could always make her smile, who didn't have a care in the world. He was kind, never so much as raised his voice unless it was to laugh. He wouldn't drink every day or spend his time making up barely plausible reasons for his absences or her bruises. He wouldn't take over her love and wound her with it. Not Kyle. He never asked for more than a person was willing or able to give on their own. He was a safe harbor and she craved one of those desperately.

Lucas was no one's safe harbor. He was a constantly rolling sea. He *looked* peaceful and smooth, the giant swells of his emotions never crashing in giant splashes or colliding into each other to give him away, but she knew better. Under his perfect surface was a churning channel of water, each wave a stronger emotion than the last, pulling you under and drowning you until you knew nothing but his passion, his power, his possession.

She'd barely survived him once. No way in hell was she going to *choose* to spend a lifetime fighting his current.

She risked a glance at the silent man next to her. For all his aloofness, Lucas was dangerous to every hope and desire she had. Too many had rested on his shoulders at one time and he'd crushed them all with one careless question. But she was no eighteen-year-old girl now. She'd banished that idiot as surely as she'd wiped herself clean of everyone else's responsibilities and fears. She had her own life to live, and she was beholden to no one, least of all Lucas Lonnigan.

"Do you need me to walk you home?" she asked, pulling the car up in front of her loft. Once a decrepit warehouse near the bay, now it was her entire world in the shape of an airplane hangar. She'd bought it at auction with her own money and spent every dime she didn't need for supplies and food to make it a home.

She discounted the fact that Lucas found it for her shortly after buying a condo not too far away. Or that he'd double-talked numbers until the banker who granted her the loan gave her unbelievably low

terms. Otherwise, it might be Lucas's, too, and that was just unacceptable.

"I'm not going home." His grim voice rang with too much authority.

She watched him unfold himself, get out and close the door firmly. His gaze met hers through the glass as he circled the front of the burgundy car. Couldn't he at least get drunk gracefully? He moved smoothly, never looking down to see if he had even ground, never stumbling or slipping. She imagined the play of every muscle beneath that jacket and shirt. She'd tasted them once, memorized how they flexed and tightened. How they felt under her fingertips, over her body.

She heated. More than twelve years and she'd forgotten nothing. Not the smell of the dewy grass beneath her back, not the heat of him above her, inside her. Not even the tension of that tiny black ribbon around her neck, the ends of the small bow kissing the hollow of her throat with every thrust...

Definitely not the fiery heat of his gaze as he'd looked into her eyes, demanding that she knew who she made love to with an endless silent stare. The same gaze he fixed on her now, through the driver's side window.

Her heart beat in irregular flutters, feeling like butterflies had taken over and gone crazy. He waited for her, but she couldn't make herself open the car door. He would leave, she knew he would, when she didn't have the courage to take what he was offering.

The impasse would continue: she unwilling to accept their desire, he unwilling to let it go. She'd stay away from him for a while. Maybe a few months this time, until they were both able to pretend nothing had happened but a few drinks and some temperamental words. Or until Kyle badgered them into being in the same room together again. Probably the latter. It always came down to the latter, which was for the best.

At least, it was until Lucas opened her door for her.

So much for choices.

"No more games, Belle," he said quietly. Almost sadly. It had her looking up at him, but he'd buried everything again. She studied him for a clue. His tall runner's frame had its usual rigid posture. The broad, roping muscles in his legs strained the fabric of his khakis as he stood as if he were ready for war. Same lean waist, broad chest and wide shoulders. His face was just as chiseled as ever, but the night shadows made hard planes of his cheekbones and deepened the lines around his mouth. He was grim. Determined. *Hungry.*

He reached out a hand.

It was the hunger that did her in. Blatant. Demanding a response. She had one, in the coils of her belly, taut with need. She couldn't have turned him down tonight, no matter what terrible thing he said. That look reduced her to silt and drew her hand out of the car.

"Don't forget the boots."

"I thought you didn't want to get blinded," she replied, unable to resist teasing him. There was too much going on, too many emotions around them, making the cool summer air heavy and hard to draw into

her lungs. Something had to give.

He tugged her hand, a cue to hurry. “Believe me, seeing you in them drives *any* red-blooded man to self-inflicted blindness. It can’t get any worse now.”

There was a compliment in there. Somewhere.

She reached behind the seat and pulled the boots out. He waited while she zipped them back up, his breathing the only sound he made until she was done. Then she grabbed her keys and let him pull her to her feet. One step, then another. Before she could move again, he slammed the door and pulled her up against him.

His hard body made contact with too much of her own. All the signals of panic and pleasure drowned her thoughts in an instant. She tried to close her eyes, to savor all the sensations of him, but he touched her cheek and shook his head.

“I’ll only have tonight, Belle. At least let me pretend it’s me you want to be with.”

As if there were ever anyone else. “I didn’t say we were going to spend tonight together.”

“You didn’t have to.” He lowered his mouth to hers, a touch, then a lick. He shifted downward, meeting her lips full-on, the scorching heat of him tipping her backward. He held her up, cupped his hand around the back of her head and drank from her like the last well in the Sahara.

She moaned into his mouth, their tongues meeting almost instantly. She tasted the beer, but beyond that was the rich flavor of him. Masculine, powerful, drugging. Her hands found purchase at his sides, pulling at his shirt until she was able to fist her fingers in it.

“Take me inside.” He released her from the kiss, taking his mouth to her neck, sucking there until she whimpered. There were so many meanings to his order, she didn’t know which one he was demanding. Inside her house? *Unwise*. Inside her heart? *Impossible*. Inside her body?

The hand at her waist found its way to her breast, curving over the small rise and fitting her nipple between his fingers.

Oh, *yeah*...as soon as she possibly could.

Wait, no... She couldn’t. She shouldn’t. She—

“I can’t,” she cried into the inches of space between them, a small voice for a tiny denial.

He didn’t stop tasting her skin, dragging his teeth back and forth over the curve of her neck. His thumbs toyed with both nipples now. “It’s the only way, Belle.”

Not really. People made love outside all the time, she thought absently. Hadn’t *they*?

“Lucas.” She didn’t know what she meant to say other than that, but when he groaned, it seemed to be enough.

“Please, Belinda. I may not be able to do this if we don’t.”

“Do what?” Lucas Lonnigan made it a lifelong goal to do any damn thing he wanted. Which was precisely why she was this close to screaming his name under a streetlight.

He pulled away, his passion suddenly distant, scaring her heart into beating triple time. The shadows were especially harsh now that they were both outside, standing eye to eye. He touched her cheek, a caress so gentle, so loving, that her eyes stung. So many years of fighting this, of fighting him, and the touch she craved was given as a gift she didn't deserve.

"All I'm asking for is one night. Just one. Then I swear to you, I'll do everything I can to make all your dreams come true."

Wasn't this a dream already? A forbidden one. A heartbroken one, but a dream all the same? "Lucas, you can't—"

His forefinger kissed her lips. "I would break heaven itself for you, Belle. I can. I will. *After* tonight."

She couldn't see his eyes. She hoped he couldn't see hers. Too many things she didn't want to admit were there. She could feel them. "If we do this, you'll only have my body. No one gets my heart, Lonnigan, not even you."

His eyes must have caught the light somehow, the way they flickered before her. His jaw tightened and he nodded.

It would be wrong to let this happen without him knowing where they stood. But she still wished that just once, she had the courage to offer more. Instead, she unclipped her keys and put them in his hands.



## Chapter Two

They made it inside the loft in relative peace. No one driving past them on the street outside the warehouse would have thought anything about the man leading a woman up the scaling staircase on the right side of the building. They'd never guess the tension, the rampaging storm rising with each step upward. But Belinda knew it. She was engulfed in it, in him, yet nothing happened beyond the gentle, continuous tug of his hand on hers. He didn't bother with the lights after using her keys to open the four locks, settling for closing the door and positioning her against it.

She actually heard the peace break. Her back was to the cold glass and the curtains. The knob—a last chance to escape—in her hand while he watched to see if she'd turn it. His breath came in a deep heave, his gaze on her tightened fingers. But she didn't want him to leave. She didn't want to send him out. She'd already made her choice. She let go, a sharp jarring sound of metal and wood in the silence.

Then he descended.

The kiss skipped all the usual first stages. Nothing soft and seductive from him. He came at her, hot and wet, overwhelming and delicious. His fingers tangled with the laces at her hips, pulling her against the unyielding hardness of his cock. His moan rumbled into her mouth when she rubbed her belly against it in response. Both his arms wrapped around her, and the two of them slid away from the door, against the wall, sinking towards the floor where they'd likely rip each other's clothes to shreds in their efforts to get inside one another.

Was it always going to be this way with him? The hunger between them so demanding there was little room for kindness? Her lips would probably hurt later—much later—and his grip on her butt would probably leave tiny bruises...

At least, that's what she thought before he dipped, slipping both hands behind her thighs and scooping her up against the wall, gently supporting her without crushing her. She felt protected, cherished, well and truly notched to him, her slickening sex against his stomach, her breasts now at his mouth level. Her legs tightened around him.

Someone was sighing, sounding satisfied when the wetness of his kiss encompassed the hard point of her nipple through the nylon shirt. Breath was hard to grasp. The curtain on the door gave way beneath the swing of her arm and rising fall of her body as he thrust against her—hard, jutting pumps. Promises of what would come. Or maybe his body was simply as desperate to get to that part as hers was and didn't have the patience to wait. Either way, they weren't getting anywhere like this, except hot. Very, very hot.

She was melting from her core, a sensation that increased when he let go of her long enough to peel her shirt off her and throw it behind him. Then he had her in his mouth for real.

A girl could feel bad about not needing to wear a bra, but Belinda never did. Not after Lucas. Even as a teenager, he'd been so...*excited* about the slight curves there because he could graze his teeth over the sensitive points and make her cry out. She was near to sobbing now, his thumbs wet from his own mouth, flicking over her and making her hips rock against him.

"You're hot, Belle," he murmured in what should have been a soothing tone. It served only to tease while his hips rucked up harder than before. "Your skin is on fire."

"I can't feel yours." She yanked at his jacket, impatient and frustrated. He was *trying* to make her crazy. He had to be. He shrugged out of it, and she pulled at his shirt with both hands, prepared to tear it in half. "I want your skin, Lucas."

"You'll get it."

He didn't understand. If he did he wouldn't sound so calm. That growl in his voice would be a roar. He'd be trying to tear it, too. She'd wanted him for so long and refused him. Now that she'd given in, years of desire overflowed. She *needed* him now, like a fury. "I want it all. All of you."

"You'll get everything tonight, Belle." He sucked in a ragged breath of his own, his forehead like a scorching blaze between her breasts. "Everything I am. Anything I can give you. It's yours."

She felt a frisson of fear, of exaltation, because he sounded like he'd made a vow. Sounded as if this were supposed to mean something more than simple sex. But then his mouth was on hers and she lost the ability to worry or to think. All she could do was feel and all there was to feel was *him*.

Buttons snapped and Lucas fit his big palms beneath her ass again, but then he started walking. They bumped into things, knocked some breakables down, but he kept going. When she expected him to drop her on her bed, he turned the opposite way and they stumbled into the walk-in shower.

"Where are we going?" Like she cared.

"Too hot," he said between wet kisses. "We're going to give ourselves heart attacks."

Trepidation invaded in a second. "Lucas—"

"Trust me." His white teeth gleamed in the soft yellow light of her nightlight through the clear shower curtain as he turned on the water.

The showerhead burst to life, spitting cool water on her fiery skin. She shrieked until he adjusted it, laughing, spreading his big palm over her bare back to take the brunt of the water flow. Eventually, he had what he wanted, enough heat to keep it from being cold...but still cool, gaining warmth as it spilled over her body onto his.

They were soon drenched, her hair matted wet, his shirt turning transparent and tightening its hold on his arms. Water flooded down her spine, into the valley between her ass and her pants, drops working their way to her molten pussy. She bounced in his hands at the pinpricks of sensation, cool droplets licking

where she wanted his tongue instead.

“Take these off, I need them off,” she groaned, tearing her hands off him to unbuckle her own pants. The zipper went down easily enough...but the fabric refused to budge off her skin. A yank did nothing. The leather had bonded to her, sticky and immovable. “Oh, you gotta be fuckin’ kidding me!”

Twelve years of waiting and she was not going to lose this night because of a pair of pants, damn it.

“How much do you care about those?” Lucas asked, frowning at her midriff.

“I’m half-naked in a shower with you, Lucas, swearing at them. How much do you think I care?”

“Here, try standing.” Adding insult to injury, he set her down on her feet, taking care that her footing was solid before letting her go. It didn’t help dislodge the leather. “Take off your boots.”

“I don’t see why—”

“Take them off, Belle.” She watched him detach the wet dress shirt from his arms and sling it into a squishy pile in the corner of the stall. Then he reached for the hem of his wet white T-shirt. Before he pulled it up though, he lifted an eyebrow at her, as if to say, “Well?”

Grumbling, she reached down for the zipper on her left boot and let him help her stay standing while she got her leg free with a disconcerting suction sound. The next boot came off and she was there in just the pants.

For his part, Lucas was still in his slacks, but they were plastered to him. The thick erection outlined there told her in no short terms that he had no intention of giving in to a few pieces of wet leather, either.

“I’m going to have to owe you.” He dropped to his knees and turned her at the hips so he was looking at one side of her speculatively, touching her exposed skin with his fingertips, faint as a feather.

“Owe me for what?”

“For this.” He put one hand on each side of the laces and ripped. The tiny strips proved little match for a determined man and after two good tugs, the pants gaped open around one leg. She stared, dumbfounded, as he spun her and made shorter work of the other side. Damn if he didn’t look proud of himself, kneeling in front of her, a smile she’d bet no one knew he could produce on those sinful lips.

His hands caressed her calves through the open sides, sliding up her legs to the insides of her thighs. She shuddered when his thumbs massaged upward, searching out her sex. His eyes darkened and the smile fell away when he found nothing but her soft folds and the thick moisture of her desire. His thumb slid over her clit, once, twice, then a third time until she threw her head back with a cry. Not in orgasm. No, he stayed well short of that. This was just a taste of relief and sweet, honeyed torture.

His hands came away from her slowly, then she felt the touch of his knuckles at her belly, working the pants slowly over her barely existing hips. Once past that, the weight of the wet leather made them drop all by themselves to her feet.

“This is new.”

Belinda looked down, now positive she was blushing, which she hadn’t done when she was dumb

enough to get his surprising little find. At least, she didn't think she did.

"I didn't know you could get tattoos here." He brought a fingertip to the hand-sized design low on her abdomen, tracing the dark outline over her smooth mound where it ended at the very top of her sex. "This had to hurt."

"Well...I...wanted something pretty." Actually, she was dead drunk for the first session and woke up completely unaware of what she'd done. After that it seemed a shame not to finish. But now was not a time for a lecture, which he'd give if she ever explained how it happened. She pulled on his nape, hoping to bring him back to the point.

Being Lucas, of course, he wasn't going to move until he was ready.

His fingertip remained on the outer black edges of the pattern, tracing the wings with their blending colors of gold, purple and blue, to the tribal slash patterns that arced off of it into graceful pin-striping curlicues. She gasped, a shudder going through her from the outside in. Deeply in.

"I like it," he whispered, sounding hoarse. "It *is* pretty."

"I..." *Well, shit, what do you say to that?* "Thanks."

"And, you know," he said, perversely matter-of-fact while his breath caressed her, making her tingle and moisten further. "I've never kissed a butterfly before."

She would have responded, but his tongue found her, parting her outer lips and caressing her clit. He was well south of her butterfly, the first kiss falling right between the dewdrop tips of the wings, but who was she to make a man feel bad about his aim?

No one, she assured herself, when he parted her thighs so he could cup her bottom with his hands. She leaned back, presenting more of herself for him to taste. To lick and lave and dip into. Slowly, as if he were savoring every drop, he ran his tongue through her folds, flicking here and there just to make her buck and gasp. And then he sank that devilish tongue into her, rolling against the edges of her entrance, fucking her with a barrage of tiny thrusts. She'd never known being devoured felt so good, so very damn good. He moaned, or maybe growled, she wasn't sure, but the sound vibrated through her and sent her tumbling right to the edge of rapture.

But he pulled away.

And smiled.

"You bastard."

The smile only grew. "We go over together. Or not at all."

"Is that the deal?" she asked, pulling him up again, determined to be satisfied. He nodded and she pushed him against the back wall of the stall. She reached for his pants, undoing the button and smiling herself when she pulled down the fly with reckless speed. Unlike her, he was safe behind another layer of fabric, but it didn't guard him long.

She found him, pulsing and rigid, overflowing her hand while she stroked him tip to root. His head

fell back to the wall and she heard him swear when her mouth replaced her hand. One deep swallow and he was hers, his clothing shoved away, leaving only his honey-colored skin and the dark, bristly hair that tickled the side of her hand as she stroked in time with the slide of her lips.

She loved touching him, taking advantage in a way she hadn't been able to that long ago night, drawing the pleasure out. She sucked hard, rippling her own tongue along the underside of his cock, loving his ragged groan at the turnabout. Her lips slid over the blush-colored mushroom head as she released him, only to rub her wet bottom lip along the crest before taking him back in. He pushed deeper, his hips pumping for more. She gave, swirling her mouth around him, drawing on him every time he pulled back. The texture and taste of him, the power of him, in her hands, in her mouth, made her senses drunk. Nearly desperate. Unable to wait, she slipped her free hand down between her thighs, seeking out her clit to relieve the pressure.

Then he snatched himself away.

Before she could even yelp her dismay, he'd lifted her up, back to his kiss, her breasts pressed to his chest, his insistent cock nudging up into her pussy. His back met the tiles behind him and his legs shifted beneath her to keep them both upright. She lost all awareness of the water or the sounds of the city below the second his fingertips coursed underneath, opening her so he could slip himself through her folds. Her own hands found the ledge to the small window above his head, pushing a shampoo bottle to the floor so she could cling to the blue-green tiles and pull her weight high enough to lift her hips above the rounded head of his cock. Then controlling her descent, she took him inside until she was utterly full of him.

They stared at each other, his eyes hooded, his mouth strained, while she maintained the stillness as long as she could. She wanted to absorb his fire and his need, memorize the silky smooth fit of him inside her. This was what sex was meant to be. Raw and powerful. Giving, taking, satisfying in its every moment. It was supposed to feel this good, even when you didn't move. It didn't have to be about love to be this good.

But the hunger wasn't satisfied. And it was in no mood to wait.

His palms beneath her ass rocked her forward. She rocked herself back, clenching her legs around his waist. His smile this time could only be called...feral. He thrust into her, the sudden stroke sending her nerve endings screaming with pleasure. And he knew it, no doubt able to tell by the reflexive tightening of her muscles around him, because he did it again. And again.

He lifted her, surged into her even as she pushed down on him for more, greedy for the feeling of him pounding within. Aching. Throbbing. She let her nipples abrade his chest, the sensation adding to the wildness of the ride, the pressure in her middle, the tension in her soul.

Then the cresting began. She bit her lip at the first frothy burst of release. Her eyes were closed so tight she could only see the white of the pressure, feel the squeeze of his hold, the hot splash of him deep within while he groaned. But he kept moving...and she kept coming.

“Lucas!” she finally cried, when she didn’t think she could take any more. He thrust once again and she fell over the highest peak yet, quaking and shivering, draped across him, unable to do more than lay her forehead on his shoulder and try to breathe.

The aftershocks continued to wrack her long moments later, their lessening magnitude what she’d once thought the height of pleasure. He held her, soothing her now with a warm hand on her back, making sounds of contentment, kissing her shoulder with all the gentleness she thought he lacked. She might even have slept there, safe in his hold as she’d never felt before.

Finally though, she came back to herself. He was murmuring something. She closed her mind to it. If she let herself listen, she’d know he was feeling something, trying to express something to her that she couldn’t bear. This night would not be about feelings. It was for sex. For taking advantage of chemistry, drowning out the hunger. The second he said anything about passion or love, the guilt would win out and she’d have to push him away.

It might be stealing, but as long as he was willing to forgo his need for commitment, she’d take all of him she could get.

He slipped from her body with little complaint from her, though she didn’t want to let him go. The cool water was welcome again, gentle and kind as it washed away everything dark between them. When she tipped her face up to look at him and he pushed her hair back, she was able to smile.

He looked down, fingering the ends of her hair, his face unreadable but for the hunger still lurking, impossibly, in his eyes. Her heart leapt at the sight of it and she throbbed deep inside.

“This is going to be a long night, isn’t it?”

He took his time answering, lowering his mouth to hers to kiss her lips—graze them, really—holding her close in his embrace. Gentleness again. And peace. Sweet, wondrous peace.

“Sweetheart, you have no idea.”

But she’d find out. Very, very soon.

Belinda with clothes on—no matter how tight or how scarce—was a sight to behold. Belinda without anything at all was proof there was divinity in the world. *Inspired* divinity.

Lucas lay wide awake in her bed, running his fingers through the soft silk of her hair. He smiled to himself at the decadent abandon of her limbs splayed out across his body. Her head lay just under his heart and the rest of her was draped bonelessly around him, pretty much where she’d slumped after their final, tumultuous ride. One leg over both of his, the other pressed firmly to his side, one arm wrapped around his middle, the other hand under his shoulder, cupping him close.

They’d used most of the small loft in some way or another—he now owed her for a flower vase and a lamp on top of the price of her boots and pants—but for the most part, he made use of every inch of this

incredible brass bed.

On nights when he liked to torment himself—most nights—he'd imagined what it would be like to be with her on a bed. To sink with her into a nest of pillows instead of the dew of grass. She'd deserved a bed that first time. She'd deserved so much more than a bed. But no matter what he wanted, he was not the man who would give those things to her.

Last night he'd tried to fulfill every fantasy he'd ever had of her, knowing the memories would have to last him until he was cold in his grave. He'd washed her mask away, the harsh make-up, the plaster in her hair, until despite the color, she was *his* Belle again, scars and all. All night long, she'd cried *his* name, took *his* passion and returned it tenfold. He'd take solace in that. Curb the wanting with it.

Set her free with it.

His hand stopped moving in her hair, resignation finally taking hold. He hadn't slept. He watched the sun sneak in through the bay windows of the warehouse, pulled her white comforter up over her shoulders and told himself he could take a few more moments, steal a few more seconds, before he had to go. But it was already eight in the morning. The night had long since expired and he had a promise to keep.

Slight as she was, it wasn't easy to dislodge her. She slept like a solid brick. One limb at a time, Lucas extracted himself from her hold, easing from the bed. He turned around, watching to make sure she slept on, undisturbed. She lay peacefully, facedown on her bed, her jet hair stark against the white pillows and white comforter, cuddled in them like a child.

A really sinful child.

He touched her hair once more, sliding it though his fingers like ribbons before stepping back. Steeling himself, he knew if he didn't do this now, he'd never let her go. He went back to the bathroom, where they'd haphazardly hung their clothes over the shower rod. Only half-dry, but better than walking out in the buff. He held back the urge to swear by the skin of his teeth while putting on the frigid clothing. Finally, he had just about everything on, keys in his pocket, heart on the floor.

*This is what she wants*, he reminded himself, looking in the mirror. But his face wasn't reflected at him. Kyle's was. Fewer harsh lines bracketed his mouth. A satisfied, sleepy look took the severity out of his eyes. There was light to them he'd never seen before. He scrubbed a hand over the short scruff of his hair, barely moving it, wondering if she would have wanted it longer, the way it used to be.

But it didn't matter anymore, did it?

It was over.

He took a last glance around the little floor plan, looking for clothes he might have left behind. All there was to see were the toppled toothbrush holder, the birth control pill dispenser she'd tossed over her shoulder in a show of feminine power and the remnants of a midnight snack that had been shoved aside for more constructive activities. The loft was open on one side, guarded by waist-high rails before giving way to the internal stairs. They would have done more damage the night before if her living area hadn't been so

sparsely arranged—just a couch, the large brass bed, a small television and a tiny kitchenette tucked into the corner.

She'd kill him for thinking it, but the room wasn't the home of a dedicated goth queen. Her bedspread was white and fluffy. The curtains were Victorian-looking lace. Her bedside table had a doily beneath the lamp, for God's sake. Everything was neat and had a place, filled with the light and sweetness she never allowed anyone to see.

At its utter, basic core, this little room was where the real Belinda lived. Out there, in the city with her brash ways, over-the-top outfits and undying dedication to Kyle, was where she hid. He sighed, wondering if she ever gave a thought as to why. He certainly had. Twelve years of thoughts, of fears, of wondering if he'd been the one to make her that way. But if he were, it would mean she cared about him, which she vowed as loudly as possible would never happen. Still, he wondered. Sometimes, he even hoped...but not often.

"Where are you going?" her voice asked from beneath the blankets, nearly making him jump. She hadn't moved in the slightest. Bending down slightly, he could see that she hadn't even opened her eyes.

"Home." The clarity and resolve in his voice was exactly what he knew they had to be.

Her right eyelid lifted, then squinted at him. "You're dressed."

"I know."

"I thought..." Both eyes opened now and she rubbed them with her hands. She yawned into a catlike smile before beginning a similarly feline reach of her arms.

A stretch of her entire body was too much of a temptation to deny, so he watched her shoulders emerge from the bedding, each tiny muscle flexing as she rolled joints and shifted. His body leapt, imagining that sinuous movement over him, already hungry again. *I'm going to want her even when I'm dead, aren't I?*

"I thought maybe we could go to breakfast or something." Sex still poured through her voice as she rolled onto her back, not covering her breasts with more than a haphazard pull of the sheet over one shoulder. The peachy tip of one peeked out at him over the fold of her arm, teasing him with its already puckered state. It took all his will to tear his eyes away and meet her dawning gaze. "Lucas?"

"What?" Sharper than he meant, but damn it, did she think this would be easy for him?

She didn't shrink away into the blankets, but her dark eyes narrowed, accentuating the tiny fissure that split the very end of her eyebrow nearly to the corner of her right eye. "Where are you going?" she asked again, probably finally realizing.

"Home," he repeated, softer now, looking away from her to the door. A few steps and he'd be out. Gone. Alone. Forever.

"So that's it? Again? Make me bowlegged and disappear into the night."

"It's day already, Belle."



“Oh don’t get analytical with me. I know what damn time of day it is.” She sat up fully, the blankets sliding to her waist, but it wasn’t a problem because she drew her knees to her chest, looping her arms around her legs and resting her chin on the highest point. With her spiky cut hair going in every direction, her eyes narrowed to slits, she looked like an angry cat, preparing to pounce. “You’re running away.”

*Like I’m on fire.*

“You’re a coward.”

“You’re hardly one to talk, Belinda. You knew this was coming.” Didn’t she? He tried to think back to the night before. Hadn’t he been clear? Didn’t he tell her exactly what the night was about? He was sure he did. He knew he did.

“Maybe I got confused by all the thrusting and praying to God. You didn’t *sound* like someone desperate to escape.”

He closed his eyes. No, escape was anything but his plan the night before, but he had a resolve to keep. This wasn’t just about setting *her* free. Maybe without her, he’d finally get a life instead of waiting for her to stop wanting Kyle.

“See, I knew we shouldn’t have done this. I knew you’d want to get emotional about it. Not everything between us has to be a federal case. We’re good at this part. Why are you making it into one?”

“I’m doing this because it’s what has to be done,” he uttered, reminding himself, too.

“Says who?”

“What do you want from me, Belinda?” he snapped, glaring at her finally. Fresh-faced, pink lips slightly parted in surprise, she was everything he’d loved since he was six damn years old. But she’d never be his. Never. She didn’t *want* to be. He had to remember that.

“You wanted sex. I gave you that. You don’t want anything else from me. You don’t want me to love you. Or care about you. Or be part of your life. You never have. You want Kyle. Now you can have him. I’m not in your way anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You said that as long as I wanted you, he never would. You said I was *killing* you, remember?” He sure did. “You might tell yourself I’m inhuman, but I’m not a monster. And I’m tired of being your dog, just a poor, unwanted substitute. I’ve had my fill, Belle. I’m done.”

“What?” Her dark eyes were wide. Afraid, again.

Lucas turned away from her. All his life, it seemed, had been lived for her protection, her happiness, to keep her from being afraid. He couldn’t do it anymore. This was for the best. This was the only way for either of them. *This is what she wants.*

“I’m done with you.” He took those steps to the door and walked through it.

He never looked back.

## Chapter Three

Belinda stared at the closed door of the loft for ten minutes. Ten. She knew because she counted each and every second. Lucas didn't come back.

"This is the most psychopathic relationship I've ever fucking heard of," she said to no one. No one but herself, anyway, and she didn't exactly believe it. Oh, she and Lucas were good at sticking it to each other, there was no doubt about it, but her parents took that particular cake and she knew it.

When she was growing up, her father only showed up to make his overworked wife pregnant and broke. It often became her job, as the oldest, not to give her harried mother messages that her father was on the phone. Or to keep the kids from expecting much from the old bastard, so they wouldn't get their hopes up that he might stay. But six kids were hard to corral, especially with her working part-time and going to school. By the time she was a senior in high school, she was tired of relationships on the whole. She'd vowed never to get involved in one, either.

The vow lasted only as long as it took Lucas to lay her down on the grass by the lake on prom night.

Belinda rolled her eyes now. Okay, their relationship probably started a lot earlier. Like the day she met him, parked on the top of the slide, ignoring all the kids behind him yelling for him to move. Kyle had dared him to try the "big kid" slide. They'd gone up together. Kyle had come down alone. Lucas got scared and refused to budge, frowning over the edge at the woodchips below. She'd stomped past Kyle, kicked off her shoes and socks and clambered up the metal slide from the front. It took some pounding on his hands to get his grip loose and finally she shoved him until he began the descent whether he liked it or not.

Of course, he'd grabbed at her dress and accidentally sent her wheeling over the side of the slide to the ground in an arm-breaking crash as thanks. No good deed going unpunished seemed to be his mantra in life.

Oh, he was sorry about the broken arm. He'd stayed with her, screaming bloody murder for the recess aides and not leaving her side until the ambulance carted her away. Lucas always did sorry well—hadn't he spent a whole decade trying to make up for her lost virginity?—but she was tired of being the one getting broken whenever they tangled.

"I'm not going to cry." She slid her hands into her hair. It was weird to have it dry natural, but it was what he'd wanted the night before. After their little water escapade, he'd washed her carefully, massaging her soreness away, lathering her hair twice and getting a little carried away with the conditioner while he was at it. Probably trying to scrub the black dye out and get to the white gold beneath. Little did he know,

no amount of scrubbing was going to make the stupid girl he'd once made love to come back, no matter how badly he wanted her.

Or was figuring that out what made him leave?

She scruffed her hair once more and threw back the blankets. She couldn't stay in bed and try to make sense of Lucas Lonnigan. If twenty-five years of knowing him hadn't given her any insight, one morning in the bed where he'd slept certainly wouldn't.

Getting up was a revelation. Her body was sore, but her joints glided smoother than ever. She groaned a little, arching her back, wondering if maybe she shouldn't have said the word *bowlegged*; it was coming back to haunt her. Most men couldn't actually keep going until you couldn't walk straight the next day, but Lucas apparently never had to worry about stamina. She caught sight of herself in the mirror over her sink and gaped.

Her hair stuck off her head on the left side and fell stick straight on the right. Her mouth was swollen, still red, and from her chin down she had the pink, freshly scrubbed look only a prickly morning beard could produce. If you dragged it all over your body. The damn man.

Anger flooded her. First he ruined her boots with water. Then he ripped her pants right off of her. Now he'd gone and tattooed her. When she saw him next she was going to—

To what? Yell at him for making love to her until she forgot everything else in the world? For spending an entire night giving her hope that maybe she'd been wrong to push him away all these years. That they might be able to...to... God, she couldn't even think of where she'd been going with such an idiotic plan. Not that it mattered. He was *done* with her.

Belinda reached past the curtain and turned the hot water on full blast. She jumped in, sure to put her face directly under the spray and take the stinging behind her lids away. But it only intensified.

*Done* with her.

How did a man make love to you with so much passion, with so little control, and claim to be *done* with you the next morning? Was he human? Was he unfeeling? Didn't he understand anything *at all*?

She put her hand on the wall to support the weakness in her legs. The ache in her heart threatened to break her chest open. When she pulled in a gasp of air, it echoed off the walls of the oversize stall like a sob. But she wasn't sobbing. That would mean she was crying and you couldn't be crying without tears.

She put her other hand on the wall and fought the wracking of her shoulders. He was *done* with her.

It was for the best. Wanting Lucas was a bad thought from its inception. Kyle was the one she could rely on. Kyle didn't inspire passion. He didn't get angry. His eyes didn't burn when they looked at her. He would never possess her the way Lucas had. Could. *Did*, anytime he put his mind to it.

After last night—clearly after this morning—she could put her desire away, the way he was doing. Unlike her mother, she wasn't going to be ruled by it. She wasn't going to be carting around kid after kid, every year taking her further from her dreams of being a respected and successful artist. She was struggling

now, yes, but she wouldn't be struggling forever. She was free.

She didn't need Lucas Lonnigan.

She certainly didn't want him.

She was *free*.

Which was exactly what she repeated to herself over and over as she sank to the floor of the shower stall and cried, no longer able to hold it in or pretend it wasn't happening.

It would have been nice if the next time Lucas saw his brother, Kyle were in some kind of full-body cast. But no. He found the idiot parked on his front porch as if he'd be welcome. Worse, he refused to go away.

Kyle had it in his head that he was interested in Jessica, his date from the night before. The date that was little more than a ruse to get Lucas alone with Belinda again because Kyle couldn't mind his own business.

Karma hadn't been kind. Jessica's reaction to being duped with a doppelganger had been to crush Kyle's adoration beneath a sedate, lawyerly high heel of total rejection.

If Lucas didn't want to kill him, he'd be laughing at the sap.

At least, he would if Kyle would go away. It was going on three in the afternoon and the pathetic bastard was still in Lucas's kitchen, whining.

"I'm just going to have to be persistent. She feels it, too."

"Feels what?" Lucas asked wearily. At best, he could hope they shared the similar feeling of Jessica's foot up Kyle's ass, but he doubted his brother would be so positive about something like that.

"She's the one, Lucas. My one in a million."

Great, the one time Lucas attempted to be comforting in ten years and the moron didn't get it right. Kyle had been going on about wanting to end his boring existence of wine, women and song to settle down and have a few miniatures of himself to fawn over. "I said you have a basic search cell of a million women in the regional area for your ridiculous breeding hunt, not that you'd *find* one in that million. You're technically looking for one in five-point-five billion."

His brother leveled a surprisingly good bland look his way. "You have no sense of romance, do you?"

Lucas surveyed him sourly from his small dining room table. That was a rotten accusation to make on this, of all days. Hadn't he bent over backward to be everything Belinda asked him to be, to no avail? Wasn't he about to sacrifice his own happiness for the contentment of the woman he loved? No sense of romance? He was the *epitome* of romance, goddamn it.

"Romance is an overused term for an under-appreciated emotion." Extremely under-appreciated.

Kyle grinned, back to being cocky and easy in his skin. "So that's a no, then?"

Lucas tightened his death grip on his coffee mug, grumbling into it as he drank. “I like you less and less as the years go by.”

“Nah, you love me.” Kyle bent back into the fridge and dug out the lasagna leftovers from a lunch with a client. “More importantly, so does Jessica. I have to admit, when I thought up sending you to meet Belinda, it never occurred to me I’d find someone for myself. Talk about lucky.”

Yeah, lucky. Stupid. Either or.

“I just have to put a plan together,” Kyle continued, oblivious. “A way to get her to forgive me. Then everything will fall together, the way it should.”

“She’s a lawyer, Kyle. She’s trained to see through clouds of bull—”

“She loves me,” Kyle interrupted adamantly.

Since his twin said almost nothing with that degree of firmness, Lucas took a second to rethink his position on Kyle’s seriousness. This might be worse than he thought. “Does this mean you think you love her, too?”

“Not think. *Know*,” Kyle corrected with a raised forefinger. “She’s the one, Lucas. She’s everything I want.”

Much worse. The bridge of Lucas’s nose began to hurt. Come to think of it, his brain was starting to hurt, right at the temples and deep into his eyes. Or was it just aggravation? “You don’t even know her!”

“I know what I feel.”

“Oh, please,” Lucas scoffed. “Hard-ons are not synonymous with love.”

Kyle snorted. “Like you would know. Your idea of deep affection and commitment is letting your date figure out how to split the bill.”

“You don’t think I’m capable of love?” That egg of theirs should never have divided.

“You’re as capable of it as the next guy. You don’t seem to believe it, though, so why should anyone else?”

Lucas felt his mood slip to rancorously grim. “As if you’ve ever done anything in your life for the sake of love.”

Kyle’s confidence took a definite hit, his smile faltering and his head tilting to the side before he looked back at his food. He stabbed his utensil at it a few times like a pitchfork into hay. “Yeah, well...I didn’t have a reason before. I wasn’t in love with anyone.”

He gave Lucas a strange sideways look. A look Lucas didn’t want to interpret. “So how did things go with you and Belinda?”

“None of your business.” Lucas might have to suffer watching Kyle and Belinda live happily ever after, but he wasn’t sharing anything about the *one* night she was his.

“Uh-huh, just what I thought.” The smug twit.

“Oh, shut up. You don’t know anything.” Now he couldn’t even drink his coffee anymore. He shoved

the cooling mug to the other side of the table in disgust.

"I know this much: The last time you stayed a whole night with a woman, you were in the womb. And yet, here you were dragging your sorry ass in the door after eight in the morning. Wretchedly, I might add. Proof positive that you're in love. You know as well as everyone else does that you want to be with her. Why do I have to constantly force you into going out with her?"

Honesty twisted Lucas's mouth. "Because no one ever asked what *Belinda* wanted."

Kyle only laughed, back to his happy-go-lucky, blind, pain-in-the-ass self. He found some bread and wandered over to the toaster. "No one ever had to. She's pretty clear about what and who she wants."

No shit. She'd been clear for nearly two decades. "That's never bothered you?"

"Why should it bother me? I think it's great." He would. The whole world was supposed to adore Kyle, wasn't it? And he owed no one anything in return. Just being there for the adoration was enough, right?

*Wrong.*

"You jackass!" Lucas snapped, anger flooding him. "How could you do that to her? String her along, knowing—"

"*Me?*" Kyle's surprise was nearly genuine. He pushed the toaster knob into place with a click and laughed. "Belinda doesn't want *me*."

Blind, stupid fool. "Then you're not even half as smart as I gave you credit for."

"I'm not the idiot here, Luc." Kyle leaned his back to the counter and crossed his arms, still smug, still annoying. "Ask anyone. The only one Belinda has ever wanted was you. I'm her pal because you, my uptight, high-strung placental partner, drive people to acts of insanity and she needed me to make sure she didn't kill you."

Yeah, right. "Like I said, try asking Belinda sometime. She has very specific answers on the subject."

"Was that what you were asking her last night?"

"Kyle," Lucas growled, curling his fingers around the edge of his kitchenette table. This one would probably fly further than the one at Vino's would have.

"Okay, fine, I won't ask about last night, but you're nuts if you think I'm going anywhere near Belinda." Then he laughed. He actually laughed. The toaster sprang, grabbing Kyle's full attention until he'd juggled his food across the kitchen and back to his plate.

The hair on the back of Lucas's neck rose as he watched the display. "You say it like there's something wrong with her."

"Aside from the fact she'd hand me my teeth *and* my nuts if I so much as laid a hand on her? Or that *you* would?"

Lucas could only hope his look was as baleful as he felt.

Kyle leaned over his plate on the kitchen island. "There's plenty wrong with her. She's hung up on

*you*. That alone indicates deep-seated psychological problems I don't want to deal with. It's bad enough I've had to put up with Mom and how much *she* likes you, insisting we keep you fed and housed and inviting you to holiday dinners. I'm a saint, if you ask me, but do I get an ounce of appreciation? Nope, not a drop. And now here you are, asking for more." He sighed, nearly a groan, and picked up his fork to eat.

Lucas stared while Kyle seemed utterly oblivious to the fact that they hadn't finished talking. He just chewed, swallowed and took another bite, looking forward blankly. Then he repeated.

"Kyle!" Lucas snapped, ready to do him in all over again.

His brother's head came up and his gaze focused as if he'd been awakened. "What?"

"What about Belinda?"

More confusion. Did he have no short-term memory at all? "What about her?"

"Are you going to ask her out?" Lucas asked, gritting his teeth to crunching again. They were going to be nubs at this rate.

Kyle narrowed an eye at him, still chewing at the large lump warping his cheek. "Tell you what—"

"Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no. The last time we had an 'I tell you what', we both got an earful from irate women."

"Women we both know we want to see again."

Lucas chewed the inside of his own cheek, positive any response was going to dig him in deeper.

"How about this? I'm going to find a way to get Jessica to talk to me—" Kyle raised a hand to point Lucas into silence when he overrode his own teeth to argue. "In the meantime, you find out once and for all what's between you and Belinda."

"*You* are," Lucas snapped, patience completely drained. "I already told you. Every day, every night, every hour for twenty-five years, *you* have been between us. How blind and deaf are you to keep missing that?"

Kyle shrugged. "So take me out of the equation."

"Excuse me?"

"I have. Often." Kyle rolled his eyes when Lucas didn't bother to look amused. "You're the mathematician. You have to do the numbers *inside* the parenthesis before you can solve the entire equation. You plus Belinda. See what happens with me subtracted first."

Logic? From *Kyle*? Lucas pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sleep deprived. I must be. You're almost making sense."

Kyle nodded, a full-faced grin breaking out. "While I'm trying to make things right with Jessica, why don't you go out there and give things with Belinda a real effort?"

The chafed skin on his knees and the small of his back could attest only to his fake efforts, apparently. "I've tried that."

"More details you won't tell me?"

Lucas nodded, unable to face thinking of them himself. Especially not with Kyle present to inspect and make fun of something so...incredible.

"Try again. Stop hiding behind what she thinks she feels about me and for the love of God, take a risk."

Was that what Kyle thought? "I haven't risked anything?"

"Nothing you valued much. Break out of the mold, Lucas. *Talk* to her. Ask her questions instead of assuming you know the answers. Find out what it is about you that scares her so much. Even you with your limited socialization skills should be able to pinpoint it without much trouble. Broaden her horizons. Broaden *yours* beyond that inch and a half you swear is all you need. Try something different. You might get through to her for once."

Lucas scowled so deep he wondered if he bent his facial bones. "You mean *be* someone different."

"Being *you* sure as hell isn't working. Show her you're capable of being more than the guy who breaks her heart."

"I've never—" Lucas turned and glared sharply at his brother. For the first time, Kyle didn't look simple. In fact, he looked like he knew something Lucas couldn't figure out and he was enjoying the hell out of it. "What are you talking about?"

"Just because I never asked you about it doesn't mean I don't know what happened at prom, dufus. And don't think no one else has put together how you two started fighting after that and haven't quit. Or that Belinda started turning herself into the dark queen of the undead afterwards, either."

"You think it's *my* fault?" Hadn't he wondered himself? He'd cast it off because those vast changes—her hair, her clothes, her attitude—would have implied he meant something to her. Implied their one night meant something to her, though she explicitly told him it didn't. Not that she was above lying, but more to the point, he never once doubted the fervency with which she said it.

"Work it out with Belinda," Kyle continued in his hypnotizing way. "And hey, if it doesn't work for either of us and we all know for sure you and she don't want to be together, then I'll take her off your hands."

How could Kyle make agreeing to Lucas's own plan sound like a good enough reason to throttle him? "She's not a baseball card, you moron. We can't trade her back and forth."

"Believe me, if this plan works—and when have my plans ever failed?—there won't be any trading going on at all."

Smug schmuck. Unfortunately, Kyle was right about his plans. He had yet to set his mind to something and not achieve it. Despite its obvious disasters in the morning, even last night's date swap had succeeded. Too well. Like a dark cloud, Lucas's own well-executed plan to spend the night exorcising Belinda sprang to mind.

"I can't." Regret closed his eyes. His last words to her welled in his chest with all the burning agony



he'd felt when he'd said them; *I'm done with you*. "She probably hates me."

"She should have hated you years ago. Have a little faith. I'm sure you've been shittier in the past."

Lucas lifted his lids enough to glare, but hope started to throb and grow inside him. "You really think she might—"

He didn't even know what to ask. Might want more than passion from him? Might want to share a life with him? Might...*love* him?

"You never know until you try. But whatever you do," Kyle advised darkly, "this time, stop taking her fake *nos* for an answer."

Lucas swallowed. Belinda's favorite word was *no*, especially when she was talking to him. The only time she said yes was in bed. Or, he remembered with body-hardening clarity, whenever she was wrapped around him.

"How do you know the fake no from the real one?"

Kyle shrugged. "You just do. Something in the way she might be looking at you that doesn't match what she's saying. Or what she's doing. You know her, Lucas. You know when she's trying to put up a front to everyone else. Just start applying your insight to when she's using one on you."

Not his forte. "This isn't going to be easy."

"If you really want something—or someone—it never is."

But it would be worth it. To be loved by her. He'd already gone through hell for her. What worse could there be?

He flexed his hands together. Talk to Belinda, try to convince her to give a relationship a real try, don't get killed and don't let her say no until she had a reason for it other than wanting to be with Kyle.

Thinking about it, about the extremes he would need to go to—all of them risky or flat-out stupid—for her to give him the time of day, he faced a grim truth.

Hell was probably the easy part.

## Chapter Four

*Being you sure as hell isn't working...*

Kyle's advice rang through Lucas's mind long after his brother disappeared to wherever it was troublemakers went for fun. Before he'd gone, they'd worked out un-Lucas-like behaviors for Lucas to try. Kyle claimed gifts and apologies would get Belinda's door open. Lucas called it groveling.

Unfortunately...he wasn't above groveling.

Flowers seemed the best place to start. He'd only ever given them to one woman before and it was Belinda. On prom night. He sighed. She'd probably kill him for referring to that night with a set of fully blooming orchids. Roses were probably the best place to start. Rose petals were exactly what her skin felt like. But not red ones. Those were too loud and brash for her. Red roses were what she pretended to be. He wanted something subtle. Something graceful.

Popping open his laptop, Lucas ran a search and came up with roughly a thousand types of roses. Not always a lot of help, the Internet. Most of them looked the same as the others: red, yellow, red *and* yellow, white, pink, purple...*purple*.

The dewed bud of the lavender rose in the picture screamed Belinda. Strong, willowy, beautiful and soft. The tiny, needly thorns fit pretty well, too.

It took him a while to figure out which website to order from, but within an hour, he had a delivery scheduled, the card simply stating, "I'm sorry." It wasn't the down-on-your knees approach most women probably would expect, but Belinda knew that kind of thing was never going to come from him. Still, as apologies went, he had to admit writing one was much easier than breaking your teeth on the words.

Yes, this could work. It could definitely work.

Four hours later, there was a knock on his door. When he opened it, there was an acrid scent, a long, gold-foiled box on the floor and the sound of someone scampering down his building's stairs. Lucas frowned down at the box, nudging it with his toe. The smell was definitely coming from in there.

Dropping to his haunches, he lifted the lid and found what he expected. Strong, willowy, beautiful long stems...that led to blackened tips where the blooms used to be.

Apparently, she'd used a blowtorch.

The top stem, the one with the bent head and virtually no evidence of its petals left, was probably the one used to write—in ash, no less; definite points for creativity—"So what?" on the back of his printed card.

Okay, Kyle had been right about women not liking impersonal things. Maybe those ten extra minutes in the womb had paid off.

Lucas had to admit as well, from a mathematical standpoint, the odds against gaining a positive response on the first try were astronomical. All this was was a challenge. If he put his mind to it, eventually he'd hit on the thing she couldn't resist. Preferably something she couldn't put a torch to. It was just a matter of time and attempts.

It took him most of the day to come up with another bid, thinking back to their childhood. The Riggs family had to stretch things pretty tightly to cover seven children—the other six of which tended to follow Belinda like goslings—but they always had room for a dog or two. No one loved those dogs like Belinda did, no matter what kind of funny-looking mutt it was. She liked dogs but hadn't had one since she'd moved out on her own.

She wouldn't appreciate one of those little ankle biters, though. She needed something sturdy. He rushed out to the pet store and decided to pick up the first good-sized dog that wasn't going to get lost in her metal works and could maybe double as a guard dog. He came out with a panting, lick-happy, peanut-butter-fudge-rippled boxer puppy, complete with carrier, kibble and leash.

She'd never be able to say no to it.

But, of course, that was exactly what she did.

He'd left the dog in his carrier on her back porch. He woke up the next morning to the sound of barking and a wet, unpleasant present on his newspaper. If he didn't know better, he'd think he heard laughter echoing in the stairwell, but he couldn't say for sure.

Usually, he did his exercise on the treadmill in his apartment, but since the energetic puppy had no large, fenced junk pile to peruse, several jogs a day were required to get him to settle down. Besides, this was more to gain perspective. Few things helped him to think better than a nice long run. Belinda, knowing how disruptive a puppy could be to his peace of mind, probably thought she was getting back at him. Would she appreciate that running freed his mind to figure a way past his mistakes? Because obviously he needed to think harder on this. So, despite the pleasant company of the running partner, even mathematical statistics couldn't take the sting out of a second failure.

What would she *really* like? Flowers were out. The dog was a mistake. An unnamed mistake. What would appeal to the private woman he wanted to reach? The one who kept her apartment in soft white and cream, who personalized every little inch with hand-painted frames and carefully placed lace?

He stopped running. Someone bumped into him because of the unexpected stop and the pup yelped on the sudden lack of motion, but Lucas didn't nod at the mumbled apology or the yank on the leash.

Would she like *fine* lace? He had the strongest urge to imagine her wearing only webbed pieces of the delicate constructions, but such dangerous fantasies would completely destroy his ability to think clearly. The lace would mean a lot to her and she'd see he wasn't blind to who she really was. She'd see he *wanted*

who she really was.

But where was he going to find something like that?

Spinning around as quickly as he stopped, he whistled to the pup and made his way back to his apartment to research. This time, he didn't bother with the Internet. He grabbed the yellow pages and looked up "lace". To his dismay, there were roughly thirty or forty places that carried the stuff in his area alone. Someday, he reminded himself, she was going to be extremely grateful for all the time and social niceties he was putting into this.

Phone call after phone call meant talking to new strangers, being polite and worst of all, explaining himself.

Very, *very* grateful.

Somewhere around the ninth call, by which time he was rifling through his kitchen cabinets for something to chew on other than their throats, he talked to what had to be a gift from God: Earl Kanby, general manager of CraftWorld.

"You need a specialty boutique," Earl informed him without ceremony. There were no supposedly subtle questions as to why he was so grudgingly looking for lace. Quite frankly, Earl didn't give a rat's ass what he was up to. "They're called man-tee-yas. Nobody's better with lace than Lucy and that's a fact."

"Give me the address." Ten minutes later, Lucas was driving down Broadway and scanning for a *boutique*—girl-speak for extremely small, difficult to find and deeply expensive. Typically, *Lucy's Lacery* was on the corner...next to a hydrant...without parking for two blocks.

Belle had better be *damn* grateful.

By the time he got in there, Lucas already felt like crawling out of his skin. Standing inside the tiny store stuffed at every angle with lace and potpourri and God knew what else, he had to stoop because his hair was brushing the ceiling.

"Hello!" someone in the back chimed. A voice to lure innocent shoppers deeper into the maze.

The air had a close, almost aged, scent to it, making him want to sneeze and call his grandmother at the same time. He inched his way past standing racks of lace on little round wheels. The ends dropped past the racks at uneven levels, some coiling, some with their ends knotted. He saw satiny flowers of ribbons and old-looking beige knots with tassels hanging from everywhere without order or care. The window had a mannequin in a wedding dress with a veil that reached to her feet. There was a lace curtain behind her, and inside the store, he saw a hanging rack displaying several more bridal explosions.

He'd found it. The eighth ring of Hell. This had to be where the unorganized came to die. He had to get out.

"What can I do—oh, wow, you're tall."

Lucas looked down at the petite blonde coming out of the back room, a colored ball-headed pin between her lips and what looked like the bleached remains of a sheep sprinkled all over her dark T-shirt.

“Not really.” She was just small. He felt like the damn Jolly Green Giant trying to fit in Thumbelina’s tower. “I need lace.”

He gave her credit. She didn’t laugh at him. “Big, small or custom made?”

His eyebrows rose. “You do that?”

She grinned, her eyes taking on a saucier look. “I do lots of things. But something tells me a man like you wouldn’t be in a place like this unless some woman was making him. So what’ll it be?”

“Big. My reference said I need a mant—” Lucas sighed. Earl couldn’t have been saying it right.

She nodded, walking from behind the counter and leading the way to a few tables where pieces were laid out. “I have *mantillas*.” She pulled a few boxes out, but the densely clotted lace wasn’t what he wanted. Most of them had thick roses, looking somewhat ordinary.

“I want something...special.” Great, back to the word of helplessness. He picked up something that looked like a curtain sheer, rubbing the gossamer through his fingers. “Do you have anything with...butterflies?”

If she noticed his voice was hoarse on that last word, she wisely didn’t say anything. He waited while she chewed her lip, looking around, absently plucking loose threads off her shirt. The woman needed a Dustbuster. Badly.

“I have something, but it’s not a *mantilla*.”

Lucas stared down at her until she patted his arm and moved past him. Then she turned on a switch next to a shelf and a lighted shadowbox on the wall caught his eye. Inside was a miracle. All in white, gathered at one point and draping downward, was a piece of fabric the likes of which he’d never seen. The sheer was clear, visible only where the folds overlapped in pleats. The edges were cut in large scallops, edged into the shape of butterfly wings. Inside the borders, white butterflies flitted and rested on beds of tiny white flowers. In his mind’s eye, he could already picture Belinda draped in it...and nothing else.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” But he wanted to. See her, touch her, believe for a second that those fairy wings were real.

Lucy smiled proudly. “No one has. My mother made it thirty years ago.”

Lucas’s heart sank and the vision faded. “I’m guessing you wouldn’t part with it.”

“Not for anything less than fifteen hundred dollars.”

“Fif—what?”

“That’s handmade vintage work there, mister. Even if I made it myself, I couldn’t charge less than twelve. Normally, it’s twenty-five, but you look like you might need it more than my wall does.”

Fifteen hundred dollars for a piece of fabric? It was insane. It was utterly stupid. Even Kyle would tell him to find something else.

Lucas closed his eyes. “Pack it. Quick.”

He didn’t open them again until it was time to sign. He left the Lacery with the box under his arm, his

wallet bleeding in his back pocket and strangely enough, a grin on his face. She would like *this*. This would at least get her talking to him again. That alone was worth all the money he owned.

Yes, this would definitely work.

"I hate that man," Belinda said to herself over coffee. She sat at the table in her workshop, still wearing her heavy apron, glaring at the white box and bow.

Usually, Lucas's best feature was he made up his mind and nothing could change it. She could rely on that. Once she talked him into something, it got done. So why wasn't he leaving her alone? What happened to being *done* with her? What the hell could have changed his mind in less than one day? Now, the fourth day since their little morning *tête-à-tête*, and she was stuck with yet another attempted apology.

She glared harder at the box. In her hand was the blowtorch, all set to play a little game of catch. In her heart, though, was an unhealthy dose of curiosity.

The flowers had been surprising. She'd loved them. She'd even run one over her lips before she toasted it and took it back to him. The dog damn near got her, with his whole little body wriggling while he tried to sit in one place. She'd relented enough for a few face licks and to feed him, but that was it.

For all his intelligence, Lucas was probably more oblivious than the average man. He really thought she'd be pleased that he knew her so well. As if she'd consider it a good thing.

He'd known she'd love those roses. Most of the guys she'd met and dated over the years had gotten her something appropriate, black fallen petals or dried carnations. Things that matched her blasé take on life and death. Not a single one of them would have thought of real flowers or a live puppy. They'd completely missed the mark on who she was and that generally kept the relationship going a little while longer.

Not Lucas, the moron. He had to go and be thoughtful. Find her something alive, beautiful and loving. Or something feminine and unique. Because he knew her. *Knew* her.

It was enough to make her kick something. She didn't like being obvious to anyone and he didn't seem to get that. Her own mother didn't understand her, complaining regularly that Belinda should settle down and have kids like her siblings had. There were now nearly enough Riggses to fill their own classroom. The next generation would probably fill a school.

Lucas had to prove how well he could see into her. He called her on every lie, whether he said anything or not. Just a flick of those deep blue eyes and she knew he'd seen through her. A quirk of his mouth and she knew he was biting back words.

As much as she hated it, that was why his rejection hurt so damn bad. If any other man ended a relationship, she shrugged it off. It wasn't as if the guy ever meant anything; he certainly didn't *know* anything. But when Lucas rejected her, he rejected who she really was. Every secret, protected thought.

Every raw inch of her, body and soul, past and present.

She fingered the clamp on the blowtorch. Any woman who claimed she wouldn't be hurt by that was a damn liar. The reasonable side of her—no doubt spurred on by the curious part—admitted she'd rejected him the same way for years and she'd had this coming. The least she could do was open the box.

Especially since it had the rather annoying tag on it reading: "Do not burn."

Setting the torch down, she unfolded her legs to sit up straight at the table. With a deep breath, she pulled the sash on the cream-colored bow. It slid with a whisper until the knot came loose and fell off the corners of the box. She pushed out the breath and rushed her fingers through lifting the lid.

It flipped back behind itself, gaping open, waiting for her to look inside its six-inch depths. Nothing crawled out. No poisonous gas. No jack-in-the-box of any kind. Which meant she'd have to look in. Twisting her lip, she put her hands on either side of the box, standing to look down carefully.

"Oh, shit."

Horried, she began to reach in, then looked at her hands and rushed to the sink a few feet away to wash them. It probably wouldn't help much, but she didn't want to put lotion on and ruin it with oil. Belinda rushed back to the table in a jangle of keys and tools, carefully reached in and lifted the impossible gift.

She'd never seen anything like it. It was a fairy wing. It had to be. It shone even in the faint shadowy light of the workshop. Belinda slid it over her arm to look at the breathtaking butterflies and flowers dotting its expanse. So many sizes and shapes, each one completely different from the others. The hem scalloped into the shape of wings where they'd hang on her back if she ever wore it.

The son of a bitch had sent her a handmade wedding veil.

What the *hell* did it mean?

Her hands trembling, she made herself fold the veil as carefully into the box as it was when she found it, looking for some kind of note. All she found was the faint stamp on the back of the lid in pink reading *Lucy's Lacery*. Evidently, Lucas saw no point in apologizing twice and the man wasn't about to either break his knees or his jaw by even writing the word "please".

So what was this? A proposal? Did he somehow think burned flowers and a peed-upon *Union-Tribune* on his doorstep translated into "I forgive you, you big, hulking idiot"?

She closed the box with a decisive, two-handed push, slid it back to the center of the table and sat on the chair with her knees curled up under her chin.

Options. She needed options. Her gaze found the blowtorch still on the table and she jumped up to take it to its hanging hook. People went to hell for destroying things like that, on purpose or accident. But she couldn't accept it, either. Keeping it meant she was agreeing to forgive him—*Not in this lifetime, buddy*—and possibly even marry him.

The urge to throw up swamped her.

Even if she were going to get married, it would never be to Lucas. By the end of the first month she'd revert to her mother's special brand of servitude: overworked, overcompensating, overplacating. God, just plain *over*. Worse, she'd probably like it.

Her mind played a movie she came up with years ago when her secret wants and desires threatened to overcome her sense. Lucas lying on a recliner, his beautiful body softened to fat that oozed over the edge of his pants. A couple of kids very close in age, playing, ignored, at his feet. A dog or three would be sleeping in front of a television that had seen better days. All the furniture in the cramped, dark place would be worn out, the walls cracked and faded, and she would be pregnant, coming out of the kitchen with a cheery smile on her obviously tired face, chiming about dinner being ready while absolutely no one noticed. Lucas would ask for a beer, tell her he wanted to watch the game. He'd eat in his chair and the kids would whine about wanting ice cream for dinner. Then the dogs would start to howl while she tried to keep a happy, perfect, Betty-Crocker grin on her face.

The vision was unfair to Lucas, she knew. He never drank much, he still ran daily—she had a few embarrassing secrets from high school about watching him from the shadows like a stalker—and he'd never owned a dog until she dumped li'l Sparky back on his porch. The kids were cute, her only concession to him, she supposed, but it was a sharp reminder what happened to the women in her family when they married. All of them ended up like her mother.

It would only be a matter of time before she did the same. Lucas had too much power in their relationship as it was. One of his frowns could make her doubt herself for weeks. One of his almost-smiles could give her a high like nothing else. And, all right, her mother may have been onto something about passion being worth a little heartache. But not *years* of it.

It couldn't have been worth the screaming arguments that had Belinda's siblings huddling in her bed, shivering with fear that their father would turn his anger on them again. It couldn't be worth the nightmares still haunting her from the nights when he did. It would never be worth the dozens of scars on her body he'd inflicted.

No, this veil had to go back. It was beautiful, but it was terrifying. If Lucas hoped forgiveness meant marriage, then she'd never forgive him. Ever.

But she couldn't leave it on his stoop like she had the flowers. If someone stole this, she'd never forgive herself. She couldn't hand it to him, either. One look at him and she'd either kiss him or kill him. Which meant she'd need to go about this a bit more circuitously.

She looked up *Lucy's Lacery* and grabbed her phone. The voice that answered was a perky, happy chirp. She was probably a blonde, Belinda thought with a rabid sourness. Probably blonde and cute and just Lucas's type. She'd fit under his arm, smile all the time and make people think his grim bearing was adorable. They'd even sound good together. Lucas and Lucy Lonnigan, leaping, lacing and—

"Hello?" the woman asked again, louder.



“Oh, sorry.” Belinda shook herself. God, this was getting really out of hand. “I’m calling about a veil that was delivered this morning—”

“The Butterfly Dream? Oh, I’m so glad it arrived safely!”

“Yes, yes, it’s perfectly fine. It’s just—”

“You didn’t like it?” the woman asked, clearly shocked.

“What? No, no, it’s beautiful, I loved it. It’s just...I have to return it.” The stunned pause had Belinda chewing her lip. “Ma’am?”

There was a soft laugh. “I’m sorry, I probably heard you wrong. Did you say—”

“I need to return it.”

“Have you spoken to Mr. Lonnigan about this?”

Belinda’s ears twitched. “You’re on a name basis with him?”

“One remembers a man like that, Miss Riggs.”

“Sounds like you remember a lot,” Belinda grumbled.

The chuckle didn’t help her disposition. “Just out of curiosity, why would you want to return the veil?”

“Because it’s... I can’t accept it.”

“He seemed very adamant that you have it.”

“Lucas is always adamant. He doesn’t have any other modes.”

Another laugh. A knowing one. Belinda was getting a definite yen to rip this woman’s hair out. “I’m afraid I can’t take the veil back, miss.”

“If it’s about the money, you can refund it to Lucas.”

“Store policy is that all sales are final, but even if I could, I wouldn’t accept the veil back.”

“What? Why not?”

“That veil has hung in this store for thirty years, Miss Riggs. It was never intended to be sold. Yesterday, your Mr. Lonnigan came in and knew it was made for you. Who am I to argue?”

The goddamned owner, that’s who. “He *said* that? Made for *me*?”

“He didn’t have to.”

Belinda’s hopes—which she was pretty sure she’d never allowed to rise—plummeted.

“It was something on his face,” the lacery woman continued in a dreamy, over-romantic tone. “I get a lot of women in here: women in love, women in need and women who just want. I’ve never had a man in desperation.”

Lucas didn’t get desperate. If he did, it would not be a good sign. “I can’t keep this. He’ll take it as tantamount to an accepted marriage proposal.”

“Oh, I seriously doubt it,” the woman said dismissively.

Belinda pulled the phone from her ear to stare at it. *Was I just pooh-poohed?* “Why wouldn’t he?”

"I don't think he knew what it was."

Belinda frowned, turning to give the box the same disbelieving glance she'd leveled at the phone. It didn't take a master of the obvious to figure it out. "It's a veil."

"He seemed under the impression you might drape it somewhere. Like a curtain."

Belinda closed her eyes. Her grandmother's doilies. The lace curtains she'd inherited and didn't have the heart not to use. The observant schmuck was paying too much attention.

"I truly believe he bought it for you, but not as a message. I got the sense he knew you would cherish it, which is the only reason I allowed him to buy it. Aside from pity, of course."

Belinda choked. "Pity?" On *Lucas*?

"Well, the poor man seemed to have been all over the place looking for just the right thing. I'm sure if he didn't find something soon, he was going to burst." Lucy Lacery coughed. "Unpleasantly."

For the first time in the conversation, Belinda laughed. Lucas in a state. It'd been a long time since she'd seen that. Probably not since he broke her arm when they first met. "I still can't accept this, it's too much. I can't accept anything from him."

"It was a gift from his heart, Miss Riggs."

Belinda's smile fell away. She knew it was. So were the roses. Even the loopy puppy. But she didn't want gifts from Lucas's heart. She didn't want anything. Still, she couldn't destroy the veil, either.

They both waited in silence, each hoping the other would give in. Belinda's gaze fell on the scrap pile she was going to be cleaning up as soon as this mess was over with, the shards and shavings already swept into a little pyramid.

"You wouldn't happen to have any scraps of your work, would you, Lucy?" she asked, gripping the phone tightly, an idea being born that might allow them all to get what they needed. "Pieces that might be similar to what this veil is made out of."

"Of course I do, but—"

Belinda sent a glance to the clock above the bay door. Assuming Lucy closed at five, she'd have an hour to get to the store. Plenty of time. "How about you let me know exactly where you are. I'd like to buy them off you."

Lucy sighed. She had to have a clue what this meant. She probably didn't like it. But she relented when Belinda said it was either the scraps...or the real thing.

This would make Lucas go away.

It had to.

## Chapter Five

Having a dog wasn't so bad. He'd never particularly wanted one but there was something to be said for happy company. Kind of like Kyle, with less yapping. Carrying around stinky plastic bags tied to your pack was a little sickening, but only until the next receptacle came along. The pup was even starting to run in a straight line instead of his back end overtaking the front until the poor thing had to execute some sort of whole body roll to get facing the right way again. Plus it was hard to be mad when for the first time ever, someone was kissing him awake. It wasn't Belinda, but at least it was genuine.

Gross, but genuine.

It was even kind of nice to be running outside again. The cold, moist air was more invigorating than temperature control and the pup made a great alarm clock. The only problem was that Lucas did his thinking while he ran. Without a problem in front of him to specifically concentrate on, he had only one other thing to think about.

Belinda, naked in her bed, glaring at him, angry enough to spear him with something dull. Belinda wearing her work overalls and a tank top with goggles and a grin. Belinda, nervous as a cat while they applied for her business loan, her fingers damn near crushing his under the lip of the desk. Belinda, when he'd come back from his first year at MIT, defiantly daring him to make some sort of comment about her shorn black hair or her morose clothes. All the way back to Belinda in her red prom dress, sitting on that swing in the twilight.

They never saw their prom party room, had no idea what the decorations were or who was there, but it was still the most memorable night of his life. Kyle went, of course. Lucas only put on his tux for his mother's sake. He'd never asked anyone to go. He'd claimed he was meeting his date and went walking down the street. Essentially, that's what eventually happened, but it wasn't what he'd planned. Even in his wildest fantasies, he could never have even *hoped* for what happened.

He'd found Belinda at the park completely on accident, sitting in the swing, looking lost. All her beautiful blonde hair swept back from her face, tied up in a chignon that would have made his mother sigh. She'd been wearing red satin, a strapless gown with black accents and a simple black ribbon choker. She'd been so surprised to be caught there...by him...crying.

"My mom made the dress." She'd plucked at her skirt when he sat in the swing next to her. From their vantage point, it was easy to see the city lights starting to flicker on, see limos arriving around the neighborhood. "I tried to tell her not to, but she said every girl deserved to go to her prom. She put a lot of

work into it.”

Work Amanda Riggs was probably too tired and busy for, but she’d found time anyway. Lucas hadn’t said anything, just held out the corsage his mother had handed him before he left.

At the time, he didn’t have a clue what he was going to do with it and didn’t care what it was. But that moment, when Belinda’s eyes looked from his face to the flower box and back again, he knew he’d never be able to thank his mother enough. The white orchid with purple and burgundy and yellow dripping out of its center was cradled by baby’s breath and wide green leaves. It was probably the size of his hand and way too big for someone as slight as her, but she wanted it. She was *moved* by that flower.

She accepted the box and let him pin it on her, the first time he’d touched her skin. The first time he made her gasp with just a graze of his fingers. The first taste of what would become an addiction.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew why she had no date for prom. She’d waited for Kyle to ask her. It was the reason Lucas hadn’t asked her himself. By that time, he’d come to grips with the fact that he “liked her”—a lame kid phrase to explain what couldn’t be handled—and wasn’t prepared to be rejected by her. Their odd, tense friendship was enough for him. Until he’d touched her.

They’d stayed on the swings for a while, watching the sun set, quiet until the cars stopped driving past the small park. It was easy to be quiet together then. They were accustomed to it. Belinda was a lot for silence back then. She never talked about what went on in her home or why her parents were so rarely there. She especially wouldn’t talk about the yelling he heard late at night. But she let him see her drawings. Let him see her projects from her industrial design classes. Even Kyle didn’t get to see those.

She did finally start talking, asking him what he’d tell his inquisitive mother about his night. They’d come up with stories to tell about what they ate and music they heard. Her stories of what happened to her less-than-favorite popular kids could still make him laugh. That was when they’d decided to head to the lake deeper in the park to skip rocks. He’d taken her hand to help her walk in the heels she was unused to. He didn’t let go when they reached the lake, though. Instead he’d used that grip to pull her close and dance.

To this day, he didn’t understand the compulsion. There was no music, no thought. She just looked beautiful, her hand in his... It seemed the natural thing to do. The same way it was natural for her palm to slide between his jacket and dress shirt to hold his side and sigh when she laid her head on his shoulder. He was lost in her scent and the glow of her hair and the sound of crickets around the lake. It was just as natural for him to brush his lips against her neck. Once, twice, then a third, firmer time when she tightened her hold on him.

No one ever asked for anything. In fact, nowhere in his memory did anyone say anything at all. Those first kisses simply continued, up her neck to her jaw, when she dipped her head and found his lips with her own petal-soft ones. The kisses never stopped. Not when her tongue reached out to touch his. Not when somehow, sometime later, he lay her down on the grass near the water’s edge and stretched out above her. Their hands touched each other, pulling clothing free, unwrapping layers to the skin beneath.

Her breasts were so sensitive when he pulled the satin down over them, she moaned. He hadn't been able to touch them enough or taste them enough. Her fingers had speared into his hair while he sucked them, her legs tight around his waist, her skirt rucked up around her hips. She'd cried out and shuddered against his mouth, gasping through her first shocking orgasm. That was when there was absolutely no going back. She'd needed, and so had he.

It wasn't his proudest moment, his inability to be gentle when he took her, but she'd taken him just as much that first time. He slid into her, startled by the hot slickness, shattered by the wet pressure all along his length. Her long legs wound around him, pushing him deeper, past the barrier of her virginity with neither preparation nor tenderness. He'd groaned and so had she. He didn't know if it made him a bastard that it never occurred to him to stop.

He pulled back, only to surge in again. And again. And again.

When she pushed her hips back against him, he grew wild. He slid his arms under her shoulders to hold her tighter, to thrust harder. She answered by widening her legs and arching her back until her breasts were being chafed by his stiff tuxedo shirt pleats. He'd stared down at her curved neck, watching her tiny black ribbon bow tickle her throat with each surge. And when she cried out, he knew he'd given her pleasure. He'd given it and taken it, burned with it. Been branded by it.

To anyone else, the idea of sex on the ground in a park was probably crude and disrespectful. To him...to him there was nothing more meaningful.

Which was probably why he'd ruined it.

Lucas rounded the corner to his street now, whistling to the dog, whose tongue was lolling around happily. He frowned to himself, thinking back as he pulled the keys to the building from his pocket. Belinda had probably thought he'd say something wonderful or kind afterward, but waking out of the spell, the first thing he'd said was the worst thing he could have uttered: "You saved yourself for Kyle, didn't you?"

Sometimes, he thought back and pictured himself saying about anything else. "Come with me to Massachusetts" or "I love you" might have been wise. No, his inherent jealousy of her choosing Kyle over him for years reared its ugly head and made him question the gift he'd been given.

She'd flinched like she'd been slapped. Then her dark eyes turned hard, angry. "In *my* mind," she'd said, making sure every word would stab and rip him, her voice steady and clear. "It *was* Kyle."

She rolled away, adjusting her clothes back in place. She refused to look at him, refused to acknowledge his attempts at apology. He didn't blame her. His attempts then were no better than they were now. In fact, they were probably worse.

"What if you're pregnant?" he'd asked, finally getting her attention.

"Then I'll get rid of it," she'd replied, cold as a snake. That was the only thing he'd ever disliked about her. No one said things they should regret like Belinda did. She went right for a guy's balls and

smiled while she did it. “Go away, College Boy. Go to your smart school and your perfect, brilliant coeds. You got what you wanted.”

“Are you going to tell me if you are?” he’d asked, ignoring her venom.

But he hadn’t been able to ignore it all. She’d saved one spiteful word for last. “No.”

That word haunted him for years. Hell, it haunted him now. Made him break out in a sweat. Made him want to hate her as much as he loved her. But he never asked and she never said. Not when he came back from school. Not when Kyle got them reluctantly speaking again. Never, not once in twelve years had he ever asked. And she never told.

He arrived on his doorstep and found a crushed white box.

He stopped dead, but the pup sniffed and whined at it, shuffling it with his paw.

Anger flickered in Lucas’s mind. It felt like fire, a small flame that licked at the back of his brain. Crouching slowly, he lifted the lid and found what he expected. Pieces of lace...shredded. Sliced. Threads everywhere. So was the stain of coffee...all over the pieces. That’s when the flame turned into a conflagration.

His fists tightened around the leash. His jaw began to ache from pressure. His blood burned like acid as it raced past his temples.

He’d had it. Enough. Absolutely enough.

No more begging. No more asking permission. No more apologizing.

The pup started to whine again.

“Come on, dog.” Lucas tugged the leash and started down the stairs again. The dog didn’t want to come. He probably thought his master was in the mood to kill someone.

He was right.

Only decent people feel guilty, Belinda told herself while she tried to drown in her shower. Face to the hard, hot spray, she hoped the stinging impact would wash the sense of guilt away. The last thing anyone had called her for the past decade was *decent*. She thrived on being rude, heartless and flat-out bitchy when the occasion called for it. The tugs of conscience were harder to feel that way. Usually. But now, because of a box of scraps, the tugs of guilt were feeling more like whips.

*It’s for his own good.*

He’d move on. Find someone who would love him like he deserved. Love him like he needed. Someone at least *slightly* less wrecked than herself.

But being right and being guilt-free were apparently not mutually exclusive.

Angry, she turned off the water...and heard so loud a clank Michigan could have landed outside. She frowned at the handle, but then there was another crunching clank. Rising on her toes, she tried to look out

the small window at the top of the stall, but could only see a piece of metal flying. What the hell was going on out there?

Then she heard the bark.

Eyes wide, she lowered herself from the window. Lucas. In her yard. While she was naked.

That sprang her into action more than anything, despite the fact that he was hucking around heavy metal like it was a discus tournament. She threw back the curtain, grabbing the towel waiting there on her way out. Not wanting to take any more time than necessary, she dried off with only a ragged pat-down. She was too busy trying to rustle up her temper to acknowledge her terror at being cornered. He had no right to be there uninvited. He had no right coming when he knew she didn't want him there. He simply had no rights at all.

She stomped into a pair of coveralls, yanked on a worn pink tank top that had seen enough bleach to make it good for summer work and wrapped a bandana over her wet hair to keep it out of her face. By the time she had her work boots secure, she was fantasizing about introducing him to the steel toe. He probably didn't hear her rumbling down the steps, but he damn sure heard her when she exited the bay doors to the open yard beyond with her hands on her hips and the fire of hell in her lungs.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?"

"You don't want to be pushing my buttons right now, Belle," he answered in typical growl mode, not bothering to look at her.

She scoffed, watching him pick up an abandoned sink from the back of the ancient Mazda flatbed she used for junking and take it to a pile of other midsized items. He was in cut-off gray sweat shorts and tennis shoes. His T-shirt was off, one end tucked into his back waistband, leaving all that warm honey skin open to her viewing pleasure. Mad or not, it *was* a pleasure to look at him, especially since he was already slick.

"You're in *my* yard, Lonnigan. I can push any button I damn well please."

He ignored her. He actually ignored her. A few pieces of pipe got thrown into the small pipe pile, making the puppy yelp as he hopped to avoid things being lobbed all around. He wasn't in any danger, but she could tell by his darting eyes and tucked tail, *he* didn't know that.

Against her better judgment, she bit her inwardly cupped lower lip and whistled. "Over here, Sparky, before your daddy kills you."

The pup was grateful, running awkwardly on huge paws, but if the suddenly flying wheel rims were any indication, Lucas wasn't.

"I didn't ask you to do this." Not that she ever did. She had a deal with the local junker to take a truckload of sortables off his hands each month. Lucas always showed up on sort day to load up her truck at the junkyard and unload it in her metal yard. It was just one other thing she'd have to learn to do without him. She hadn't had the energy to do it since their "date". Hard to believe it happened less than a week ago.

She circled the truck, putting her hand on the bed wall while he reached in for another sink. He

dragged it toward himself, every muscle in his arms and torso flexing with the effort and all but knocking the wind out of her.

Huffing, she grabbed the edge of the sink and tugged it her way. “Stop. I don’t want you to do this.”

“This isn’t about you,” he bit out. He wouldn’t even look at her, but his leather gloves made a loud noise as he tightened his grip.

“Like hell it isn’t.”

“What I mean is that I don’t *care* what you want, Belle.” He yanked the sink out of her grasp, hefted it onto his shoulder and walked away with it.

She stayed there, her mouth open in shock while he crossed to her piles and dumped it unceremoniously next to the last one. He walked back, his eyes narrow in the morning sunlight but flaring with brilliant color anyway. Rage made him dangerous. She could sense the ripple of power under his control, feel the energy crackling through him. Her response to it felt elemental, like a magnet being drawn to a far more powerful source. She held the truck wall tighter to keep from going to him, despite the fact that he wasn’t even looking at her to beckon her. In fact, he was looking everywhere but at her. Which only angered her more.

“Lucas!” She felt his attention shift to her even if his eyes didn’t. “What part of *go away* is hard for you to understand?”

He flexed his hands inside the work gloves. Open once. Close once. Open again. Then they closed into a knot of flesh and leather. She felt his gaze hit her like a fist, instantly making her regret pushing.

She took a step back. Not in fear of him, but his intensity. Every emotion seemed to flow like molten energy in his eyes. Pain. Desire. Anger. Need. Hot, hungry need. She took another step as he came towards her.

“What’s the matter, Belle? You look worried.”

Because she *was*. “I don’t want you here.”

“Why?” She must look defensive, too, if his pleased perusal meant anything.

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you want me here?” With each word he came closer and she retreated further to the warehouse. The dog danced around her feet, looking for a place to stay, probably wondering if this was a game. “You never had a problem with me here before.”

“I have a problem now.” *Yeah, brilliant response, dumbass.*

“Why?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.” *Run for friggin’ Congress, Belinda. Geez.*

“Oh, yes, you do. You never have, but you should.”

His autocratic remark finally cemented her feet in place. Anger, wonderful, spine-stiffening anger, flooded her. He kept advancing, stopping only when their chests touched with each heaving breath they



took. Not that she understood why either of them was breathing so hard. They were only talking...right?

She poked her finger against his chest. "All I *should* have to do is tell you to go, Lucas. That's enough for everyone else." Well, it would be, if anyone else were allowed on her property.

"You haven't told me to go."

She thought over their conversation, momentarily befuddled. Hadn't she told him to leave? She couldn't remember. "I'm telling you now."

"Go ahead."

Maybe it was the tremble in her body, having him so close. Or just the power of his gaze drilling into her, but she couldn't form the words. Any words at all.

He nodded slowly, understanding—damn him—and their breathing seemed to slow down. She got lost in his gaze, in the fiery touch of his now bare thumb on her jaw.

"No matter what you do or how you hurt me, you can't make what's between us go away. You can't make *me* disappear, Belinda. I'm not going anywhere."

Her body clenched, caught between wanting to defy and wanting to hide. "You were the one who wanted out, Lucas. I'm just holding you to it."

"I was wrong."

That required blinking. Lucas was never wrong. He didn't know how to be wrong. She was about to mention that, but his mouth descended on hers. His arm snaked around her at the same time, yanking her against him while his other hand cupped the back of her head.

She didn't want to use the word *helpless*. It didn't apply. But she did feel powerless—against him, against her own needs—when her hands took hold of his hot shoulders, sliding slightly against the sweat there while his tongue plundered her mouth with devastating accuracy. He didn't stop the battle until she whimpered, until she was clinging and tears seeped beneath her tightly closed lashes. Then he was gentle, soothing with caresses of his lips...and then he was gone.

As quickly as the kiss came, it was over. She was released and he looked grimmer than before, arms outstretched wide. To keep himself from touching her?

"This isn't over," he said, a dark promise that locked around her like a vise.

She touched her mouth, still wet, still possessed by him. Every inch of her felt possessed, owned, by his proprietary gaze.

"Now get inside and lock the door before I change my mind and take you right here in the dirt."

So Belinda did what any woman did when her knees were melted, her heart was confused and the man in front of her was the last man she could afford to love.

She ran.

It was official. He was never listening to his brother again.

Lucas finished sorting the junk truck, but it wasn't anger he had to work off anymore. He'd gone there to confront her. To pound on her door and yell at her until she listened to him. By the time he reached her yard, he was pretty sure he'd throttle her if they got into it, so he'd opted for emptying the truck.

He hadn't expected to touch her. To taste her. He simply hadn't realized he'd been screwing up for twelve years straight. But he could see it now.

That long-ago prom night he'd experienced his fantasy of touching her not because he'd won his way into her good graces. Belinda wasn't going to bend enough to come to him because he said pretty please with sugar on top. The only times he'd ever breached her defenses were when he simply led and did. He took kisses. They weren't given. He took dances. They weren't offered. He took her to bed, but she never once asked him to.

Maybe, if he wanted a chance with her, he had to simply take that, too.

When the truck was clear, the sun was high and hours had passed. The pup had been loping all over the place, finding interesting smells, barking at insects and Belinda's larger pieces of art, like the wrought-iron trellis she'd been creating for a new bridal display at some church, the multi-armed...*something* she made when she first got this place. It was her first attempt at a full-sized fountain, combining modern art and waterworks. Now she was adding glass inlays to the metal-works, creating pieces that captured even his dubious imagination.

"Here." She was there nearly the second he lifted the truck bed door. As if she'd been watching for when he finished. He kept his lips from smiling, accepting the bottle of water she thrust at him.

"Thanks," he said to her back as she turned away.

"I don't want your thanks. I want you to go," she grumbled over her shoulder. He hid his grin behind the water bottle and sank to the nearest spot in the shade to sit on that had a good view of her. She'd kick him, but he did enjoy watching her walk in those baggy overalls. It was so much more fun guessing where her sleek body was behind the fabric than himself and every male for a hundred yards being able to count the folds in her skin because her pants were so tight.

"And take your damn dog with you," she added, probably well aware he was looking.

He sighed. "If he's *my* damn dog, why did *you* name him?"

She spun around, frowning. "I never—"

"Sparky!" he snapped, to prove it. The dog lifted his head and came bounding. Lucas raised an eyebrow at her.

"Shithead!" she called and the dog immediately turned her way. She raised her eyebrow right back, making him rise from his seat on the overturned bucket to watch the dog lick happily at her outstretched arm. Her mouth twisted. "Hey, look, it works on both of you."

He couldn't stop the smile that time. No one would ever call her charming, but damn she could get

him when she wanted to.

She smiled back, just as honestly. She avoided true smiles almost as much as he did, but for very different reasons. You could see the sweetness of her when she smiled like that. Light glowed out of her. He figured she hated that.

He took a gulp of the water and replaced the cap. “Be at Vino’s at seven. We need to talk.”

There went her smile. It was all right. There would be more.

“There’s nothing to say, Lucas. It’s over.”

“Then you can tell me that at Vino’s.”

“I’m telling you *now*.”

He snapped to Sparky, who trotted over obediently and waited for Lucas to pick up the leash.

“Lucas!”

He decided he liked the sound of outrage in her voice and kept walking. “Seven. Meet me there.”

Hours later, he sat in the booth and wondered if the dare would pay off. It might not. Belinda was brilliant when it came to being stubborn. But he had a feeling this would work. She’d be late, just to prove she *chose* to come, and she’d be sullen, but she’d come.

Near eight o’clock, his confidence was starting to wane. Vino was tossing him curious looks—no problem being recognized this time—and the bottom of his beer glass was starting to shine up at him.

Then she came in.

She wasn’t the black leather sexpot this time. Skintight jeans hugged her hips all the way down her legs ’til they flared over her chunky, ankle-high work boots. She had on a black tank top with prerequisite blinding white skull and crossbones that read, “Screw you” rather pleasantly across her breasts. Her hair had extra shellac this time, looking shiny enough to pierce metal. She dropped into the booth like a bag of dumped athletic equipment. He decided her choice to stomp on his feet and nearly remove his kneecap with a boot heel was purely accidental.

“It’s over.” Subtle, she wasn’t.

He grinned, which surprisingly made her pale. “Want a drink?”

“I’m impossible to get drunk, Lucas. You won’t get back in these pants that way.”

“I’m surprised *you* got into those pants.” He gestured to Vino, who nodded and had another beer sent their way.

Belinda glared at him through deeply underlined mascara. But she sipped the beer anyway. “What’s this about?”

He shrugged. “I wanted to go out with you.”

“This isn’t a date.”

“Sure, it is. I asked. You came.”

Her impatience narrowed her eyes to slits. “You didn’t ask. You demanded.”

As if that mattered. “You still came.”

“Because if I didn’t, you’d be at my place every day driving me crazy!”

“No.” He smiled, already picturing her laid out on her fluffy white duvet, pale thighs spread while he licked and sucked every millimeter of her beautiful pussy until she arched against his face, panting his name in breathy syllables. “That’s my plan for *after* the date.”

She went back to slumping, sliding into the seat and putting her boot on the triangle of seat between his legs. “I hate you.”

“Everyone says that.” Not everyone tried to play darts on his balls, but she could at least be original with her insults.

“Lucas, this is not a date. It was a dare.”

Logic never was her friend. “Which you failed. Which means I win. Which makes *this* a date.”

“There weren’t any specifications. And you didn’t win because I’m here.”

“You were late.” He popped a pretzel in his mouth. “I win.”

“You never could win a dare without cheating.” She blew out a frustrated breath, essentially admitting he was right.

It wasn’t true concession, but he could be gracious. “You want a redo? Name your stakes.”

She laughed, but it wasn’t pleasant. Sort of a bleat. “Please, I could beat you at anything blindfolded, with my hands tied behind my back.”

That could be interesting. Especially given her level of flexibility. “I’m willing to be kinky if you are.”

Her lip rose in a feral, feminine snarl. “You wish.”

“Every night.” He threw back the rest of his beer in salute. “But that doesn’t change the conversation. Are you up to a little double-dog daring, Belinda? Winner take all?”

She leaned into the table, hackles up. “You’re *daring* me to go out with you?”

“I’m daring you to take a challenge,” he corrected her. “First one to turn down a challenge or fail it loses.”

It sounded simple, but she knew him well enough to look for the trap. He could see her mind working, her gaze inspecting him for duplicity. He opened his palms to show her his empty sleeves.

“If I do this and I win,” she said finally, “you have to leave me alone, Lucas. I mean it. No kissing, no dating, no future and no sex. Ever.”

The teasing he so rarely got to partake in disappeared. She was serious. He weighed her proposal. She was no pushover in any respect. Plus she was mean. That had to be taken into account.

“If I win?” he asked.

She shrugged, back to being blasé, sinking against the booth cushions. “You won’t.”

Normally a comment like that would have him up in arms. But this was different. Her confidence was

finally writing a check he couldn't wait to cash. "Fine, if I win...we get married."

Her start was barely noticeable. Thankfully, he was well trained in watching her every response. "You don't want to marry me, Lonnigan. I'm not your type."

"What type is that?" This should be rich.

Her sneer was back. "The kind you take home to Mommy."

"I've taken you home plenty of times. My mother loves you." He grabbed another handful of pretzel snacks. The more comfortable he seemed, the more agitated she got. Who would have guessed? She loved him best as a jackass.

"Your mother loves *you*. That's no account for taste." Her derision only made him grin. "Stop smiling, you know what I mean."

How could he? *She* didn't even know what she meant half the time. "Not really, no."

"I'm no happy domestic. I'm not my mother. I wouldn't be washing your clothes and ironing them just the way you like them. I'm not the kind of girl you take to client dinners and I'm sure as hell no one's idea of Mary Poppins."

"Honey, if I wanted Mary Poppins, I'd marry a kindergarten teacher." He'd probably hang himself with his own belt to escape the boredom, too. "What I want, it seems, is a big pain in my ass. You fit the bill perfectly."

Her dark eyes narrowed into slits, her slightly bent nose fully out of joint now. "Fine. I win, you stay away. Forever. You win, you get me. Forever." She extended her hand out the same way she used to when they'd make equally stupid bets in their backyards. He cast a silent hope heavenward and slid his hand into place. She smiled, an evil, greedy grin that nearly had him wondering if this was the wrong tack to take. But by then, it was too late.

"I'm going to make you cry for your mommy, Lonnigan."

"And I plan to make you cry out for me. Again." He didn't let go of her, instead caressing the back of her palm with his fingers. She yanked her hand away.

"Vino," she yelled over the growing crowd. Her gaze never left Lucas's. "Bring me the big guns."

Famous last words.

The question was...who was going to live to regret them?

## Chapter Six

Belinda woke to a ratcheting, scraping noise and a fog of white, brain-splitting light. She closed her eyes and heard the horrible noise again.

After a moment, she realized the noise came from her lashes, brushing something on her face. She made the mistake of groaning and rolling over. Then crying out when she rolled a tender stomach onto her hand and her face onto...paper?

Sitting up faster than was wise, she grabbed at the crumpled sheet and yanked it off her face. First came the sting of realizing it had been taped there. Then came the agony of daylight's full impact on her moisture-deprived eyes. And finally, the blood-boiling anger caused by the two words written in thick black ink: *I WIN*.

"I *hate* that man!" she growled, balling up the paper and hurling it across the room. It didn't help anything. It certainly didn't stop a familiar stinging ache on her belly.

She didn't want to look down. She didn't want to admit she may have done something incredibly stupid, but she already knew she did. Peering at her belly, she could see the white gauze patch and feel the sharp sting. Groaning, she peeled the gauze away and found two dime-sized, candy-red hearts and white ribbon across them with—of course—the name "Lucas" in cute, girly letters. It was puffy, but it was there.

The bastard had branded her.

If she wasn't sure her head would explode, she'd scream.

How had this happened? One minute they were downing shots and for some reason, Lucas was keeping up. She'd made it a point to be able to hold her liquor so she wouldn't find herself in a situation where anyone could take advantage of her. Proving to herself she could best her father if she had to helped her achieve the goal. Her tolerance must be slipping if Lucas could outdo her.

She'd only gotten wasted one time before, when she heard Lucas was seeing someone "important" while in Massachusetts. His mother later expressed disappointment that she'd been wrong, but by then, Belinda had a butterfly on her hoo-ha. Now, thanks to him again, she had a permanent valentine on her stomach. For the life of her, she couldn't remember what happened after he'd started laughing with her about something one of them had said while in the bar. She'd felt the yank of desire at the glint of mischief in his eyes, the deep rumble of his laughter, his damn sexy smile.

Then it got a little hazy...

Someone had dared something. Him. No more smoking, he'd said. She remembered because she'd

been so tempted to flick the last lit cigarette at him. Then there was something about kneeling in front of him... Where the hell did they *go*? When did they leave Vino's in the first place? And, God help her, what did they do when they left?

She breathed a sigh of relief after checking that her underwear was still in place. So *why* did she still have a memory of lifting her shirt and flashing him?

She groaned, letting herself melt back into her bed.

Just when she was starting to relax and the air pressure didn't feel as painful as before, the phone rang.

She grabbed it off her bed stand as much to silence it as to issue death threats. "When I get my hands on you, Lucas—"

"It's not Lucas, Belinda. This is Kyle."

As if he was a better alternative. She plunked the phone back on the cradle. It rang again almost instantly. She grabbed a pillow, but it didn't do any good. It kept ringing.

She knew Kyle. It would keep ringing. Lucas, at least, got frustrated and quit from time to time to think up new approach strategies. Not Kyle. He only seemed to get more cheerful as he annoyed you out of your ever-lovin' mind.

She snapped up the phone and dragged it under her pillow with a hissed, "What?"

"I need your help."

*No, you need a psychiatrist.* "Why would I help *you*?"

"Because you love me?" She could practically hear his dimple blinking like a neon sign for masculine adorability.

She hung up. When it rang again, she didn't bother with hellos.

"Because I fell in love over the weekend and I screwed it up big?"

She waited for the feeling of being utterly crushed to hit. The disappointment and torment of his careless newsflash should be at least twice as crippling as hearing that Lucas had been seeing someone all those years ago. But all her heart came up with was a disinterested *So*?

She pushed the pillow off her face. This was so not good.

"Is that a fact or a question?" she made herself ask. It was easier than dealing with any questions she should be asking herself.

"No, I definitely screwed it up big. Is that enough to get you to talk to me?"

Poor Kyle. He probably thought she was mad at him because of the Lucas debacle. If she weren't hung over, she probably would be. But the second she saw Lucas outside Vino's door, she'd taken over responsibility for what happened if she talked to him. Still, Kyle didn't need to know that.

"You screwing up isn't new. You thinking you're in love—"

"What is it with you and Lucas? You both act like I don't know my own mind."

She almost smiled, but she knew how much it would hurt. “I’m guessing it’s because neither of us knew the two of you had been introduced.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny. I know what I feel, Belinda. But I’m not getting through to *her*. I need help.”

“What do you mean not getting through? When did you see her last?”

“Last night,” he mumbled, sounding appropriately guilty.

“This is the hussy you threw over your best friend to go out with, right? Or did you fall in love with some other unfortunate while I was sleeping?” Oddly, she didn’t feel any bitterness.

“Lucas said you weren’t going to be happy with me about that.”

Lucas. Her lazy mind tried to whirr. “He knows about this? That you feel this way?” she asked, a deep, ugly suspicion starting to take root.

“Sure. Why do you think he’s so mad at me?”

Of course. *That* was why Lucas had come crawling back. The idiot. The absolute jackass. She could practically hear the litany that must be rolling around in his empty head: *Kyle found someone else. I must go and comfort Belinda. Not because I want her for myself, but because it’s my job to pick up the pieces when she falls apart.* Oh, she could just kick him.

It wasn’t that she wanted him to want her, but the moron could at least want her for the right reasons.

“I finally got her to talk to me, but she won’t take me seriously,” Kyle continued mournfully.

“Understandable.” She never took Kyle seriously either.

“I need help. I’m going crazy over here.”

It was a deliberate ploy to get her pity. It failed, but it did rouse her curiosity. Kyle unable to charm a woman was sort of like a leprechaun unable to find his pot of gold. It might be worth a look. And if she played her cards right, they could go look in on Lucas as well. With any luck he had a tattoo on his forehead.

If not, she was sure she could arrange for one.

“Come over in an hour. I have to clean up.”

And clean up good. She needed to make every inch of herself into a living, breathing tease. Hangover or not, when Lucas saw her again, she was going to look good enough to eat and way, *way* out of his league.

*How the hell do I get into these situations?*

Lucas scrubbed his eyes, standing on the sidewalk outside of his building, wishing he had an answer. Sure, he woke up with a hangover. He also woke up with a smile. He’d won. By the skin of his teeth and the death of who knew how many brain cells, but technically, he’d won the challenge. If he’d been given a few hours to recover, he probably would have done a few backflips over it.



But he wasn't allowed such a luxury.

Once again, it was all Kyle's fault. Jessica Saunders had banged his door halfway to splinters bright and early. Since she had a right to be mad at him, he'd let her take her piece of flesh. Lawyers, however, had distinctly different views of what constituted a pound and what equaled *flesh*.

"I have always advised you to read contracts before you sign them, Lucas." Jessica's prim tone reminded him of his mother as she tossed her briefcase into her car. Actually, a lot about Jessica reminded him of his mother. She was pretty in a cool, marble kind of way. Intelligent, well read, well spoken and economical in every way. She was a typical accountant's wet dream. "Even from me."

But Lucas hadn't read the contract any more than he'd found Jessica distracting. He'd wanted her to stop talking. He'd wanted her to go away. Usually she was a reasonable person. She couldn't entirely blame him because she made the phenomenal mistake of sleeping with Kyle. Why would she mix business with revenge?

But she did. And the woman had no mercy.

She'd set him up to take on a multi-business audit, a project he'd normally earn thousands from and he hadn't so much as batted an eye before signing. Even staring at the contract now, he couldn't believe she'd done it to him. "I can't do all this work for twenty-five dollars!"

"Yes, you can." Precisely like his mother.

As soon as he got a chance, he was going to rub the similarity into Kyle's subconscious. See him sleep with a smile after that.

"I have total faith in your skills. Bye, Lucas!" She waved like she was leaving some kind of birthday party instead of wrecking his financial future and disappeared into the driver's seat of her car, leaving his line of sight open to the street behind her. He wouldn't have cared, but something about the couple on the opposite sidewalk caught his eye.

It wasn't the familiarity of the dark-haired man smiling. No, he pinpointed the source of his interest as the woman in a plaid skirt that barely covered her ass, the scrap of fabric held down by suspenders running impossibly down between her legs. She laughed, her arm twined into the crook of the man's next to her, licking a fresh pretzel, carefree while his head ached and his abdomen burned because of her.

Knee-jerk jealousy kicked in.

Kyle and Belinda.

Belinda and Kyle.

His brother and his...his...

Words failed him. He couldn't believe it. Knowing how Lucas felt, knowing the deal they'd made, Kyle was still over there, laughing with her. Probably flirting with her. Moving in on her. And she was eating it up.

Lucas fisted his hands. He sucked in a breath, trying to rein in the urge to stomp over and rip his

brother's arms off to slap him with them. There had to be a good reason for them to be meeting practically on his doorstep where he'd be unlikely to miss them.

And there had *better* be a damn good reason for her skirt.

Jessica must have looked over her shoulder when he stopped arguing. Most likely, she came to the same jealous conclusion because she was out in a flash, her car door suddenly slamming hard enough that the glass should have shattered. Then she was stalking across the street like an avenging angel in court-appropriate gray. Lucas watched, dumbfounded, frozen in place. His mind kept rolling, trying to make decisions. Should he warn them Jessica was headed toward them? Should he stop her?

Statistically, Jessica had more weight to put into a punch should she and Belinda get into a catfight of some kind. But the mild-mannered lawyer had nothing on a hard-assed metal worker who could probably kick his own teeth in. With a groan, he followed after her.

Kyle and Belinda turned into the park, through the ivy-covered gates and past his ability to see. Then Jessica was inside and no matter how his belly complained at the unwelcome stretching, he began jogging to catch up.

What he really should have done was gone back home. It would have saved him the unwelcome sight of Belinda draped on Kyle's body like some sort of previously undiscovered moss. His belly had nothing on the constriction of his heart.

Close up, Belinda's outfit was even worse than he thought. The jagged edges of the Catholic schoolgirl skirt gave the red plaid a stronger sense of sinfulness. Inverted suspenders snaked between her legs like some kind of handle set. The ripped edge of her black tank top snagged a corner of a palm-sized bandage on her stomach, the only thing amusing in the little vignette. That and her knee-high patent leather boots with spikes running up the front. How she thought her outfit was complete without a skull and crossbones somewhere on her person, he didn't know. But her head on Kyle's shoulder while she curled her fingers possessively around his coat lapels definitely wasn't dragging any smiles out of him.

Kyle was doing some kind of stumbling, verbal backpedaling while Jessica called him names. Lucas knew the exact second Belinda realized he was there. Her dark eyes met his and she did the one thing that would cost him all the control he had left.

She hugged Kyle even tighter.

The next thing he knew, his hand felt like hell and Kyle was splayed out on the ground.

"You jackass!" Belinda cried, swinging her arm in an unfortunately familiar way.

For some reason, no matter how often he saw it coming, he never had the ability to duck the flat of her hand against his ear. She'd perfected cuffing while raising her wild siblings, but he still should have been able to duck it by now. Since he already had a splitting headache, the flash of white behind his eyes and the loud popping noise of his eardrum screaming its violation just short of knocked him over.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Belinda kept yelling while Lucas tried to hear over the ringing

sounding through his head. She was helpful in that aspect by being so goddamn loud. “What are you hitting him for? Kyle didn’t do anything to you.”

“Sure looked like it to me,” he mumbled. At least, he hoped he mumbled. The imbalance to his hearing disoriented him.

“Yeah, how?” Leave it to her to need specifics. She was there, wasn’t she?

“You two were wrapped around each other—”

“So? What business is it of yours?”

How dumb did she think he was? He looked up at her, covering his ear in the hopes it would stop jangling. “He knows about us, Belle.”

“The way you’ve been acting, everyone and their grandmother knows about us! At least now *I* finally know why there’s an us to be pissed off about. I can’t believe I let you do this to me. Again!”

The blow to his ear must have popped something in his brain. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your Lancelot complex. You think you have to save me from falling apart because Kyle chose someone else? I’m not a little girl anymore, Lucas. Believe me, I’m well versed in not being chosen. I can handle it.”

“Are you still drunk?” he asked, trying to make sense of her, but his confusion just seemed to make her angrier.

She jabbed his shoulder, looking like an enraged kitten picking a fight. “I know what this is all about. The presents. Your stupid dog. The dares. You’re going back on your plan to be *done with me* because you think I can’t handle being rejected.”

How could he not appreciate how beautiful she was when she wanted to kill him? But if he didn’t watch it, she was going to shove the spikes on her boots somewhere unpleasant.

“What’s going on between you and me is *not* about Kyle.” Maybe because of him, but it wasn’t about him.

“Sure, that’s what you always say. I’m just a dog toy for the two of you. You only want me because I wanted him.” The accusation stung. She couldn’t really believe that. He knew she didn’t.

“You’re the one with the belly candy.” He pointed to her massive Band-Aid, knowing exactly what was under it and so damn glad to be able to point it out whenever he wanted.

“You dared me,” she accused, adding a rare combination of swear names afterward.

Ignoring the pain in his ear, he crossed his arms and smiled when it was the last thing he wanted to do. Talk about convenient. For *her*. She didn’t remember. He couldn’t *buy* a break, could he? “You sure?”

She paled. “I wouldn’t do this to myself on my own.”

“Oh, but you did. When we hit the parlor. You passed out before we ever got to your next dare. So, I won, fair and square. I was thinking something in September, when it cools down a little, if that’s good for you.”

“What are you babbling about now?” Not that she seemed to care. She was looking inward, wildly searching her memory if her distant but rapidly moving eyes were any indication.

*Keep looking, Belle... You'll remember. How excited and proud you were of it. Right up until you passed out...*

“The wedding.” Would that jog her whisky-addled brain?

Her eyes stilled, locked on him with shock and fire. Nope, no jogging from that. At least, not the part he wanted jogged. Now she was going to hit him again. He could already see it, and he had a feeling the boxed ear was going to be a love bite, comparatively.

“We are not getting married, Lucas. Ever.” How she managed to speak with no blood in her face and her whole person trembling with rage was something he'd leave to science to figure out.

“So, October then?”

He almost felt bad for her. She looked lost. Probably confused as to whether she should hate him or kick him. “You're impossible!”

“You think Kyle isn't?” He pointed to the pile of man on the ground, just sitting up, no doubt trying to figure out where he was. Hopefully *who* he was. Jessica was crouched next to him, seemed to be telling him something. Or maybe just telling him where to go. Kyle blinked at them, his eyes just this side of focused.

“Normally,” Lucas added, uncomfortable with the guilt nipping at him with every throb of his hand.

“I was *trying* to help him with his girlfriend over there until you came over here like some wild rampaging caveman and ruined it.”

“I am *not* his girlfriend,” Jessica corrected, making them both turn to look at her. Her pale cheeks were full of color and her eyes flashed with irritation.

*Great, more guilt.* Lucas kissed away any chance of getting out of the contract now.

“I don't know what kind of freak show is going on here.” Jessica included all of them in a roving look of disgust. “But I've had enough. I'm going.”

“Jessica, wait!” Kyle tried getting up, but he spent too much time wobbling to catch up to her.

“I'm not dating him!” Belinda suddenly yelled, catching Jessica mid-escape. Kyle, too. And just about everyone within a fifty-foot radius. Unfortunately, there were more people in that distance than Lucas wanted to count. “He wouldn't want me, even if I were. The only woman he wants to be with is you.”

Belinda briefly met Lucas's gaze, hurt welling in the depths of her eyes before she looked away. Damn it, why did she think Kyle's stupidity made *her* any less valuable? Why did she never see what *she* was worth?

Lucas's fists curled tight, but forming them didn't give him any sense of power. If anything, he hadn't felt more powerless in his life.

“I'm not what he's looking for,” Jessica finally said softly. She looked at Kyle briefly, then calmly

walked out of the park, back straight, gait even, as untouched as falling snow. One thing was sure—the woman was far too classy for the likes of them. Her utter lack of regret at walking away would probably have stung if it were something Lucas would have to deal with. For once, his brother bore the brunt of cold rejection.

Belinda turned her back on Lucas as well, reminding him there was always enough rejection to go around. She put her hand on Kyle's shoulder to comfort. "I'm sorry, Kyle. I really thought I was helping."

Kyle rubbed his jaw, watching Lucas with definite suspicion. "Yeah, well, next time you want to help, hon..."

Lucas frowned at the sarcasm of his tone.

"You might want to actually think before you act for once in your life."

She gasped, snatching her hand away as if he burned her. And he had, the dumb bastard.

"Belinda—" As usual, Kyle remembered too late that she had feelings. Lucas took a step toward them, ready to pummel his brother all over again.

"Don't worry about it," Belinda bit out, her voice wavering painfully. She spared Lucas a fleeting glance. "In fact, I don't want *either* of you to worry about me. Ever again."

Lucas put a hand out to her, but she slapped it away.

"Especially *you*," she added, reading his actions if not his mind. If it weren't for her pride or the fact that his brother was right there to see it crumble, Lucas would have ignored her and hauled her into his arms anyway. Someday, she'd learn there was nothing wrong with crying on his shoulder. Someday, he vowed, she'd see she didn't have to be the strong one, the one everyone turned to. She'd realize she'd been turning to him all along.

Today, though, he had to let her turn away.

Damn her and these games they had to play.

He never should have brought up marriage. Blaming the hangover didn't help, either. He knew she'd react this way no matter when he mentioned it, knew it would push her into chew-off-the-paw mode. But he hadn't been able to help himself. Now she was out of reach again.

She ran out of the park unsteadily, and for now, he was willing to let her go.

But only for now.

She should have known better than to think he'd actually do what she told him to do. Not two hours after that scene in the park, Lucas was back at her door, leading Sparky on his leash and wearing something that looked like an apology on his face. It couldn't be, though. Lucas didn't do apologies. His attempts were usually worse than his original crimes.

Wearily, Belinda dragged herself off her bed and opened the door. She might hate him. She might

even love him. But she was not stupid. He'd stand on her porch for a week solid until she heard him out. She parked herself on the threshold, resolved not to let Lucas inside her loft no matter what he said. She would give him the inch of answering his knock, but this time, the man would *not* take a mile.

Lucas coughed into his hand. "I'm no Lancelot."

*No shit.*

"I'm a jerk. I don't know how to say the right thing. I screw up a lot with you. All the time, actually."

She stared at him, waiting for him to say something she didn't know.

"But wanting you has never had anything to do with Kyle," he added quietly. "All I've ever wanted, for as long as I can remember, is to be with you. You might not like it, but you've always known it."

A good person would have acknowledged his honesty with some honesty of her own. But she was as good as she was decent so she said nothing.

His sigh was heavy. "If you really wanted me out of your life, Belle, you'd stop opening your door to me."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you want, Lucas?"

Sometimes, when he smiled this way, she could almost picture him with boyish charm. "I thought we'd give that dare of yours another shot."

If only she didn't remember him as the grimmest boy on earth.

"Did you now?" she asked, ignoring the steady lick of Sparky's tongue on her leg while he pushed his big round head against the door she held firmly to her side. *No males getting in this house today, dog.*

"You were right." Lucas almost managed to look comfortable with that sentence. With this entire—dare she think it?—apologetic conversation. He leaned his broad shoulder against the opposite threshold, his smile growing warm and distracting. "It wasn't fair to consider your passing out cold to mean you quit willingly. If I want to win, I should win fairly."

Not distracting enough. "You consider a bet for my hand in marriage to be fair?"

"I said I should *win* fairly," he qualified with a raised forefinger. "I never said the game itself was fair."

Of course not. If it were, she'd know for sure the Body Snatchers had attacked. She inched the door closer to her side. "Am I supposed to fall all over myself with happy because you're letting me have another dare to get out of this?"

"I wouldn't mind if you did."

"I bet you wouldn't." She'd stomp on his feet if she didn't know it would give him an opportunity to get inside the apartment, no doubt her bed shortly after. "Goodbye, Lucas."

Faster than she would have imagined, his hand reached out. Not for her hand. Not for her chin. No, he grabbed the twin suspenders holding her skirt in place, letting the thick elastic rub gently where she didn't want him rubbing at all. Back and forth with every twist of his wrist, nudging her clit teasingly, warming

the folds of her sex that should know better than to grow slick for him but were doing it anyway. White heat jolted through her at his sudden tug and her gasp turned to a delicious shudder as her lashes fell in an instant.

“How long do you think we can keep going the way we are?” he asked with the dark, sensuously serious voice she knew so well. All the while, his hand rolled back and forth. “We hurt each other over and over because the game we play never ends. Can you keep taking it, Belle? Because I can’t.” He leaned against her. She could feel him breathing her in. “I want a life with you.”

The last thing she could give him.

“Play with me, Belle.” His mischievous tone made her smile. “You know you want to.”

No, she didn’t. “Lucas—”

“Don’t you want to know what your dare is?” he asked, his voice like heated honey against her cheek. He tugged again, the effect heightening her need like an unexpected spank. If he pulled just a little harder...

“Is it to stand here and let you feel me up?” she asked, the tiniest bit of a sigh slipping out. She could do that dare easily enough.

His intimate chuckle, smoky slow, took her back to the night he’d spent tangled in her sheets. “You’d never get off that easy.”

She looked up at him, rolling her hips toward him in an invitation she wasn’t sure she wanted to make. “Keep that up and I might.”

He smiled, the special sexy smile she doubted anyone else knew he possessed. Then he let go, the bastard.

“I dare you to go out with me, Belle,” he whispered, soft as a kiss. “On a real date.”

She scoffed, pushing at his chest, pretending she didn’t wish he were still manipulating those marionette strings. “A real date? What, like dinner and a movie?”

“Maybe. But you have to wear a dress.”

She didn’t own a dress and he knew it. God, she needed a cigarette. She wasn’t sure why she’d avoided having one, since he already thought she’d lost the bet. Pride, maybe. But if a situation ever called for stress relief, this was it. Lucas Lonnigan, chipping away at her reserves. He wasn’t a man who often gave in to loopholes, least of all ones that left him at a disadvantage. Their game was never meant to continue beyond last night, but here he was, offering her a second chance to lock him out of her life. She’d be stupid not to take it, right?

Then again, how could she be thinking of doing this? Playing games with Lucas was like playing Russian roulette with a bazooka. He cheated. She’d get hurt. Badly. It was stupid to consider.

But neither did she want to step back and close the door in his face.

It wouldn’t do her any good if she did, she knew. He was purposely tying her in knots. He wouldn’t let something as simple as a closed door stop him. It was why she’d answered his knock in the first place.

“If I do this and we keep this idiotic game going, how do I know you’re not going to dare me to sleep with you again?”

“Because I won’t need to.” And people thought he had no ego. “Six o’clock. Something that comes to your knees. I like your skirt, but I don’t want to share you with anyone tonight.” He leaned down to kiss her and God help her, she let him. She breathed in his scent and let his lips take the sting out of their earlier argument with a soft, gentle kiss. “Tonight, you’re all mine.”

Of course she was.

That was the problem.



## Chapter Seven

To say he was stunned when she opened her door for him that night was an understatement. For reasons she wasn't willing to think about, she'd gone to her sister and borrowed a dress fifteen minutes after Lucas left her doorstep. And asked for hair tips. Being by far the most intelligent of her sisters, Corrine had said nothing about the unbelievable request and only excused herself once to make a low-whispered phone call to their mother, which Belinda pretended not to hear.

You could be that gracious when your date guru was able to tame your sharp hair into something resembling contemporary style. If Belinda took those moments while her sister was away to make her hands stop trembling, no one else knew it. She'd looked into her own dark eyes, devoid of the prerequisite goth-industrial shadows and saw the girl Lucas was trying so hard to unearth. And shuddered.

That image of herself shouldn't have been there, but she wasn't able to escape it. What the hell was she going to do if Lucas saw it? Saw that he was slipping beneath her guard somehow, reminding her who she'd been so long ago. She didn't want to be that girl. She wanted to be the balls-to-the-wall woman she'd created out of sheer will. Why didn't Lucas want *that* woman? Why did he have to see so far inside?

He wouldn't for much longer, though. She'd win the bet and Lucas wouldn't see her at all.

Which turned out to be a thought that had her sitting uncomfortably on the closed commode when her sister returned to finish the job.

"What's wrong?" Corrine had asked when she came back in, following Belinda's gaze to the mirror. She'd tilted her head to the side, checking the reflection for some kind of clue. It was there all right, not that Corrine would ever see it. Their two faces, so alike and so different, staring back at them. Corrine, her honey blonde hair tucked behind her ears, so put together, so seemingly content, and Belinda, framed in blackness that no amount of hairspray was going to remove. One wrong word, one ounce of truth uttered, and Belinda could have stripped that contentment away. She wasn't dumb. She knew Corrine ached to pick up their mother's quest to convert Belinda into a believer concerning their father's sobriety and supposed change of heart. No one would ever guess that *Corrine* was the one deluding herself about Adam and a whole bunch of other things. Thinking she was happy to follow her husband around the world, their troupe of kids bringing up the rear. But Belinda could see it, in the eyes so like her own. Corrine had her doubts. She had dreams she'd set aside for her life. Just because no one talked about them anymore didn't mean they didn't hurt anymore.

"Nothing," Belinda made herself say, her determination to win steeling her nerves. There was no use

considering the truth with her family. She would never become like her mother, or even like Corrine. She'd accepted the price long ago.

Still, an hour or two later, even Belinda had to admit Corrine had outdone herself, a fact reflected in Lucas's lit eyes. The nice, spring-style white dress with sunflowers on it and a white, wide-brimmed Easter hat Corrine assured her pulled the look together while covering the unredeemed sections of jaggedly cut hair at the back of Belinda's head. It took forever to get the black Mark-it-All ink off her nails and cuticles, but when her sister was done, Belinda had a tolerable shade of peach polish on her newly trimmed finger- and toenails. There was some grumbling about what Belinda had been hiding under her steel-toe boots, but eventually, Corrine had soaked her skin into deep enough submission that she wouldn't be an utter disgrace in a pair of sandals.

It was disconcerting to look in the mirror and see all the traces of the life she'd created scrubbed away. All but her hair, which was still as unforgivably black as ever, though now it was slicked away from her face into a retro flip. Either Belinda's hairdresser had cheated her when she offered the ultimate unconventional haircut or her sister was a cosmetic genius.

And it was all worth it when Lucas smiled with true pleasure.

Which terrified her more than anything in her life.

But still, she walked out the door and let him take her hand to lead her to his car.

"So, where are you taking me, Lonnigan? And it better be good. I don't get all girled-up for nothing, you know." Then again, how good could it be? He'd brought the dog, of all things. Sparky panted madly from the back seat, his tail beating against the leather with a series of cracks. "You need to get him a doggy blanket. He'll rip up your seats in no time."

Lucas winced, leaning his car seat back further than she'd ever seen him do before. "I know."

"Taking up low-riding or something?"

He turned his head to her briskly, but only answered with a smile. "Cruising."

"Ah." She pretended to understand. They didn't speak much as he turned into the freeway. A half hour later, he pulled into the parking lot of the Pacific Beach Boardwalk as the sun started sinking behind the buildings. She stared up at the roller coaster speeding over wild curves and the carousel beyond it. There were more rides, all of them colorful, filled with kids screaming and adults laughing. "You've got to be kidding me." She turned to him. "Belmont Park? There are *happy* people here, Lonnigan. Are you insane?"

"Nope. I always wanted to drag you here." *Drag* being the operative word. He took her hand again, which she stared at for a few blank seconds. How did he do that? Just touch her and short-circuit her better judgment? "Now I have. Come on."

Her feet had a lot less traction on the sandy blacktop than her boots would have given her. "More unrealized teenage fantasies?"

He completely missed her sarcasm because he said yes. The next thing she knew, she was sitting under an umbrella at the open court tables, Sparky tied to the leg of her cast iron chair, watching people go by while Lucas went for food. Assuming he could find anything that passed for real food here.

“Not bloody likely.” She reached down to scratch the top of the dog’s softball-shaped head. So far, she’d seen a hotdog spot, a pretzel shop, a walking ice cream vendor and a popcorn guy. She leaned forward, watching two boys with dark hair walk together to the popcorn stand, but instead of the gold fluffy stuff, they were handed long, cinnamon-and-sugar-rolled *churros*.

The boys turned together, smiles on their young faces, their dark eyes meeting hers for a brief second before their smiles fell. She stared, recognizing that look of curiosity and the onset of concern. Her heart raced, breath gone. It couldn’t be those boys. It was just another mistake. Another mirage. But still, the guilt flared and panic began to move in—

“Hope you like funnel cakes,” Lucas’s voice interrupted. She looked up at his face in relief as he placed the small tray in front of her. He tilted his head in question, looking over at the concession stand for some source of malevolence.

“I’m fine,” she made herself say, knowing the boys were gone. Besides, those boys were hardly the threat. Someday, Lucas would realize, the real source of malevolence in his life was *her*.

She looked down at the red and white paper tray, finding the twisting tubes of fried batter covered in powdered sugar and decorated with fresh sliced strawberries. Lucas handed her a fork. She shook her head at him, taking it from him with a sigh. “Exactly how long have you been fantasizing about this?”

“I think we were twelve the first time my dad brought us out here. I used to come here to run. Not so much anymore.” He gestured with his fork to the huge building behind her. “We went to The Plunge there.”

She looked over her shoulder. The building housed a giant pool, but the outside was the real source of interest for her. The entire wall was a mural, using classic art deco styles to title the building and showcase its original 1920’s construction. People were painted in soft fading colors, the styles of the bathing suits and faces matching the era.

“The coaster wasn’t working back then, though. I wanted to bring you, but—”

“My mother said no, right?”

“Actually, my dad did. He wasn’t sure he could watch all nine of us. Mom was out of town visiting her sister.”

She stared at him. “You asked your father to bring my entire family?” The mere thought of such mayhem—even now—horrified her. The boys would have been babies and the four girls were screaming nightmares back then.

Lucas shrugged. “You wouldn’t have been able to come alone.”

True. Her mother worked and she’d had full control of the younger kids. “You really are nuts.”

“It would have been worth it. Besides, you’d have liked the paintings.” He grinned and popped a

strawberry in his mouth. "Eat up. You won't like it if it gets cold."

She did as he said, letting the sweet sugar melt on her tongue. When the food was gone, she helped him clean up and Lucas led her to the beach. They walked on the sand barefoot, his hand in hers once again. She didn't bother telling him to ask for it. At least when he just took it, she didn't have to feel bad about telling him no. She could just enjoy the warmth of his palm and the guilty rightness of his touch. She let her toes sink into the wet sand every time the surf receded. They even let Sparky hop along the dissolving foam, ears flapping, bark-crazed and nuts. He'd smell horrible and probably sleep all the way home, but he'd be happy.

She took off her hat as the sun sank behind the line of the horizon. It seemed silly to keep it on, since the wind played hell with everyone else's hair. Deciding to give Lucas a thrill, she slipped her arm into the crook of his and leaned her head against his shoulder. They walked past people and pets, cyclists and volleyball players. Eventually, people were starting fires in the sand pits and most of the human traffic had moved on.

"It could always be like this." Lucas finally broke the pleasant silence. "If we let it."

She sighed, her vacation from reality obviously over. "No, it couldn't."

"Why not?"

She tried to disentangle herself, but he tightened his hold incrementally. Not a threat or a demand. It felt like an automatic reflex to keep her close. She stopped walking, hoping that would allow her some space. Lucas didn't seem to get the point because he turned in front of her, releasing her arm only to loop both his hands behind her back and pull her flush into his hold. She had to look him in the eye while explaining this and that was never easy, even in the dark. Lucas simply saw too much, no matter how she tried to hide.

"Tonight was nice, can't we leave it like that?"

"Only if tomorrow is nice, too." He was tenacious, she had to give him that.

"We're not nice people, Lonnigan," she reminded him. "You're grumpy, crabby and not a little bit obsessive."

"So? You're rude, foul-mouthed and mean."

She scoffed, pushing at his brick wall of a chest with her free hand. "Geez, tell me how you really feel, why don't you?"

"Because if I did that, you'd run as far and as fast as you could."

She stared up at him, his face obscured by the dark shadows coming from the sea, only the blue lights from the nearby businesses illuminating his features. She touched the side of his face, the slight stubble at his jaw tickling her fingertips. How could he be so handsome, make her heart stutter and her body melt, while his brother had no effect on her at all? Was it the way he touched her, as if he had the right to command her? Or was it the longing in his eyes that no amount of darkness could hide?

He lowered his head slowly, giving her all the time in the world to turn him down. But she didn't. She wanted his kiss again. Wanted the taste of him on her lips. Craved it.

His hands tightened at her back when his mouth met hers, smooth and cool from the breeze. But the searing heat of him soon took over. She opened to the touch of his tongue, teasing his with the tip of her own. She smiled at the growl she felt rumble in his chest before he swept inside. Then she was lost.

Her hat and her sandals dropped to the sand. Her hands clung to him and her body surged to life. Yes...this was what she ached for when she was kissed by other men. No one, no matter how practiced the technique, could make her moan with just a kiss. His hands dropped lower, caressing her ass, which felt so much better through thin cotton than tight leather. She felt soft against his grip. Lush. Melted. He could lower her to the ground right now, the same way he did on prom night and she wouldn't think twice. She'd wrap her legs around him and take him so deep inside she'd only have the feeling of being whole instead of being broken.

He tore from the kiss, crushing her against him, his breath hot against her neck. "I want to make love to you, Belle," he admitted roughly, gripping her tighter and pressing his cock against her belly.

Part of her wanted that, too. Her heart and a few moist places decidedly south. But the rest of her froze. Panicked. Fled. "No."

He stiffened, lifting his head to meet her gaze. She ached to touch him, to kiss the tension from his jaw and his eyes. But that would only make things worse. He had to know, to understand. What he wanted from her was impossible.

"We can have sex, Lucas. Right here, if that's what you want, but I can't make love to you."

His eyes widened with disbelief. Then, as usual, understanding. Or maybe just memory. "No one gets your heart, right?"

It was hard not to flinch at his bitterness. "I don't have one."

He let her go so fast she stumbled backward, upsetting the dog she didn't realize had decided to park his bony butt behind her. Lucas took a few steps from her, lacing his hands together and folding them behind his head before taking a few steps into the surf. Belinda stood there, body still alight, her dress flapping around her legs as helpless to the wind as she was to Lucas's pain.

Except...the bastard was *laughing*.

"What's so damned funny all of a sudden?" she demanded.

"You are," he replied, turning to her, but there was no trace of humor on the hard planes of his face. "I have never met anyone as full of complete bullshit as you, Belle. And that's saying a lot, considering I split an egg with *Kyle*."

"What are you—"

"*You don't have a heart*. Do you hear yourself when you say these things? Do you even comprehend how many lies you tell yourself each day? I lose count and I'm a goddamned accountant!"

"You're rambling." *And I'm not listening to it.* If she did, she might have to admit he was right and she would never do that.

"No, I'm frustrated!"

"I could take care of that, but you turned me down," she tossed over her shoulder, reaching down for Sparky's leash. Damn dog was going to kill her if he kept hiding behind her feet.

"This is not about sex," Lucas growled.

She laughed, the acidic sound burning her throat. "Like hell it's not."

He reached for her, taking hold of her arm and spinning her around. "I love you, Belle. If you think I just want some random fuck in the sand, you're out of your damned mind."

Belinda stared down at his hand, holding her tighter than he ever had before. She could handle his roughness during sex. She wasn't the lightest hand in those moments either, but everything in her began to burn at the sight of his hand on her this way. "Let go, Lucas."

"Not until you start being honest with me."

She pulled at her arm, willing her anger to stay inside. But the terror inching inside grew teeth when he took hold of her other arm.

"Belle—"

"No!" She shoved at his chest, her scream startling him into letting go. He tumbled down to the sand while she stood over him, shaking.

"Hey, everything okay over there?" someone called from the beach fire not too far away.

Belinda brought her hands to her face, willing the trembling to stop. She wanted to run, wanted to throw up, wanted to fall to her knees and beg him to stop looking at her as if he'd done something to hate himself for.

"Miss?" The voice was closer now, coming up behind her. Her trembling increased. She forced her mind to remember there were no bruises on her face this time. No bloody noses. Not even tears.

"She's fine." Lucas rose from the sand, picking up her hat and her shoes with one hand. How many times had he done that for her while they were growing up? He hadn't been able to protect her from Adam, but he'd known she hated the pity on other kids' faces, hated the shame, and he'd shielded her time and time again.

"Not asking *you*, buddy," the kid had the temerity to say to a glowering Lucas. It'd be funny if it weren't her life. When she was a kid, what she wouldn't have given for someone to be so concerned when her father tried to rattle her teeth loose. Now, when she needed a hero the least, a perfect stranger swept in. Irony sucked.

"I'm fine." She turned to look at the guy. God, he couldn't be more than twenty, a little soft in the middle from too much drinking over the summer. Lucas could have flattened him. She forced a smile past the bile and added, "Just a little misunderstanding."

*Dear God...*

"You're sure?" The kid swept another gaze over Lucas.

She nodded. "Completely."

*I've become my mother.*

The kid left, shaking his head because he didn't believe her. How could he? She couldn't believe what she'd just done, herself. If ever there were a reason to hate Lucas, she'd just found it.

But she couldn't hate him.

So she hated herself a little bit more.

"I never meant to scare you," Lucas said quietly.

She could just imagine the guilt coursing through him right now. He knew he hadn't hurt her. But he'd triggered hurt she worked hard to bury. To overcome. "It's just as well," she said, suddenly tired. "We should turn back."

"Belinda."

"No, Lucas. I think we just proved why this would never work. You're better off losing this bet. The last thing you need is to go around defending your honor because I can't handle myself."

"The only one who thinks I'm honorable is you." He fell in step beside her. It must have been a half mile before he spoke again, hands in his pocket, dog at his side. "I'm not giving up on us."

Somehow, she knew he'd say that. "You're looking for a love affair. I can't give you one. So if you stick around, it's your funeral."

"You planning to do me in?"

She rolled her eyes. "Sexually, maybe." She might want to get rid of him, but if he got off his high horse, *she* wasn't going to miss out.

"I doubt it." He sounded so speculative she turned to stare at him.

"Why? Mr. Raging Hard-On get damaged back there?"

"No, Mr. Raging Hard-On is keeping it zipped."

She laughed. "Sure you are. If I wanted to, I could get you in my bed at the drop of a hat. Faster if I wanted you on the floor."

His self-deprecating smile wasn't aimed at her. "If I don't get all of you, Belle, I don't want you at all."

Her feet stopped moving on their own. He took a few steps past her, then stopped. Sparky drooped between them, probably wishing they'd pick him up.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

Lucas nodded. "I'll admit to being desperate. But I'm not cheap."

Given how much they broke in her apartment the last time, she would never have called him that. "My body is the most I'm willing to offer. Even if I lose this bet, you'll never have more of me than that."

“But you don’t think you’re losing,” he said, turning to walk again.

Sparky looked at her, little ears low as he whined before following his master.

“I’m *not* losing,” she called out to Lucas’s back. He didn’t seem to hear.

Or maybe he just didn’t want to.

How did he do it? Take her emotions on a trip that made the roller coaster over there look like a kiddie ride and come out on the other side as the man she couldn’t stay angry at? Why did he make her feel vulnerable and safe, miserable and happy, all at the same time? Was it on purpose? Or was it as close to charm as Lucas Lonnigan could get?

Shaking her head, strangely smiling while she did, she plopped her hat back on her head and ran to catch up.

She’d like to say the Devil made her do it. But really, who would believe her? Everyone knew she didn’t need help from amateurs when it came to being evil. Lucas’s remark about not sleeping with her the night before had left Belinda with an urge to set him straight. The decision to have sex was never—and would never be—in his hands.

“Get naked,” she said as soon as Lucas and Sparky entered the back gate to her metal yard just before noon.

He blinked at her twice. Slowly. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, sorry, I have to be formal?” She could blink innocently, too, and showed him, smiling as sweetly as she possibly could without falling over from insulin failure. “I dare you to pose for me.” She pointed at a borrowed pool chair with a sheet draped over it in the middle of her metal yard. “Nude.”

He stared at the chair with a frown the likes of which she hadn’t seen since high school.

“You’re a *metal* artist.”

She grinned. “Are you saying you never get hard?”

His deep blue eyes gleamed and he shook his head at her, obviously trying to decide whether he should run and hide or stay and bare.

“You could always cry uncle.” She knotted her hands behind her back. Her stomach rippled. Which didn’t make a lot of sense. She wanted him to give up. Maybe not as much as she wanted him naked, though. Particularly naked and understanding exactly who was in control.

“Even if I wanted to, *you* don’t want me to,” Lucas eventually said, sounding long-suffering and making her frown while he pulled his T-shirt from his jeans. He headed to the lounge in the middle of her sorted junk piles, lifting the fabric over his head. Why did he have to turn everything into an examination? Couldn’t she simply get a kick out of forcing him to undress?

She hadn’t done any life drawing in years, but Lucas naked could inspire the arthritic into picking up



art tools. She grabbed a sketch pad and her charcoal tin, then set herself up cross-legged on an overstuffed wicker chair she used for idea hunting. By the time she was ready, he was undressed.

Suddenly wasting him on a drawing seemed like a damn shame.

He stood there, hands on his lean hips in utter defiance, peering down at the lounge without trust while she stared at his tight ass without a thought in her head. "How do you want me?"

All kinds of suggestions surged to her empty mind. *Beneath me, over me, behind me...any way you can get inside me.*

She cleared her throat. *The idea is to torment him, dumbass.* "Sit, with your knees sort of...drawn up?"

She tried not to laugh as he tested the chaise by sitting gingerly. He wasn't a man who often had to move gingerly and aside from showers and sex, he probably didn't move naked too often, either. Shoving him outdoors that way was probably the cruelest thing she could do.

Too bad he didn't seem victimized in the slightest. Meanwhile, her face was threatening to need a team of firefighters to put it out. And the bugger knew it, thanks to the fact that hair dye did absolutely nothing to change a platinum blonde's complexion.

But she couldn't give in. However dumb these dares became, embarrassing or difficult, she had to remember what the goal was: keeping Lucas from the biggest mistake of his life. If that meant embarrassing the crap out of him and taking whatever cruel kindnesses he doled out, she could do it. Whether or not she could remember her own name while he strolled around nude, however, was up for debate.

"I don't think this is what you want," he mumbled, looking at himself, clearly unable to decide what to do with his limbs. "Why don't you come over here and set me up?"

It was a trap. A deliberately lame excuse to seduce her while he was nude. First, she'd go over there and he'd smile at her in his way. Or he'd touch her in some way. He'd search out the chink in her armor and once he had her going, who knew what she'd say to get him inside her? Not a good plan.

She'd never have gone anywhere near him if getting him naked hadn't been her own idea. The best defense was a good offense, wasn't it? Wasn't that how she lived her life? Yes, and Lucas Lonnigan was not about to change that while playing on her home field. Carefully she set down her implements, then crossed the dirt path to his towel-draped throne.

"You want me to *touch* you?" she asked, setting her hands on her own hips; the better to keep from grabbing him.

Lucas raised a brow. "Do you know another way to move me around?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You promise to keep your hands to yourself, because I don't believe for a second that you're noble enough not to take advantage."

He looked her over, almost pointedly taking in her overall cut-offs with the bib falling down on one

side and the white shirt with pink and blue skulls on it arranged like flowers over her small breasts. “I think you’re safe. You’d have plenty of time to knock my balls in before I so much as got your button undone.”

The reference to his privates, of course, made her glance right at them before looking immediately back to his face with her mouth skewed. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

He didn’t look repentant about his arousal. It jutted up next to his raised thigh, grazing the folds of his belly as his torso curved so he could settle his forearm on his bent knee. The other leg lay, bent as well, his left foot on its side in the space between his thigh and right foot “You had plenty of ideas last time.”

She should have brought the charcoal tin, just to toss it at his head. “You have no shame, Lonnigan.”

“I don’t need any with the way you’ve been looking at me.” He tilted his head back to squint at her in the sunlight, grinning like a loon. A proud, well-endowed loon. She refused to inspect him further until she was safe in her chair several feet away.

How on earth had she ever thought stripping him would give her any kind of an edge? He obviously had no qualms about his body or its effect on her. This wasn’t control. It wasn’t even a power play. The man had her frazzled in ten seconds flat.

Well, maybe not *flat*...

“Can’t you do something about it? It’s casting shadows.”

“It likes you. If you want it to go down, you know how to get it that way.”

Her hands itched to take hold of him and do exactly that. To ease him into the palm of her hand, circle him with her fingers, take him deep into her mouth and stroke until he lost all control. He tempted her further, closing his eyes, leaving himself utterly open for attack. For just a second, she reached out, but this was a trap and she knew it. If she wanted him, she was going to have to admit to caring about him. Admit him in more ways than she cared to count.

She pulled her hands back to her overalls, shoving them in her pockets. “Did you just make your next dare?”

He opened his eyes and when she met them, they were fiery. “I will *never* dare you to make love to me. I only want you if you want me. That’s how it’s always been and that’s how it’s staying.”

She clenched her hands tightly, glad he couldn’t see them. “I’m sorry,” she finally murmured, finding it somewhat impossible to believe she was apologizing. She never thought she’d be doing that for him. “I know, I just...”

She didn’t know what to say she wanted. Probably because what she wanted was too confused and blurred to make sense. Her body wanted him. Her heart needed him. Her mind knew better than to give in to either. Nothing was turning out the way she hoped. He was supposed to be embarrassed. His body was supposed to be exposed, not her emotions.

He reached into the open flap of her overall bib, the back of his hand grazing her belly as he tugged, pulling her close, pulling her down. Then he kissed her. Gentle. Authoritative. A soothing touch and a

reminder that what drew them together had never hinged on her ability to do everything right. There was acceptance in his kiss and it might well have been a drug because she was instantly addicted to it. She laid her hands on the sides of his face, drinking him in like a woman dying of thirst, when he moved away.

“I thought you needed to draw,” he said hoarsely.

Her hands slid to his shoulders, her lips already forming the words to tell him she couldn't care less about drawing when taut lines of muscle rippled under her palms. She frowned, running her fingers over the lengths from the outward curve of his ball joints to deep valleys where his collarbones met his throat, sensing the elusive tingle of inspiration. She could feel it, the surge of energy, the rush of understanding a figure before her as an idea if she could just catch the tail of it and hold on.

“What?” he asked quietly. Did he feel it, too? Was that why he didn't move?

“Turn around,” she whispered urgently, unwilling to break the spell with her own voice. “Face that way.”

He didn't argue. He turned until he was facing away as she directed.

“Fold your arms so your hands are behind your head again.”

He complied and she could see the hundreds of small muscles flex in his shoulders and down his torso to the paler skin at the small of his back.

He was a beautiful machine, toned to sinuous lengths, golden skinned with a few freckles and moles across his breadth to make him unique. She could already see the sculpture in her head. The heated, smoothed lengths of polished steel that would represent the beauty of him. It would need water. Water to slide over the planes and curves. Yes...yes...to slide over perfection.

She ran back to the pad and began slashing and soothing dark dust into shapes and shadows. She did three fast studies before changing his position to a tilted version. First left, then right. How he stood it for so long, she didn't know. He never moved, never complained. The final drawings were made with him facing her, his dark eyes full of the flame that drew her, the strain at his mouth all that finally slowed her down.

“I'm done,” she said, knowing she wasn't. The sketches were only the beginning. The beginning of a masterpiece, though. Only the beginning.

He wrapped himself in the bath sheet, muttering something about using her shower before walking past her into the workshop.

She stayed out in the yard, trembling, spent from her artistic exertion, craving a taste of Lucas-scented steam. Seduced again, damn him. She couldn't even satisfy herself with the taste of a smoke. Instead she gnawed on a pencil from her kit. She made herself stay in the yard until he whistled for the dog and left the same way he came, leaving her emotions fully engaged, far too cognizant of him and how he fit in her life. In her heart.

She covered her face with her hands.

This was getting messy.

“You were naked in the metal yard?”

Lucas rolled his eyes, stirring his tea while he listened to Kyle making too much out of things. “I was inspiring her.”

“You were waving your bare ass all over her property,” Kyle corrected, if not disgusted, sounding damn close. “Is it still safe to sit anywhere?”

Lucas considered the night he and Belinda had made use of any surface strong enough to support them. And said nothing.

“So what else did she dare you?” Kyle asked, probably making faces over his own morning coffee. He’d gotten the idea that they should update each other on their “campaigns” once a week. For the first time ever, Lucas was making more progress with a woman than Kyle—who had yet to get Jessica to do much more than pause before hanging up on him—which at least made the occasional phone calls worth Lucas’s time. But describing Belinda’s dares wasn’t exactly fun.

“I have to clean her warehouse every day.” He mumbled the other part of the dare he wasn’t so wild about, hoping Kyle wouldn’t hear.

He didn’t. “What?”

“She makes me sing while I’m doing it. Disco.”

Kyle’s laughter roared though the phone line. “She has to regret that.”

“She wears earplugs.” The dog wasn’t so lucky. He howled for a while each day before trotting off to hide under a sink until the attack on the Bee Gees was complete.

“Please tell me you got her back somehow.”

Lucas thought about all the things he began leaving hidden for her around her loft and workspace: new art supplies—particularly some new charcoals—a new pair of boots and a certificate to her favorite leather outfitter to replace the pants he’d ripped, among other things. It was going to take her weeks to find it all, by which time she couldn’t give any of it back. But somehow, he doubted Kyle considered black fishnet stockings with satin bows to be a vision of revenge.

“I dared her to take the dog.” The look on her face of pure disgust still managed to brighten his day. Oh, he’d regret it when this was all over—and to a degree, he really did miss the sniffing, licking little monster—but it was still a sweet play.

“So what’s next?”

Lucas grimaced. “Dancing. On Sunday.”

“You?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas replied over more rambunctious laughter. Kyle was the dancer. Kyle enjoyed

clubs and screeching music, grasping women and probably even the sweaty crush of people. Lucas avoided people in general, something most folks had the presence of mind to be grateful about.

It was his own damn fault though. Belinda had been bopping around her downstairs kitchen barely wearing a camisole and a pair of white panties, waiting for her ancient toaster to need flipping, while he was forced to *stay alive* next to her. It was an impulse to grab her hand and spin her into his arms, one of the few he gave in to. At first, she'd been startled, but then he spun her back out and she'd started laughing, joining in while he all but twirled her in the big open space. The two of them weren't going to make John Travolta worry about his disco legacy, but by the time the song was over, they were both laughing uncontrollably, exhausted and sprawled in her mismatched chairs, and the toast was burned all the way through. She even let him kiss her goodbye when he left.

His inner alerts did make some noise after she made the dare though, wondering if she were pushing him into a Kyle-mold on purpose or if she was just picking things he'd hate to do. Frankly, it was a toss-up. "I'm not real wild about clubbing it either, but I figure we're still even."

"Yeah, how's that? You'll be wearing steel-toe boots, too?"

"She has to dye her hair." That dare had been a stroke of genius. "Eyebrows, too. Back to the original color in time for the dancing."

Belinda's jaw had dropped, leaving her vulnerable to yet another kiss before he slipped away from her front door. The truth was, the past week had been a smorgasbord of stolen kisses and caresses. She didn't even get mad at him anymore. Not when he touched her hand or grazed her healing tattoo with his fingertips. Not when he whispered things in her ear as he passed. Not even when he insisted on kissing her whenever he arrived or left. He'd never felt so free or seen her hidden smile so often.

Of course, there was a reason to her laxity. She was trying to break him down. It started with the sudden lack of clothes. He'd come in, finding her in various levels of undress. The worst was the morning she came out of her shower in a wet white towel too soaked—and too worn—to be any deterrent to his sight. Her building hardly had any windows and the ceiling fans did almost nothing for the heat, so her lame excuse of being hot had enough truth to it that he couldn't complain. His dick might throb, but it wasn't complaining.

It wasn't getting satisfied, either. She teased, she pranced and she all but dripped sex left and right—something that had to be making her as nuts as it was making him—but she wasn't getting any until she said the magic words.

After a moment of quiet, Lucas realized Kyle hadn't said anything in a while. In fact, his silence seemed thoughtful—a frightening prospect if ever there was one. Lucas figured out how much so when his brother finally broke it.

"She's going to figure it out, Luc. If she hasn't already."

"Figure what out?"

“You’re dating. Creatively, I’ll give you that, but it’s turning into something that resembles a relationship and I’m telling you, she’s going to notice.”

Lucas tried not to be irritated. Kyle sounded almost logical. Such behavior should be encouraged. Usually. “What do you mean, *resembles*?”

“I mean to *you*, this is a relationship. Something you can keep going until you unwrap the real Belinda beneath all her bullshit and attitude and then you’ll get to keep her. To *her*, this is a game. A way to have you and not have to make it real.”

Maybe Kyle was better off stupid.

“I know it’s the last thing you want to hear, but you can’t keep walking around in a fog. I’m worried you’re going to get hurt, man. *Again*.”

Lucas leaned back in his chair, frowning. All right, maybe stupid was a harsh word. Kyle was probably right. He even knew Kyle was genuinely concerned. His brother was the only one who knew how badly he’d taken losing Belinda as a kid, the only one who knew the truth about his first year in Massachusetts. But he’d come too far to back away when he felt so close to breaking through. It didn’t matter if it wasn’t real now. It *would* be.

“She’s worth the hurt.” His voice sounded like a growl to his own ears.

“Have you given any thought to why she’s this way?”

Smart men knew when to end a conversation, but he was feeling a little too like his twin to do it. “What do you mean?”

“I told you a while back that you’re not the only reason Belinda bites men’s heads off if they so much as say hello to her.”

He wasn’t so sure about that. He’d had that effect on other women, too. “So?”

“So, if you’re sure you want to keep going with this game of yours, maybe you want to think about your strategy for dealing with who Belinda really is when you finish digging her out.”

“Are you looking for the Yoda award, Kyle, because you’re being cryptic and you suck at it.”

“Do you *remember* her father?” Kyle said in exasperation. “Truck driver. Roughly the size of a redwood. Lots of plaid and baseball caps? Is he ringing a bell, because it should be pretty damn obvious, Lucas.”

“I remember him, all right.” He just didn’t like to think about him. It wasn’t often, but nights when Adam Riggs was home, sometimes the yelling next door went into the early hours of the morning. There were times he’d snuck out to check on Belinda through her bedroom window. She was often there, arms around her endless supply of siblings. He still hated himself for the nights when she wasn’t.

He’d told her once that he’d keep his window open for her, if she ever needed somewhere to hide. She’d punched him in the shoulder, pretending he was out of his mind. But he still kept that window open for her, and every now and then, in the earliest hours of the morning on the nights when the yelling had

been at its worst, he used to swear she'd been there, sitting on the sill.

"You think that kind of childhood's not going to leave a person with scars?" Kyle demanded.

No, he knew she had her scars. Knew each and every one as if they were on his own body, evidence of his inability to protect her. The slim crevasse at the corner of her eye, the two empty spaces in her teeth on the right side, the deep dent in her left side where her ribs had been cracked when she was fifteen. No one could ignore the small shift of her nose, high on the bridge, giving her beauty a hardened edge. He remembered the broken fingers, the split lips, the days when she didn't talk because her jaw was too sore... He'd seen them all—on her body, in her eyes—and he'd certainly felt the results of them over the years. "Her sisters have scars. They've gotten married."

He'd reassured himself with that as each Riggs daughter found a mate, given himself hope with the thought that, someday, he might be able to bring Belinda around. First marriage, maybe even children. A simple dream for so many, probably the most difficult goal he could imagine for himself because if it didn't happen with Belinda, it wouldn't happen with anyone.

"You and I both know she is not like her sisters," Kyle continued, making Lucas's hopes sound foolish. "They won't talk about those days, but how many scars do you think they have compared to her? How much guilt do you think they drag around? She protected them like they were *her* kids. Why do you think they let her get away with whatever she does?"

"Her mother doesn't." Belinda complained often enough about her mother's patent confusion concerning why her eldest was not a housewife yet.

"Amanda lives in her own special land of denial and you know it." Kyle didn't have to remind him that Adam Riggs had retired last year, putting more strain on the complicated relationship between mother and daughter because now Belinda *never* went home. If that wasn't a clue, nothing was likely to make Amanda face reality anytime soon.

"What am I supposed to do?" He couldn't change her childhood. He couldn't kill her father for her—though there would be some mental satisfaction at the prospect of beating him to within an inch of his life. But nothing he could do would change what she'd been through.

"I wish I knew."

Lucas willed the frustration to go away, but his brother stayed on the line anyway. "You bring up her past and tell me to think about it, but you don't know why?"

"I bring it up because even *I* can see the castles in the sky you're building, but they aren't there, Lucas. They never will be until you get Belinda to work past the fact that she doesn't trust you to be any different than her father. She thinks all of us are that way."

A memory of her face that night at the beach flashed uncomfortably in Lucas's mind. And the moment in the bar, when he'd held her hands in his own and left her defenseless. Could he really slip between her and decades of self-preservation? Did he have the right to try?

"I love Belinda like a sister, but *you're* my brother," Kyle continued. "My priority is *you*. Right now, *your* priority needs to be getting your head out of your ass before she breaks your heart. Again. You can't keep daring each other for the rest of your lives. The game will end sooner or later, Luc. You need to be prepared."

Kyle was right. So right Lucas felt it like a sucker punch. Eventually, the game would be over and someone was going to lose. She'd either be trapped into a relationship she resented or he'd never see her again. When he looked at it that way, it seemed like both of them were doomed to lose.

He closed his eyes and pushed logic away. He didn't care what the odds were. He didn't care how much he might get hurt. Somewhere, somehow, there was a single solution that would make it all work out for the best. He just had to find it.

"Bye, Kyle," he said, hanging up the phone over his brother's protestations. It rang again almost immediately, so he pulled the plug out of the back and listened to the blessed silence. Out of it, he had to find his next step.

If only Kyle's warnings didn't keep playing in his ears.

"Leave it alone, you look great."

"I'm a Clorox commercial." Belinda glared at herself in the mirror while Corrine beamed from behind.

Not sure she wanted to attempt to go back to her white blonde hair by herself, Belinda had called to see if her sister would be interested in helping her with another mini-makeover. The rest happened so fast she was sure Corrine had called in her husband's fellow marines. In truth, all she did was drag Belinda to a man named Pablo. But if he was Latin, *she* was a Nubian princess.

"This is style, darling," Pablo said, fluffing the remnants of her hair. "That nasty black...*thing* you were doing had to go."

"Along with my scalp?"

"We all pay for beauty. Speaking of, my front desk will take care of you now. *Ciao*. And Corrine, sweetheart, set up an appointment. Your roots are *this* close to offending me." In a huff of perfume and glamour, Pablo was gone.

"Lucas is going to kill me." Belinda stared at her reflection, horrified and afraid to touch what was left on her scalp.

"Why would he do that?" Corrine fluffed the top of Belinda's head with plucky fingers. "You look beautiful."

"I look bald. Like some sort of freaky duck fresh out of the egg." At least before her hair came down to her shoulders in the front. Now it feathered around her face in something slightly resembling a skullcap.



“The dare was to *color* my hair, not shave it off.”

“Well, going from black to white can damage even healthy hair, which you didn’t exactly have after years of...what did you use, shoe polish?” Corrine unsnapped the plastic tarp draped around Belinda’s neck and gestured for her to get up. “Plus your hair is thin already and lightening it damaged a lot of it. It had to be cut. You’re lucky he was able to save this much.”

Belinda finally touched the baby soft ends of her hair. Lucas had always loved her hair. He’d never said it, but he was always touching it, even while it was black. He was going to be disappointed to see it all gone.

“It’ll grow,” Corrine soothed, hugging Belinda as she stood, brushing away her own mid-back-length hair before doing so. Belinda felt her black mood growing. Corrine, oblivious, all but pranced away toward the reception desk. “This is my treat, okay? Oh, I may just have to kiss Lucas. First he tells you to quit smoking and now he’s making you get that junk out of your hair. I might just love him.”

“It was a *dare*,” Belinda reminded coldly. Her body tensed to a standstill at the prospect of what Corrine was hinting. “I didn’t do this to make him happy. Lucas doesn’t *tell* me to do anything. Even if he did, I’m no obedient dog rushing off to do what he says.” Let her pick on that hint.

Corrine, the only one of her sisters who was of a similar height, turned her regal head and perfect mom-hair so that she could pin Belinda with surprisingly angry blue eyes. She might look pristine at all times, but Corrine always gave as good as she got, no matter how dirty Belinda chose to make it.

Right now, she looked to be ready to give a little extra. “Don’t say another word until we get in the car. I don’t want to have to correct your sad little preconceived notions in front of a crowd.”

Belinda crossed her arms, bristling. “Afraid you’ll be embarrassed?”

“Only by you,” Corrine muttered, stunning Belinda into the requested silence as she crossed to the reception desk with brisk motions.

Belinda waited, not liking the sudden wrenching twist on the day. Couldn’t she go through a single day with someone she cared about and not completely piss them off?

Corrine indicated she was ready with a nod of her head toward the doors and Belinda met her there. They walked tersely toward the parking lot, and when they both dropped into the low-slung station wagon, the tension was palpable.

Corrine tightened her hands around the steering wheel one finger at a time, letting out a slow breath. “Out of respect for you and what you went through for us when we were kids, I have let you get away with your snide little comments, but I’ve had it, Belinda. For years you have treated my husband like some kind of leper. Now you’re doing it to the other girls and I’m sick of it.”

“*It*? What exactly are you sick of?”

“You. Acting like the last virgin on the planet, as if every man is some autocratic despot just because he has the nerve to want to get married and have a family. I’m especially tired of you insulting us because

we found happiness when you're so utterly incapable of it. Each one of the girls has found someone she thinks is amazing and treats her well. Instead of being happy for them, instead of being proud of them, you have to belittle their efforts to overcome as painful a childhood as you had. You don't have the monopoly on anger or fear. We were *all* there, we *all* saw what life with Dad was like."

*I will not slap her. I will not slap her.* Belinda made herself take a slow breath in and push it back out. But her skin still prickled with anger.

"That's right, Corrine," she admitted, her mouth barely moving around the words. "You saw. Because you *watched*. It was never *you* taking the brunt." No one else was interested in that particular role. Not even their mother.

"Oh, sure, *you* were the only one who ever got hurt by Dad. It wasn't Mom. It wasn't us. Just noble little Belinda trying to protect us all."

She could say one thing about her sister, Corrine could sneer beautifully. Even with her head that far up her own ass.

"Yes, it was. I never saw you in a cast. No one knocked out your teeth. You never did anything but hide in the room with the others and pretend it wasn't happening. That's what you're *still* doing. Burying your head in the sand, as full of shitty excuses as Mom, acting like his ability to speak to people without slapping them means he's someone else. The truth is *someone* had to protect you and it wasn't her. It was *me*."

"No, don't try to make this about us kids. It was never about us. You just *had* to prove you could take it. That nothing he did was going to beat you down. You had to be better than him."

Belinda sucked in a breath, stinging hurt and indignation a bitter pill to swallow. Did Corrine truly believe she'd taken blow after blow for them because she *wanted* it? Did they all?

Didn't they remember how it really was? Or had listening to themselves make pathetic arguments in his favor wipe all the truths and terrors away?

"Congratulations, Belinda," Corrine said, full of ripe resentment, not even realizing Belinda had gone numb next to her. "You've managed to become an even bigger bastard than he ever was."

Belinda wanted to argue, but what could she say? What had she said in the last ten years, whenever they went over this same verbal ground, that had made any difference? Her sister thought she was no better than an abusive drunk. For all she'd done, all the secrets she kept, Corrine—maybe all of her siblings—believed she was worse than their father. Was there a response to that?

Other than wondering if they could possibly be right?

She reached inside herself for her usual barriers. The sarcasm and the impassive mask she needed to avoid these situations, but they stayed firmly out of her grasp. It was Lucas. It had to be. While she did her level best to reduce their attraction to repressed sexual impulses, he'd been slowly but surely melting her reserves and peeling away the things she used to defend herself. A gentle kiss, a sweet caress, a thought-out

gift hidden beneath her pillow or next to her toothbrush. He was getting inside, damn him, and leaving the doors to her heart wide open while he was at it.

"I am *not* my husband's dog." Corrine fixed her with a solid glare even Belinda couldn't look away from. "I'm not his slave. I'm his *equal*, something I shouldn't have to explain to my own sister. He's my husband and you will damn well give him the respect he deserves." Corrine's eyes clearly telegraphed how deserving Mike really was. She sighed heavily, sounding tired and sad all of a sudden. "Do you really think I have so little respect for myself that I would stay with someone if he treated me the way Dad treated Mom?"

Belinda shrugged, more than ready to see this discussion end. All she wanted to do now was go home and get ready for her next nightmare, the gala for the Cultural Artists of the 21st Century competition. Why she'd let Kyle talk her into entering it was a mystery. Probably had to do with all that pride Corrine seemed to think she had. "All I know is the longer you're married, the more I see of Mom in you. It freaks me out."

"It shouldn't. Mom's a good woman."

"She's a doormat." No amount of restraint was going to pull the truth out of that statement. "Worse, she likes it that way."

Corrine's eyes flared again. *Damn it, I should have kept my mouth shut.*

"As if you'd know what Mom is or isn't. When do you ever go home, Belinda? Or talk to her about her life? When's the last time you came back for family dinner? You're still walking around pretending Mom and Dad are just like they used to be, but they're not. They love each other better now. Things have changed. *He's* changed. The only one still the same is *you*."

Something that felt like instant hives formed in the middle of Belinda's back, just like they always did when she thought about her father and the guilt he'd stained her with.

As much as she hated to admit it, Adam and Amanda Riggs *did* love each other. Desperately. But their love consumed them. It ate up everything good in their lives as they searched out ways to hurt each other. Until the day Belinda found a way to use that love to her own ends. The day no one but her father knew anything about.

After that, Adam Riggs had straightened up, if only outwardly. He came home to his wife, he agreed to join AA and not so much as a beer had come into their house since. Of course, he and Belinda still fought. She maintained the upper hand and he resented the hell out of her for it. Her mother had let the abuse fall into a deep dark hole of forgetfulness, pleased that her husband acted nearly like a decent human being for once, admonishing Belinda for not acknowledging the man's efforts.

To everyone else, Adam had overcome his addictions.

To Belinda, he was still the same selfish bastard who hated her because she'd ruined his life.

If she gave in, how long would it take Lucas to develop the same opinion?

How long would it take her to lose her strength and beg him not to look at her with empty eyes? How

long would it be before she ignored his hours away from her side, pretending to herself she didn't know he was with others? Pretending her love for him wasn't eating at her like acid.

Fear made Belinda curl her fingers into fists, but they trembled anyway. She could never give in. Never.

"There's no talking to you." Corrine sighed, probably mistaking the action for anger, and started the car as if it were punctuation for emphasis. "You're just as unreasonable as Dad."

"Don't compare me to him," Belinda said, her voice deadly quiet in the tense atmosphere. "You're probably right about your husband. About the way I treat them all. But I don't do it on purpose, so don't *ever* compare me to him."

Corrine shook her head, looking behind the seats as she pulled out of the parking space. "At least he's been able to change. Can you say that about yourself?"

Belinda began to tell her what she could do with her ability to change—and not in words Corrine would appreciate—but thankfully her cell phone rang, saving her from getting in any deeper. She'd barely answered before Kyle's panicked voice interrupted hers. "What?"

"I can't do that thing with you tonight. A friend of mine is in the hospital. I have to stay here until her son arrives."

"What?" Belinda covered her eyes. "Kyle, the Cultural Artists dinner has been planned for months. You got me into this. You can't just drop out."

"It's an emergency, Belinda. I don't have a choice."

"What am *I* supposed to do, go alone?" She pictured the various people she'd have to see and talk to and something inside her withered further. It'd be smarter not to go at all. She'd have a better chance at landing the commission.

"Ask Lucas."

"Are you insane? *Lucas*? I have to impress these people, not inspire them to take hacksaws to my art."

"He's not *that* bad in social situations," Kyle mumbled, but he didn't even sound convinced. "Tell him to do the arm candy thing."

She snorted.

"Sorry, kid, but I can't leave. Lucas is your best bet. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

She narrowed her eyes, even though he couldn't see it. This was apparently her day for confrontation. "What are you getting at?"

"Belinda, come on. Be honest. When something goes wrong, I call you. Probably won't be the case anymore, but that's the way it's always been."

"It's been the same for me." *Sort of.*

"Sure, you *call* me. Who do you think of first? Who do you *want* to call?"

Lucas. Damn it. And damn him for knowing. For knowing her answer right now just by her silence.

“Call him. He’ll be there for you, like he always is.”

“I can’t.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose, finding the dent where it broke when she was eleven with practiced ease. “It’s not my turn to dare him.”

“Who cares about the dares? *Ask* him.”

Who cared? *She* cared. She wouldn’t be putting herself through this hell in the first place if it weren’t for their game.

“For once in your life, trust him. He’s your friend and he’s never let you down before.”

Yes, he had. Once. But, she admitted at the pang in her heart, she’d let him down, too. She couldn’t hold prom night against him forever.

She ignored her sister’s oddly concerned look and stared up at the ceiling of the car while Corrine pulled into traffic. “If this is one of your idiot plots, Kyle, I’ll string you up by your own tendons, I swear to God.”

“That’s what I’ve always liked about you, Belinda. You’re so feminine and sweet.”

“That’s not a denial,” she chimed.

“No, it’s not. But it’s not one of my plans, either. Fate just happened to work in your favor this time.”

Had it? She let him end the call and waited for her sister to get nosy.

“Something wrong?” Eight whole seconds. Had to be a record. At least Corrine was finished being angry. Nothing switched her sibling’s mood like good gossip.

“No. Well, not for you. This is *your* lucky day.” Belinda fingered the numbers she’d have to dial.

“Oh yeah? What’d I win?”

Belinda leaned her head against the seat headrest and wished she didn’t have to do this. Trust him. Trust him. God, was there ever a harder gig on the face of the earth?

*He won’t let you down. He’s your friend.* This wasn’t about being lovers or players in a game. This was simply a friend asking for a favor. Just like when she asked Kyle.

But Lucas was never Kyle.

And for one night, she’d have to ask him to be.

He was *really* going to hate her for this one. She swallowed, but her mouth was too dry to do anything but rasp. In a vague way, she was aware of Corrine’s slight frown, but it didn’t matter. She was dialing.

“Belinda? Hey, what’d I win?” Corrine asked again.

Belinda finally answered before putting the phone to her ear. “Not only did you get to chew on me, now you get to hear me grovel.”

## Chapter Eight

“You’re frowning again.”

Lucas maneuvered his car through traffic, feeling strung tight on so many levels and they hadn’t even gotten to the damn banquet yet. “Getting it out of the way.”

“Oh.” She was probably smiling, but he didn’t dare look over. Looking at her on his own two feet was difficult. Looking at her while he was driving...that was just suicide.

Her hair was cut into a pixie style that made the most of the tiny wave. Her eyes were made up with graceful arcs of soft rosy peach shades and artful lines that made her lashes seem impossibly long. She was an adult version of the girl he hadn’t seen in twelve years. The dress was like sunset ice cream, if such a thing existed. Blended shades of afternoon light wrapped around her in a strapless gown so touchably soft he actually asked who she stole it from.

She threw her purse at him and had him tie the silver skull choker she’d made around her neck, looking pleased as punch when the amber stone in its teeth glowed back at her in the mirror.

If the night weren’t so important to her career—if he hadn’t made a vow to wait for her to admit she loved him—he’d have thrown her over his shoulder, taken her to her bed and not let her out of it until she agreed to stay with him forever.

Instead, he’d let her tweak his tuxedo’s bowtie and swish past him to the car so he could bring her where he’d agreed to portray his brother. He couldn’t believe he was doing it. There was no way in hell he was going to be able to pull it off. They hadn’t been able to manage a switch as children. As adults their differences were stark.

“Explain again why I have to pretend to be Kyle.”

She’d told him three times, but it still didn’t compute. “Because they all already know him. They *expect* him.”

“Why not just tell them you’re dating me?”

“Lucas, please, this party could mean the difference between having a fountain in the middle of Balboa Park and selling chess sets made out of screws and springs for the rest of my life.”

“I thought you hated schmoozing.” A halfhearted complaint. Her future was worth a hell of a lot more than one night in a monkey suit, acting like his brother. Kyle’s warning rang in his ears. She wouldn’t tell everyone who he was because it would imply a permanence she didn’t expect. She still planned to be rid of him, damn it.

"I do hate it." For the first time, Belinda sounded like the cranky woman he knew. "That's why I drag Kyle to these things. He does all my schmoozing for me. How do you think I got invited to this party in the first place? Believe me, it wasn't my unique style and stellar wit."

"You were invited because you're an amazing designer. You deserve this commission and you'll get it." He didn't have to tell her. He'd seen her finish more than one piece. Seen the satisfaction on her face, knowing each one had come out exactly as she'd planned.

He risked a glance at her when she didn't respond and nearly missed the brake lights ahead of him. She was smiling, her expression soft and pleased again. Her eyes were even dewy, nearly caressing him. "Thank you," she whispered.

He made himself concentrate on the cars ahead, gripping the wheel tightly to keep from reaching for her. "I've told you before."

"No, you haven't."

Yes, he had. Sometime... He frowned, trying to think. "I...meant to."

Shivers ran through him at the speed of a lightning bolt when the back of her hand touched his cheek. "It means a lot."

She closed the gap between them and leaned her cheek on his shoulder. It made driving a little harder, but he didn't care. He'd drive to Guadalajara if she stayed that way.

Maybe it made him an idiot of the worst proportions, but he vowed then and there to do anything in his power to make this night work for her. After which he remembered what it entailed. "How the hell am I going to be an idiot for four hours?"

She sat up, sputtering with laughter. "Your brother is not an idiot. If he were, you'd never have talked me into trusting him with our investment portfolios."

"What? You've never heard of a savant?"

"Lucas." Her chide was tinged with humor.

"You give him twelve dollars a month to play with, Belle." He made the turn onto Park Boulevard, easing forward on the four-lane road as too many cars slowed to turn into the parking lot. "That's not exactly trust."

"Twelve dollars is all I have to spare, Mr. Moneybags."

He grimaced. "Hardly. Besides, I handle his accounting and his taxes. He has to be good to me. We can't afford to screw with each other."

She tweaked an eyebrow in dismissal, probably realizing she wasn't going to get him to proclaim his brother's brilliance anytime soon. "You'll do just fine pretending to be him. Kyle isn't so much charming as he is friendly. You can be friendly."

He turned his head to look at her and inspect her head for obvious cracks. Had the bleach she'd used on her hair done some permanent chemical damage? Maybe that was what brought on all her open

warmth—she'd lost her mind.

She smiled crookedly at him. "Fine. Pretend you're Sparky. Only you can't lick anyone and I'll rub your face in it if you pee on any shoes."

He laughed, which showed how nervous he was getting. She let him find parking, but before he could get out, she leaned across the seat and kissed him.

For the first time since that long-ago prom night, Belinda brought her lips to his all on her own. The butterfly touch stopped his heart, his breath and his soul. Then she deepened it, her mouth widening into a smile that seduced him more than the kiss. He let his arms circle her, taking pains not to hold her too tight, so as not to wake her up from her madness.

Or was it his?

She pulled away, still smiling, rubbing her thumb over his lips firmly to scuff off any lipstick.

"Not that I minded," he said quietly, surprised to find the windows not fogged up, "but what was that for?"

"Courage?"

"Is that your way of saying you don't know?"

Rather than answer, she slipped out of the car and left him to follow her if he wanted to find out.

To his dismay, the outdoor gala was exactly that. The lights of the park were in full use and well-dressed people milled the courtyard. Belinda waited for him beneath the arch of the Spanish Amphitheater. Framed by the slim pillars and ornate cornices, he had to stop and stare at her for a second so he could be sure to lay it all to permanent memory. The way she looked over her creamy shoulder at him, the genuine smile lighting her eyes, clouded out the uncertainty. Then she reached out to him, offering to pull him up onto the shelf of concrete.

If he wanted her to offer him more with that hand, he tucked the thought away for later. For someday.

Grasping her fingers, he hefted himself up onto the curving walkway and put his hand around her waist.

"You ready?"

He looked down at her. Ready for this kind of thing? No. Ready to have her next to him for the rest of his life. Definitely. He nodded.

"Okay, first, let's scope out the competition." She tugged on his arm to get him to walk the semicircle of arches. They passed a waiter and she pulled two champagne glasses from his tray, putting one into Lucas's hand and sipping at her own. Her sharp gaze searched around, as if looking for prey.

She pointed to a tall blond man with the tip of her chin. "That's Martin Millgrew. He's brilliant but very expensive. Odds are they won't be able to afford him, so let's count him out. Those are the Donnas. And over there is the real competition, Hale Riddoux."

"Who are the Donnas?"



“See that cluster of women? That’s Marcia Bellows in the blue, Angelina Crane in the green and Jeanne Christiansen in the purple.”

“They’re all wearing the same dress,” Lucas noted, vaguely remembering something about women supposedly being embarrassed to be caught dressed the same as another woman at a party. But they all looked happy about it.

“Yup. They’re best friends. They do everything together. Really nice bunch, but I scare them.” She tapped the skull at her throat. “They’re ninety-nine percent sure I’m the antichrist.”

Lucas let himself smile. Kyle would have laughed loud enough to attract someone, but it would do for a warm-up. “Why do you call them the Donnas?”

“Kyle came up with that. Short for *Ma-donna*. They’re very into Catholic renaissance art. Beautiful designers, but they aren’t very open to alternate expression. Unfortunately, Balboa is extremely Spanish inspired. Their work could easily fit in with the park. They like Kyle a lot, so they’ll probably say hello. Just smile and nod a lot. Compliment them. The torture will end quicker if you do it up front.”

“Be Sparky.” He swallowed nervously. This was going to be much harder than he expected.

She chuckled. “Yes, be Sparky.”

He moved onto the next subject while she walked next to him in a whisper of soft fabric and the gentlest of perfumes. “What makes Riddoux so dangerous?”

“He’s *good*. The theme they’re looking for is art to represent the melting pot of San Diego. Riddoux is new to the San Diego scene, but he’s had some pieces sell to large-scale businesses downtown. His mosaics are incredible. You don’t know how many times I’ve wanted to dive in and get my hands on his tiles.”

He stopped walking and frowned at her.

Belinda rolled her eyes, grabbing his hand and pulling him along with her. “Down boy, the only man I’d wet good leather for is you.” She blinked a few times, as if surprised by her own honesty. Abruptly, she shrugged it off, slapping on a strained smile while letting his hand drop. “Besides, I’m not his type.”

Their progress so far was worth letting her off the hook a little. “He’s not into blondes?”

“He’s not into *breasts*. Not that I have much, but it’s still more than he wants. See the guy next to him? That’s Brandon LeMarche. They’ve been together for years. Kyle gets along with *him*, too.”

“Who doesn’t Kyle get along with?” Lucas grumbled. The daunting task in front of him was getting bigger and bigger. If only any of this came easy to him. But no, meeting new people made the muscles in his neck tighten. After saying exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time, every time, he started saying as little as possible when he was at these kinds of functions, family weddings, reunions, holiday events. Funerals were the only relief, sad as they were, because no one wanted to speak, least of all loudly.

“Don’t think about it, Lucas,” Belinda murmured. Her fingers slid through his jacket buttons to rub little, soothing circles over the inferno in his stomach. “Take it one person at a time. Let them do the talking. It’ll be the same with everyone: smile, nod, agree a lot.”

"No licking, no peeing," he added grimly, relieved when she nearly choked.

"And I promise not to maim anyone." She said it so earnestly he momentarily forgot his own paranoia.

"Someone *here* is on your violence list?"

For the first time, her mouth curved into that wry grimace. "Councilwoman Malarkey. I wonder where she is. She's usually front and center for maximum exposure."

"Malarkey can't be her real name."

"It's not, but it should be. Yvonne MacInerney. She's the head of the board of trustees. Evil, grasping bi—"

"Belinda, is that *you*?" A shrill voice asked from behind them. Lucas looked down, seeing Belinda's closed lids and muttering lips. "I didn't recognize you, darling. You look so...lovely."

He whirled, surprised to find not a blood-sucking creature of some kind, but instead a very pretty woman doing a good job of not looking too close to fifty. A petite woman, Yvonne had styled her hair into a round, brown ball of some sort. Her dress draped her from one shoulder, leaving the slightly over-tanned skin of the other bare. Glittering gray eyes looked him from head to toe, taking a little too much time at the middle for his comfort.

"Yes, it's me, Yvonne. So nice of you to notice." Belinda smiled, sickly sweet. Lucas could feel the steam pouring out of her ears. "Look at you. So...brown."

Yvonne's eyes narrowed, but she laughed nonetheless, choosing to pretend the comment was a joke. "Aruba, dear. You should go sometime." The implication that Belinda shouldn't come back home was not lost on anyone. "Oh, Mr. Lonnigan! Don't you look dapper?"

People still used the word *dapper*? "Thank you, Ms. MacInerney."

"Oh, we really must stop with this formality. Belinda and I are on a first-name basis and we *have* seen each other several times now. Call me Yvonne."

He extended his hand. "Kyle."

"Kyle," she repeated, looking a little too much like she wanted to chew on him. Was this how lunchmeat felt? She kept shaking his hand until Belinda reached in to reclaim him, sidling up close to his side.

"Oh look, honey," Belinda said tightly. "There's Councilman Clark. We have to say hello. Don't you just love him, Yvonne? It's so rare to find people who have *true* interest and a *genuine* eye for art. So many people just use it to try to make themselves look important. We'll see you."

Lucas made sure to smile at the woman left blinking at them, pink stains on her cheeks that had nothing to do with her flawless make-up. "That probably wasn't wise, Belle," he whispered when they were far enough away.

"Couldn't help it, I hate that woman. And she was looking at you like you were edible."

Jealousy? From Belinda?

So sue him for enjoying it. Sure it wasn't the PC thing—not that he had too good a grasp on that particular school of thought—but suddenly, smiling at the people he passed wasn't so hard.

Belinda did take him to speak to the councilman, who *was* pleased to see her. Person after person complimented her on her “makeover”, most of them seeming to mean it. She got better at not flinching at their surprise, but it was always there. As if all they ever saw about her was the way she looked. Not her talent. Not her dry humor. How had they missed the things that made her unique?

Had she been the one to play arm candy when she was out with Kyle at these events? Lucas wasn't sure, but he made it a point to redirect conversation each time, somehow always finding a topic these people cared about before her discomfort showed. Thankfully, Belinda rattled on about architecture and artistic elements often enough that he was able to make heads or tails of what most of them spoke about or what everyone was hoping to achieve with their designs.

The Donnas were nervous, as this was the night when the finalists were being named. Riddoux was friendly, once he'd established his dominance with a grip bone-crushing enough to make Lucas raise his eyebrows.

“Don't mind him,” Brandon LeMarche interrupted with a grin and a strong French accent to his soft voice. He looked from Lucas to Belinda twice, then murmured something in French to Riddoux. The big artist's frown lightened to nonexistence while he animatedly discussed the trials of overheated steel with Belinda.

“So *you* are the brother Kyle speaks of so often,” Brandon said quietly a few minutes later when they were collecting new drinks at the temporary bar.

Lucas said nothing, pretty sure this was one of those times when silence was by far the smarter option.

“I play racquetball with him every now and then and you didn't recognize me. It wasn't so difficult to tell. Besides, I know my friend.”

“Oh,” Lucas replied when some sort of response was obviously required.

“He said you were painfully reserved, but you're doing quite well tonight. And, of course, Belinda looks radiant.”

“Yes.” Lucas agreed because, really, she did. He finally sipped at his wine.

“Please forgive Hale. He has difficulties concerning my friendship with your brother. He's the jealous type.”

And spit it back into the glass.

Brandon patted him on the back, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“I'm sorry,” he said, trying not to cough. “Riddoux thinks Kyle's *gay*?”

The other man's blue eyes twinkled. “He swears it.”

The laugh inside him wouldn't be held in. Lucas saw Belinda's eyes dart his way, her curious half

grin as she spoke to Riddoux telegraphing her wonder about what could be so funny. He shook his head at her.

"I've told him over and over, but he refuses to believe me. He says there isn't a man alive that could come to event after event with a woman like Belinda and not be attached to her unless he was her 'gay friend'."

Lucas couldn't argue with logic. "Kyle always has been a little dumber than the average bear."

"He seemed quite intelligent to me. He speaks very highly of you."

If it was an admonishment, it didn't faze Lucas much. He raised his eyebrow until Brandon relented with a shrug. "Well, he says you are brilliant, at least."

"At most," Lucas corrected. "It's all right. We have a way with each other no one else seems to understand. I know how valuable my brother is, under the fluff. Kyle would be the first one to throw himself in front of a truck for me."

"And you for him?"

Lucas nodded, but inevitably, his gaze had already gone searching for Belinda.

"Ah, but I think you'd leap in front of a *train* for her, *mon ami*."

Lucas sighed. "You have no idea."

"I think I do. Why do you think Hale did not continue to mash your bones into pebbles? All one has to do is look at the two of you."

"Oh, yeah? And see what?"

"Perfection," Brandon said with a flair only a Frenchman—maybe only a gay Frenchman—could pull off gracefully. "It's a beautiful thing to see two people so well tuned to each other."

"I wouldn't say—"

"You don't have to say. We're artists. We appreciate things without explanation." Brandon nodded to his mate and left Lucas standing there after a nudge to the arm and a murmured, "Good luck".

When Belinda smiled at him, ignoring her conversation for a brief second, Lucas thought he might not need it. He started toward her.

"Well, well, well, here we are again, Mr. Lonnigan. Oh, I'm sorry, *Kyle*."

Lucas looked down to see Yvonne MacInerney stepping into his path and rising on her toes to brush some kind of fake kiss against his cheek. He had the feeling there was supposed to be something sensual about the action, but he certainly didn't feel it.

The urge to flee ran rampant, but he reminded himself she was a councilwoman on the trustee board. She not only held a vote that could be important to Belinda, she was the head of the project. Belinda had trusted him to help her look good. He had to show he was worthy of her trust.

"How are you doing, Yvonne?"

"Oh, perfectly well, thank you. The gala's been a success so far, don't you think?"

“Most definitely.” Starving artists feasting on pâté? What else could it be?

“We’ll have to make the announcements soon. A pity. It will be disappointing for so many.” She pouted briefly, waiting for him to make some sort of reaction.

“When will you have a chosen artist?”

“In about a month. Right now, only the style of the designs has been considered. After tonight, it’s about the bids and the feasibility of the design to the grounds.”

“Sounds time-consuming.” He was pretty sure he could pick something in about five minutes.

“Oh, it is. It is!” The thought occurred to him that if she was so put out, she could quit, but even he knew saying so wouldn’t go over well. Besides, she looked so relieved to have found a friend who understood, he almost felt bad for inching further away. “But it’s important to us, to the city. We take our jobs very seriously.”

Lucas nodded. He could escape from her soon. He only had to stay with her long enough to be polite. Eight minutes more ought to cover it. He hoped.

“Still,” she said, dragging the word over a few empty beats of silence, reaching out to tap his lapel and drag her fingertip over his chest for a second before taking hold of his coat pockets, “we do find time to...enjoy ourselves.”

Better make it three minutes. In eight, he’d no doubt be swallowed whole. “Good for you, Yvonne. Everyone needs downtime.” He looked around quickly, but for once, Belinda was completely out of view. He protected himself with another step back.

“Yes, yes, I agree. My personal time is very important to me. I choose who I spend it with very carefully since my husband died.”

Death, thankfully, Lucas knew the standard response to. “I’m very sorry.”

“Well, yes, thank you.” She fluttered her hand as if the dearly departed didn’t matter much. “Spending time with the right people is very important. The mind needs to be stimulated and kept sharp. You enjoy stimulation, don’t you, Kyle?”

All right, that was it. Time to flee. God, how did Kyle put up with this? He felt dirty and she’d only touched his coat for a half second. “I’m sorry, Yvonne, I think Belinda is waving for me.”

A definite look of perturbation crossed her face.

“I...make it a rule never to let my dates go unsatisfied,” he added quickly, relieved that the corny line he’d seen in a bad movie was right up her alley.

“Oh, then go on. I’m sure we’ll run into each other again tonight.” She touched his cuff, tilting her head somewhat to the side so that she was looking up at him through her lashes. That was some sort of signal, he gathered, but all it did was make his skin crawl. Probably in a desperate effort to drag him away. He forced a smile and went off to search for Belinda.

With any luck at all, he’d find her quickly and it would be time to leave.

Belinda smiled to herself as Lucas drove back to her loft. In her hands was a small medal with her name engraved on it. The top five. She'd made it to the top five!

"If you keep rubbing it like that, you're going to wipe the letters right off," Lucas teased with his deeply rumbling voice.

"Oh, leave me alone. This is my first award." Even if it wasn't, it would be the most important. Her fingers caressed the feathered wheat representation along the circular edge. Pride flared through her and she allowed herself the ridiculously girly move of holding it to her chest and hugging it.

"I'm pretty sure you won something in elementary school."

"Nope, they don't give awards for beating up crybabies on slides." She laughed at his narrow-eyed sideways glare. "But I did get the cast," she conceded.

"It's been over twenty years. I think I've been raked over the coals long enough, don't you?"

"You're right. How about I harp on the time you ruined my math homework by putting your name on it?"

"That shouldn't count. I've never been good at cheating."

"What about the time you—"

"Belle," he warned, despite the thread of humor underlying his tone.

"Oh fine, but I'm not letting you spoil my fun. I won something, Lonnigan. I get to crow."

"No, you *earned* something. You and your design. You should be proudest of that." He slid the car into place in front of the warehouse and pulled to a smooth stop. He turned his head to look at her, a faint smile on his mouth. He took her hand gently into his, turning her mouth dry suddenly. "I'm proud of you."

"Because I pulled off this makeover?" Why she asked, she didn't know. So many people talked about it. Away from him, the women tittered that they'd cut their hair off for him, too. They all thought she had given up something of her own principles to please him, just like her sister did. She wasn't so sure she hadn't. Was it what he thought, too?

Lucas's scowl was dark even for the late night murkiness inside the car. He let go of her palm, only to caress her cheek with the back of his hand. The strong hand that had always been there for her, offering help, support and kindness. It was impossible not to lean into it.

"If they think changing your hair changes anything about you, they're out of their minds." His fingers slipped down to tweak the little skull on her neck. "The important thing is that *we* know who you are."

"We?" The tension in her throat made her feel like a frog.

He nodded, nothing but seriousness on him now. "You're everything."

Her indrawn breath, ragged and loud in the intimacy of the vehicle, must have sounded like she was trying to argue because he shook his head at her.

"I know you think I don't know anything about the real you. You think I only see who you used to be. The little girl we played with because she was more fun than any of the boys on the block."

"Lucas." Oh, God, he was going to say things she didn't mean to ask for. She took hold of his wrist, hoping to stop the words, but he wouldn't be put off. Not this time.

"I know you've outgrown her. You're not the doll your mom tried to shape with frilly dresses and shiny shoes. And you're not the innocent kid trying too hard to be what no one should have asked of you as a teenager. But you're not the antichrist you want the Donnas to think you are, either."

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the emotions welling up in her. But he kept talking and they kept rising, so much bigger and stronger than her. She might fear it, but God...she wanted to hear it all the same. Wanted to feel what he made her feel.

"You're all of them, Belle. The girl, the innocent and the attitude, all balled up into someone I'm glad to know." He feathered his fingers over her cheeks again, making her realize he was wiping away tears. She lifted her lids, looking at him through wet lashes. He swallowed, his huge heart right on his sleeve, burning into her own heart without mercy. "The woman I'm proud to love."

Six words turned out to be all he needed to shatter her.

All her reserve, all her fears, simply crumbled into dust under the force of that one sentence. She'd always known how he felt, but neither of them had ever said it without hurling it in an argument. She'd always felt it from him, deep in herself. His love was her only constant, even when he was far away. When she railed against it, it held firm to her. When she needed it, he wrapped her in it like down, protecting her with everything he was, even from himself.

And she'd cursed him for it.

Almost as much as she'd cursed herself.

"I don't deserve you, Lucas," she said with a sandpaper whisper.

She wanted him, though. More than her next heartbeat, she wanted this man a part of herself forever. The good part, the strong part, the best part. Forever. Because she loved him, too. Always had, always would. Loved him in a way her own mother could never fathom—not with begging, not with fighting for every morsel of his affection, but with giving. With sacrifice and best intentions.

Lucas gave his heart completely, no matter what she did to him or how she aggravated him. She loved him with everything she had, and though she'd pushed him away, she wanted him to be proud of her, wanted him to see how far she'd brought herself. She wanted to be worthy of his dedication. For once in her life, she *wanted* to be worthy of the best.

"Because I'm not Kyle?" Doubt stained his voice for the first time in years.

She shook her head. "We both know I never wanted Kyle. I just *needed* to want him."

Relief softened his expression, only to drift into a frown of confusion. "Why?"

Finally, he was asking for the truth.

"Kyle doesn't get under my skin. I care about him, but he's a buddy. Someone I can mother if I have to. I don't need him. The way I need you is...terrifying." She owed him these truths, even if they stripped her bare, so she kept saying them, wondering at the strange lightness that came over her after every revealing word. "I have no control around you, Lucas. You look at me and I feel like I'm yours. Not my own. You don't know how frightening that is."

"Yes, I do," he whispered, breaking into her confession. "That's exactly how I've felt since I was six years old. Owned, by the dirty little girl in pink ribbons and black bows. You may be mine, Belle, but I'm yours, too. With everything in me."

"I don't deserve you," she cried, surprised that the words burst out of her again. Why didn't he understand? Her stomach was so tight she thought she might be sick from it. "I've hurt you, I've pushed you away, I've—"

"Yes, you do, Belle," he interrupted again, urgent and demanding, putting his hands on her shoulders as if to brace her. "For better or worse, you deserve me and everything else good in the world. You just have to take us."

She bowed her head, wishing she could reach his shoulder and rest her soul there. Wishing so much more. "I wish I could see what you see in me."

"Me, too." His sadness sent a tremor through her. And then he let go.

Painful realization slipped through her like a snake as his warmth left her shoulders. *He's leaving...*

He would kiss her goodbye and let her take the miracle of his love upstairs to her lonely bed to try and make it less than it was because that was what she always did. He would go home and hope to make more inroads to her heart on the next dare. The next chance.

He had no idea he was already there, far beyond her barriers into the very essence of her. She simply wasn't whole without him. Tonight, she didn't want to be empty any longer.

She took hold of his wrists, lifting her head and meeting his deep ocean gaze. "Show me."

He tilted his head in silent question.

She leaned forward and grazed her lips across his in answer. Then she opened the car door and eased backward from the car, never letting her gaze slip from his. "Show me what you see in me, Lucas. Come upstairs and love me."

There was hope in his eyes, she watched it flare. Then recede. "It has to mean something to you, Belle. As much as it means to me. I want your heart."

She smiled at his cautiousness. She couldn't even blame him for being worried. She would be too if she had to deal with herself as often as he did.

"I want you to come up because I—" Her throat tightened again, clamping hard on the words—the emotions—she'd never shared with anyone. She wanted to tell him how she felt, to give him what he did deserve, but the fear turned strangling and words became impossible.



But because he was Lucas, he understood anyway.

He nodded and she found she could breathe again. She could smile. She could even feel the glow inside her of something pure and wonderful. He rose from the car, closed the car door and circled the machine until he was before her, once again standing under the streetlamp as he had that first night he'd taken her to her bed. Only this time, he was letting her lead.

"Take me home, Belle."

It wasn't a vow...but it should have been. She smiled up at him, took his hands and led the way to her door.

## Chapter Nine

His hands trembled. It wasn't debonair, it wasn't smooth and it sure as hell wasn't sexy, but Lucas couldn't make them stop. Was this how dreams came true? Was this the way a lifetime's desires came together? With shaking hands and a tiny zipper sliding through a cloud of fabric?

He felt Belinda's small hands tugging on the bowtie, the fabric sliding apart at her will. Her dress sagged and she let him tug it over her slim hips until it sank to the floor. She stepped out of it, standing in only the tiniest bits of silk and lace he'd ever seen. A tiny satin bra, black silk panties that made love to her faint curves and the antique garter belt he'd thought he'd go to hell for buying from the young, smiling clerk last week. Belinda wore them all; the gifts he'd tucked under pillows, behind tools, inside her lingerie drawer—right down to the beribboned black sheer stockings on those goddess-shaped legs.

He had to ease the air into his lungs slowly to keep from taking hold of her right then, trembling hands be damned.

"I didn't know you were wearing those," he managed to say.

"If you did, we'd have put on a pretty good show under that horse statue, wouldn't we?" She wore that sensual smile again, turning to show him the nonexistent back of her panty ensemble, jutting her hip to the side while she looked over her shoulder.

"Sweetheart, the Donnas would have been excommunicated just for *hearing* what I want to do with you."

"So why are you still dressed?" She walked to the edge of her bed, still wearing the black heels no one had been able to see under the hem of her gown.

"I'm trying to figure out why you wore all this for me." Had she meant to reward him? Or in case she needed comforting? More sex as a weapon? He braced himself for hurt, holding on to the sincerity that had been on her face in the car. She loved him. He knew it. She'd almost said as much before she choked on it. He tried not to be bruised by that particular stumble, given his own inability to speak properly when he was nervous. Someday she'd say it. He could wait.

She scrambled some of his thought processes by sitting on the fluffy duvet on her bed, stretching her body across it and lying on her side to study him. Suddenly, she was the curviest woman he'd ever seen, every lean length of her leading to the next rise or fall of her body.

"Well, my evil plan was to torment you from time to time tonight by letting you know I was wearing the stockings."

He didn't remember any particular skirt lifting action. "But?"

"But after I put them on I realized how much I liked them."

"You did?"

She nodded slowly, something that sounded like a purr coming from her throat. "It felt like I had your hands all over me."

He swallowed. "And you liked that?"

She lolled onto her back, her dark eyes still trained on his, her full lips parted slightly. "I *always* like that." She pointed a lazy finger at him. "Too. Many. Clothes, Lonnigan."

Zorro had less accuracy than that finger's haphazard slashes in the air. In the three steps it took him to reach her, his jacket was gone and his shirt was open. He stood between her parted knees while she rose up to sitting. Her hands immediately began undoing his belt while his own cupped the back of her head so he could turn her intent gaze up to his.

"I want your eyes open tonight, Belle."

She leaned into his hold, still pulling the leather apart then starting on the slide catch. "Why?"

"Because." His zipper rasped down over his eager cock, then her questing touch slipped past his underwear to caress him with both hands and he couldn't quite say.

"Lucas," she murmured, leaning forward, gliding her cheek against his hard flesh, letting him feel the caress of his name on her lips before opening them and taking him inside. Her hands stroked, but it was her tongue, hot and wet, that scrambled what was left of his senses. She sucked him in, taking torturous care only to slide the head past those delectable lips. Over and over, she pulled him free with a wet pop and a smile. Just when he got a grip on what he wanted to say, she took him all the way in, so deep he could feel the tight squeeze of her throat muscles working around him. She rumbled, sending pleasure up every nerve ending he had.

"Fuck, Belle—" He took hold of her short hair, pulling her back as gently as he could, all his control holding on by the thinnest of threads. Another second of that and he'd have come, completely losing his mind and not giving a shit.

She laughed, a sexy, husky sound that felt almost as good as what she'd just done. "Oh, Lucas, don't you know by now? The only one I've ever seen when I closed my eyes was you."

To hell with control.

He bent, half falling, half lifting her, so that they slid across the covers, his body fitting over hers like lost puzzle pieces.

She wasn't laughing anymore, but she was making noise. Those warm moans of pleasure when his hand found her breasts. The groan when his lips left hers to push the bra away and fill his mouth with a sensitive tip. Her grip tightened on his shoulders as he laved the pebble point of her, drawing it deep. She arched with every stroke, pulling on his clothes until they were tangled and torn.

He rose away from her only to rip the shirt away and she helped him shuck the pants and briefs. Shoes and socks came off somehow—he didn't know and he didn't care—but soon enough, there was only her writhing form beneath him, the wet, wondrous slide of his tongue into her already slick pussy and the feel of ribbons on his neck when she tightened her thighs after his first taste.

Wildness took over. He couldn't touch her—taste her—enough. He wanted to feel her everywhere. Memorize her sweetness, bring her more pleasure than she'd ever known. He searched out the nub of her clit, flicking it twice before sucking it in, pumping a finger into her slit in time with his tongue. She sobbed, pulling on his shoulders while she trembled as much as he did, crying out his name over and over again with each successive shudder. Only then did he remove the wet panties he'd pushed out of his way, easing them over her long, silken limbs.

Then he had a hell of a good time working his way back up, making her laugh, making her sigh, making her whimper by the time he reached her breasts once again. By then, he couldn't hold himself back. Not in any way.

Looking down into her dark eyes, eyes that knew him to his soul and shone with the love she couldn't admit, he did it for them both, slipping into her body as far as nature would allow. "I love you, Belle. We're going to be together forever, I promise."

It was hell to reel back, to remove himself even one inch from the wet grasp of her pussy, before he slid back into place, back where he belonged. She raised her legs high, her knees grazing the back of his arm, those tiny black bows tickling his ribs when she raised her hips to take him impossibly deeper.

"Always, Lucas," she whispered, closing her eyes tight while her body gripped him to breathlessness. "Always you."

He arched into her.

"*Only* you."

The pace grew beyond his control. Her panted words in his ear became a sigh of surrender, an incredible gift of her love.

"*Only ever* you."

Her hands clenched his, the thrusting of their bodies frenzied now, hearts beating wildly together as infinity rushed toward them at crushing speed.

She screamed when it reached her first, the clutch of her muscles sending him with her beyond a peak he'd never known, into a well of pleasure he never dreamed existed. And she was there with him, all his senses trained on her scent, her flavor, her hold.

Together, they drifted back to reality, finally taking breaths deep enough to fill their lungs. He smiled at the small kisses being tiredly peppered on his shoulder.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, pretty sure he hadn't because she'd be kicking him otherwise. Assuming she still had use of her legs.

“As if I could tell.” Both her voice and her eyes were hazy and pleased. “But I think we drilled a hole right through my comforter.”

Her hands caressed his back, sliding back and forth as if to soothe him from his own passion. He couldn’t help it, he laughed into the hollow of her throat, kissing an apology there when she asked him what it was about.

“I didn’t even let you finish getting undressed,” he said, letting a boneless hand caress the silk on her thigh. “I think you still have your shoes on.”

“You *never* let me get undressed. I haven’t decided if you’re impatient or just kinky. But either one’s okay.” She kissed his cheek. “So am I,” she whispered, sending a shiver down his spine.

He rose up so he could give her the benefit of his best scowl. “You think sex on top of the blankets is kinky?”

“It is when you do it, Lonnigan.” She lifted her head to give him a soft, lingering kiss that made a joke of his typical recovery time. As he was still buried within her, she made a sound deep in her throat to note she’d felt his re-ignition. “Round two?”

“Oh yeah.” He reached a hand to claw at the fabric beneath them and lift her body enough to drag them from underneath. “Just wait ’til you see how kinky I get *under* the blankets.”

“So far, you’re all talk, Lonnigan.”

“I’ve *never* heard that before.” He pulled back, separating from her before deftly flipping her onto her belly. A quick swat to her ass had her laughing again.

When he smoothed his hand over the tantalizing curve he’d just spanked, she looked over her shoulder at him suspiciously. “What are you thinking now?”

He shrugged, tracing the crease where her buttock met her thigh. She let him move her opposite leg, bending her knee so that the pink folds of her sex opened to him. His finger followed the curve to the crease that separated her flesh, parting it to stroke her.

The suspicion fell away, her expression softening to sleepy acceptance. She lay her head down on her forearm, still watching him, the flush in her cheeks rising again.

Lucas allowed himself to play. One finger became two, sliding through her folds to caress her clit gently before stroking all the way up, parting the globes of flesh to the tight entrance between. She didn’t jump at the touch, instead lifting for him with a flick of her hips.

“Did you know I’ve always had a fascination with your ass?” he asked, going for conversational and ending up with a hoarse facsimile.

“Didn’t *you* ever wonder why my skirts are always so short around you?” she asked, her eyes sliding closed like a kitten’s in the sun.

He took advantage, leaning down to lick an upraised cheek.

This time she jumped.

“I’ve spent over twenty years thinking of all the things I want to do with it. Lick it. Suck it.” He punctuated the statement with a sucking kiss that made her whimper. “Bite it.” His teeth closed over the firm flesh just hard enough to win a squeal. Determined now, he moved his hand back down to her slit, gathering more of the cream there on his finger, bringing it back to her rosebud. The wet caress this time lasted longer, massaging to the sound of her soft moan. He repeated the process, gently applying more pressure each time until she was thoroughly wet and opening for him. Finally, he sank carefully inside, caressing, stretching and sucking at the sensitive spot he’d just bitten at the same time. She groaned, lifting higher for him, pushing back into the small thrust. Soon, he’d added a second finger and she’d begun reaching back to keep his mouth right where it was, devouring her flesh until she began to ripple around his invading touch.

He watched her over the tempting swell of flesh, waiting for those dark eyes of hers to open, listening to her pant in rising passion. “But I can’t tell you how many years I’ve dreamed about fucking it.”

She took her time, arching her back, her eyes swimming with want as she pushed a pillow under her own hips. “What are you waiting for then?”

Lucas rose up behind her, taking a whole second to stare at her, spread and dripping for him, determined to memorize this moment forever. Gripping himself, he rubbed the glistening head of his cock through her folds, smiling tightly at her muffled swearing when he dipped into her pussy. She was wet, so slick and wet, and he wanted to keep her that way. But teasing her was tormenting himself. He gave her three hard thrusts, coating himself in her before pulling out and raising his cock to her waiting ass. He rubbed against the tight entrance, pushing the broad head carefully forward, giving her time to adjust. Time for himself, because that tightness threatened his control already. He spread her cheeks further with his hands, loosening her enough to allow him in.

Second after agonizing second, he pushed, finally easing past the ring of pressure, sinking into depths both unfamiliar and devastating to his control. She flexed, backing into him and taking more of his length.

“Oh, God, Lucas,” she whimpered, for a second freezing him into worrying he might be hurting her, but she circled her hips and pushed back for more. “All of you. Gimme it all.”

In that instant, control finally snapped. He sank all the way down, buried to the hilt, his body draped over hers, his hips pumping into her. She reached back for him with both hands. Unable to ignore the blatant offer of trust, he levered himself up, taking hold of her at the elbows and leaning back. Then it became a blur of motion, pounding into her while she shuddered around him, coming with a scream that didn’t seem to stop. Lost, Lucas gave himself over to the white hot demand in his cock, fucking her until oblivion swallowed him whole.

Minutes—could have been hours—later, once Lucas realized he was actually still alive and so was she, Belinda’s hoarse voice broke the silence.

“You realize, don’t you, that since we kicked off the blankets...this doesn’t count.”

Half-dead or not, he still smiled into her shoulders.

There was a warm, smooth furnace beneath her. Belinda was already grinning before her eyes opened. Faint morning light glowed through her curtains, dappling his golden body where she wasn't draped all over it. They'd managed to keep the sheet mostly on the bed the rest of the night, but it covered them only from the hips down. She blinked slowly, taking stock and realizing Lucas was still asleep beneath her. If he were awake, he'd probably already be inside her again.

The night before played deliciously in her mind. There was something to be said for the stamina of a man who ran ten miles a day without fail. Gently, she splayed her fingers over the rippled belly next to her cheek. Fine hairs tickled her palms as she let her fingertips find the darker, thicker strands beneath his navel, letting them lead her hand downward where they became denser and surrounded what was quickly becoming her favorite toy.

Before she reached it, though, her eyes focused on what looked like ink on his skin. Picking up her head, she frowned down at the offending difference. Until she read it.

"I was wondering when you were going to see that." Lucas's sleep-rumbly voice startled her just as he began to stretch. She watched with widening eyes as he arched and rippled all over. Someday, she was going to have to videotape him, just to have it whenever she needed inspiration. "Couldn't figure out how you missed it that day in the metal yard. Or last night, for that matter."

Probably because she'd been obsessed with the rampaging hard-on blocking her view. The tiny moniker had probably been hidden in the shadowy folds while he sat and she had no reason to expect it there. Her brain was *still* soggy about the night she'd gotten her tattoo. But she did remember clearly telling him to drop his pants. "I dared you to do this, didn't I?"

Half-lidded eyes drifted over her nudity, gaining heat she could feel on her skin.

"Lucas?" She tapped the spot where the letters rode the lowest half inch of his belly, nearly hidden by the regrowing hair.

"Hmm? What? Yeah, you did. You said you weren't going to quit smoking unless I did something equally drastic."

That certainly sounded fair. Getting a tattoo within a centimeter of his pubic hair was about as drastic as a man could get and still be Lucas Lonnigan.

The clouds in her mind thinned somewhat. She'd pushed him into the chair while he grinned like an idiot and she'd pointed out the strip of flesh she wanted marked. Licked it. To get him branded.

"I wanted to put my name on you," she murmured. Hadn't she accused *him* of that? Had it always been her holding on, unable to let him go?

"I didn't mind." He pulled her from thoughts that seemed too dark in the light of morning. "Next time

I get bombed, I was thinking of getting a couple of tiny butterflies around it, so we're even."

She ran her fingers over the small, flowing cursive letters there, beautifully rendered, well-healed and dark indigo: *Belle's*.

"When I was done, you showed me yours," he added, smiling wide. "You were stuck with me after that."

"I've been stuck with you for a long time, Lonnigan." She pulled her hand from his body to ruffle it through her hair, still trying to adjust to the short length and hopefully change the subject. The questions in her head floated by without her permission, opening a door to the conscience she didn't want to hear from after such a beautiful night.

She felt him shift next to her, could sense his tension rise along with his body, but kept her gaze averted. His hands settled on either side of her hips, turning her toward him as his warm lips settled on her exposed neck. "Are you stuck with me from now on?"

She'd never been so cold in his arms, but the chill deep inside suddenly filled her up. Both his palms slid up her back, gently rubbing, pulling her closer until she realized she was laying her head on his shoulder and letting him comfort her.

Once again, her silence had to speak for her, but she wasn't sure if he understood it. He pulled the sheet up and over her shoulder, continuing to try to infuse her with his warmth. He whispered into her hair, something that sounded calming, but didn't resemble, "We can talk about this later", which *would* have been calming.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight and closing her eyes against all the thoughts and fears clamoring for attention.

"Why are you so afraid of us, Belle?" he whispered close to her ear. "Don't you know I would never hurt you?"

She did know. Under everything. But the fear coiled deeper.

"He said that once, too," she heard herself finally say, tears starting to sting. "But he hurt us anyway."

"I'm not your father." It wasn't an admonishment—despite the frown she could hear—but a gentle reminder.

"I know. You would never—" He wouldn't. He would never look her in the eye and tell her he wished she'd never been born. Lucas would never raise his hand and send her flying into a wall like a gnat that had annoyed too long. There would be no bloody noses or scraped knees from being dragged across carpet. Lucas would never keep her up all night in a roaring rage because she'd hidden his beer or dipped into the house payment money to feed the kids.

But fear still coiled deeper than reason.

"I love you, Belle."

"I know you do." She did.



“But you can’t trust me.”

It wasn’t him she didn’t trust. The night before would never have happened if she didn’t. She clung to him, wishing the words didn’t bottleneck in her throat. Too many to come out at once, too huge of a notion to keep in. She shook her head against him, realizing too late that he took her meaning wrong. He stiffened in her hold, probably insulted.

“I started the fights,” she choked out, wishing she could make him understand with a look, the way he understood everything else. But this was too big and she knew it. He needed to know, needed to understand.

“It was always me. It’s *still* me. You don’t know the things I’ve done. He...he’d be gone and I kept my mother from his phone calls. I kept hoping someday he’d figure out we didn’t want him there and not come back. But he always did. Eventually. And he always knew it was me.”

She’d paid for each and every betrayal, too. Singled out for his angriest words, for slaps when her mouth got ahead of her sense. She’d stood between him and her siblings, left them huddling in her bed when he agreed that she’d be punished for them all. And always, she stood between him and her mother. If only Amanda had once been on *her* side.

“Why didn’t you ever ask for help, Belle? I would have done anything for you, even then.”

“That’s *why* I didn’t. Your parents tried to help, but they couldn’t make her leave him. Couldn’t protect us. Nothing could. You would have gotten right in his face and he would have crushed you. You were a boy and he was a bastard. A drunk, hateful bastard. I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if he’d hurt you.”

“He can’t hurt me now. He can’t hurt you either.”

“I know.” She’d made sure of it years ago. But no one else would ever know it.

“I’m not him and you’re not her,” Lucas whispered.

“I know,” she made herself say again, trying to leech comfort from his skin.

“No, you don’t, but you will. I’m not going anywhere, Belle. Same old grumpy, pain-in-the-ass Lucas, every day, always here with you, waiting until you’re ready for me.”

She smiled, somehow. “You *are* grumpy.”

“So are you, honey. That’s what I like about you.”

She grabbed the edge of the sheet and mopped at her face. “You’re really going to wait on me, Lucas?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I’ll admit, the first twenty years were rough, but the last few weeks have really been looking up.”

She punched his shoulder and pulled out of his embrace. He chuckled, catching her and half tackling her back to the bed. She looked up into those earnest, burning eyes. Carefully, she placed her hands on either side of his face, letting them drift into the short, spiky lengths of his hair. “I can’t promise I’ll ever be

ready for marriage.”

“Or kids?” Her heart cracked at the disappointment he tried to hide but hovered in his gaze anyway.

She shook her head, guilt eating a bit more of her soul. “I don’t know.”

She didn’t blame him for taking a moment to digest that. Even two. But finally, he nodded. “One day at a time then?”

“How is it I never knew you were an optimist?”

“Because I wasn’t. But I told you, the last few weeks were looking up. I’ve got a new frame of mind.”

“You got laid is what you got.” She pushed him away and rolled off the bed, taking the sheet with her.

“Where are you going?”

“Little girls’—ow!” Belinda looked down at his jacket on the floor, trying to figure out how simple fabric managed to stub her toe. She bent down, picking it up and digging into the pocket.

“Oh, sorry, I put your medal in there. You all right?” He sat up, preparing to stand while she looked at the articles in her hand. The medal was there. But so was a hotel room key.

The cold she thought had settled rose again, harder and faster than before. “Kyle, meet me at eleven in room twelve-twenty-three,” she read blankly, her voice sounding hollow to herself, “for some mutual stimulation. Yvonne.” She lowered the card and stared at him. “Something you want to tell me about?”

He sighed, his face taking on a grimness that tightened the pressure on the back of her neck. “Not really, no.”

“Because you have plans to call her and tell her you’re sorry you missed her?”

“Because it’s embarrassing as hell,” he countered. “I didn’t even know that was in there.”

“Sure, you didn’t.” A good-looking woman hands him a hotel key and he blithely misses it? Yeah, she believed that.

Lucas sighed. “Belle—”

“Don’t *Belle* me. You really expect me to believe you didn’t know she gave you a hotel room key? What part of her putting it in your hand skipped your attention?”

“She must have shoved it in my pocket,” he said with a weary sigh. He probably figured from her expression she’d heard that one. “It’s not like it’s ever happened to *me* before.”

She smirked at him, fully angry now. “You’ve never had a woman hit on you?”

“Men don’t hit on *you*?”

“Of course they do, but you don’t see me accepting hotel room keys.”

“Neither did I.”

She waved it at him, then threw it at him when he rolled his eyes. Unfortunately, plastic cards don’t fly well and it only made it two impotent feet.

“The woman is a snake. I’m surprised she didn’t slither into my shoes.” He rubbed his eyes as if he could wish the whole situation away.

“She was never all over *Kyle* that way.”

“How the hell would I know? You didn’t mention what I should do if she tried to feel me up in public.”

“Yvonne MacInerney is a city councilwoman. She wouldn’t attack a man in full view of the entire community! What did you do to make her think you’d welcome her attention?”

“Now you want me to say this is *my* fault? You think I *asked* for her room key?”

She crossed her arms, her face feeling like lead as she listened to the dog barking downstairs. All right, no, it wasn’t likely Lucas would ask for anyone’s hotel room key. But neither was the idea of Yvonne opening herself to repercussions from the conservative right unless she was damn sure her advances would be accepted. “You must have said or done something. She’s not stupid.”

“Have you considered she’s delusional?”

How could he be flip when she was two inches from screaming out of her skin. “Lucas, damn it, be honest with me.”

“I *am* being honest.” He glared at her. “I’m not exactly known for my charm. *You* had to tell me to act like the damn dog, remember? I can’t talk women into bed with me.”

“You do pretty well from my point of view.” She clutched her sheet so tight to her chest she wondered if it would tear or just break her ribs.

He *tsked*, not bothering to look at her anymore. “I should have seen this coming.”

“Seen what?” She backed up when he shifted to the end of the bed and reached down for his pants.

He shoved his legs into them, zipping up harshly enough to make her jump. “You. This. Ten seconds ago you were terrified of our relationship and now you’re on the attack. You’re gnawing your paw but good this time.”

“I’m not gnawing anything.” She hated when he used that phrase. It never failed to make her feel like a panicking idiot. “I left you alone for *ten* minutes last night to go the bathroom and you end up with some woman’s room key.”

“No, you’re looking for a reason not to trust me. And you know what, Belle? There’s always going to be one. Some speck of something that you can twist and turn to make it look like I’m out to get you.”

“Aren’t you?” she asked snidely. She backed away from him—yanking the sheet from the floor to behind her feet, just in case he got any ideas about pulling her closer with it.

“No, I’m not!” he snapped back, his voice going up from his typical deep octave. “I want you. I *love* you. But I want you to want me and love me *back*, damn you. I want you to accept that loving each other doesn’t mean we’re going to bash each other’s head in. Or that we have to.”

“I’m not bashing your head in.” *Yet.*

He was shrugging his once-crisp white shirt over his shoulders, frustration making every motion sharp. “I am *not* your father. You sure as hell aren’t Amanda. I’d no sooner hit you than I would break my

own damn knees. Even if I was ever stupid enough to try it, you'd knock my teeth in. But you'll never believe that. Because you don't trust me."

"I do, too," she said hotly, startling them both.

His eyes widened, but he took in her own shock and discounted the remark for what it was: a lie. She brought oddly shaking hands to her lips before crossing to her tiny kitchenette table and dropping into the chair waiting next to it. Ten minutes ago, everything was fine. Now...now it was a damn mess and she didn't know why.

Knocking over the sugar bowl, she pulled out the emergency cigarette pack and plastic lighter. She barely managed to tap it twice before fitting it to her lips and lighting it. Smooth smoke seared into her mouth and down her throat, but the soothing quality wasn't there. She'd have to fake it until it came. She blew smoke through her nose while Lucas stood near the stairs, hands on his hips, glaring at her.

"That's not going to help anything," he said, obviously meaning the new appendage.

"It helps keep me from slapping the crap out of you," she grumbled from one side of her mouth, the other side firmly clamping the cigarette for the next deep drag.

"I'm not doing this." He dug around for his shoes. "You're itching for a fight, but I'm not giving you one. So you just keep on sitting there and sulking. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? Why? Are you *done* with me again?"

"Bye, Belle." He started toward the door, determined to ignore her.

"If you go, you just keep on going."

Oh God, had she really said that? How many times had she heard it, late at night, her mother's final point in thousands of arguments. *Oh God...*

Lucas stood still, his back to her, sighing. "Don't do this."

She needed to shut up. She needed to put a clamp on the fear that seemed to be talking instead of her. But the words kept coming in the bitter, angry voice she hated. The one that sounded too close to what she'd heard all her life and tried to tune out. The one that sounded like her father. "*I'm* not doing anything. You're the one walking out."

"Because I'm tired of you thinking love is a weapon. I'm not going to sit here like a trained pet while you trot out your psychosis."

"I do not have a psychosis!" She had a black heart and a bastard father whose decrepit soul seemed to have taken her over, but she didn't have a psychosis.

"Oh, you don't?" He laughed harshly, finally turning around. She didn't like the expression on his face, either. Not mocking, not angry. Something darkly in-between. "I know you, sweetheart, and the truth isn't pretty."

"Fine, go away. Leave. I don't care." She took a deep drag, but it did nothing for the terror inside. Why was she doing this to them? And why didn't he just go away and forget her, like he should?

"You care. Because you're the most insecure woman I've ever met. You think you're tough, but you're not. You have no faith in yourself. All you do is make a lot of noise and say a lot of things that don't mean shit.

"The truth is, Belinda, you're the worst kind of coward. When something comes up that you want, you're too afraid to try for it. So you belittle it until you can pretend you don't care about it anymore. But it's still there, just out of your reach and you bite whoever is closest to you because of it."

"What are you talking about? I've been working my ass off!" But part of her shrank back while her anger burst full throttle.

"I never said your work ethic wasn't good. I said you're a *coward*. You hide behind your attitude and your clothes. You hide behind Kyle and worst of all, you hide behind me."

"I *don't* hide." Not once. She'd prided herself on very little as a child, but she'd never once backed down from a fight.

"Oh, no? What about prom night?" He crossed his arms, waiting for an answer. He got one.

"I'm not the one who had anything to be ashamed of that night."

"I never said I was proud of how I acted," he qualified, his face like stone, carved with disapproval. "But I was a kid."

"So was I!"

"You still are!" he snapped. "What's the first thing you did, Belle? Do you remember? Because I do."

"What *I* did wasn't important. *You* made me feel like a whore." Accused her of having sex with him when she was thinking of someone else. What else should she have thought?

"I was stupid. I admit it. You wanted me as much as I wanted you, but I couldn't see it. I was unsure. I've loved you all my life, but you made sure I knew at *every* point of our childhood who you really wanted. Making love to you changed me. It changed us both and I was scared. I said the wrong thing, but at least it was an accident. You *purposely* said the most hateful thing you could think of to make me go away because you were too afraid to admit something special was between us."

She closed her eyes, too disconcerted to admit he was right. She hadn't been ready to feel that much. To have accepted that much. She'd never known what love felt like, not a pure love, anyway. It thrilled and terrified her at the same time. So she rejected him.

"When you'd ripped me open you went one step further and said you'd get rid of it if you were pregnant. Just to make sure I'd leave."

"What was I supposed to do?" she cried. All those feelings as she'd sat on the soft grass came rushing back, the warmth of him still inside her and the hopelessness of what was ahead all she could see. "You had a *future*! You had a life ahead of you. There was no room for me there. You were better off without me."

"No, I wasn't!" He held out his hands as if he'd like to take hold of her and shake her, but all he did was curl his fingers and put them at his sides. "I was lost without you, Belle. Destroyed. If Kyle hadn't

called me all the damn time, I never would have made it through the first year. Or the second. I nearly flunked out. I couldn't eat. I barely slept. It took months to learn how to function, how to think straight, without you. All Kyle ever talked about was *you*. At first, I wanted to kill him for it. I wanted him to stop torturing me. Then I realized Kyle was the only way I'd get close to you again, so I stopped arguing with him. I started hanging on every goddamned word. You could have come to me at any time. I would have found a way for us to stay together, to get you out of that house. If you said even one word to make me think you cared, I wouldn't have gone to MIT in the first place."

"That was your dream," she whispered. All his plans from back then were still crystal clear in her memory. Going off to school, making something important of himself. It was what he'd always talked about.

He shook his head. "*You* were my dream. I *settled* for MIT."

She didn't want to hear this. Couldn't bear the guilt or the shame of what it all meant. "What happened on prom night doesn't mean anything now. We can't go back in time and change anything."

"No, but we can sure as hell repeat ourselves, can't we? We're right back to you sleeping with me and throwing me out of your life again."

"I didn't throw you out, you left all by yourself. *Both* times." She softened her voice, hating to see the hurt on his face. What she wouldn't give to stop hurting him. "You were right to go," she forced herself to say, her anger burned out. "You deserve better than me...and my psychosis," she added with an eye roll.

"Did I deserve to spend twelve years wondering if you gave up our baby?" he asked solemnly, his voice so quiet after all the yelling.

No. No one deserved that. Her shoulders slumped, her cigarette drooping close to the surface of the table. She watched it burn for a few seconds. It seemed like her life. Constantly burning...and she was the one who lit it on fire, leaving everything she touched in ashes.

"Why is it that all of your sisters have gotten married? Why can they live normal lives and you can't?"

She laughed, a choking snarl of a sound. "Normal? They act like none of it ever happened, that's how. They come home for family dinners, hug my father and act like he's Daddy of the Fucking Year because he finally quit drinking." Corrine's anger and words tried to echo in her mind, tried to draw her into reason, but she shoved them away ruthlessly, counting them as just one more aspect of her sisters' lack of judgment. "They married men who lord over them, each and every one of them. They're as deluded as my mother, pretending we can be some kind of fairytale family now. They lie to themselves. I'm the only one who knows the truth."

"And you hold on to it with both hands, don't you?" He crouched in front of her, laying a hand on her knee. "You think if you keep both eyes on the past, you aren't going to relive it?"

Somehow, she nodded, though she'd never thought of it that way until he said so.

“Don’t you get it, Belle? You can’t relive what you haven’t finished living out in the first place.”

Her gaze jerked down to him against her will.

“You can’t do anything about your parents. You never could. You can’t change anything for your sisters, either. The only life you should worry about is yours, but you’re not living it. You’re living in the past, dredging up pain until it’s a fortress. A prison.”

“At least it’s *my* prison,” she whispered, looking away again.

“Is that what you want to do? Push me out, pretend you don’t love me and you don’t need me. All because you’re afraid.”

“I won’t become her.” She couldn’t stop herself from being *him*, though. And she couldn’t continue to hurt Lucas the way Adam had seemed to enjoy hurting his mate.

“I’m not asking you to.”

Why wouldn’t he go? Take his gentleness and leave. Didn’t he see she didn’t want to hurt him anymore?

“Not yet.” But it would come. Or worse, he wouldn’t have to. Then she’d be trapped into being both her parents.

Lucas shook his head and stood. “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. Call me when you’re rational.”

“What’s it going to take to make you go away?” she demanded, wishing she had enough hair to clamp in her hands and rip out. “Why won’t you just leave me alone? Cut your losses, Lonnigan. I’m not worth your time.”

“I told you. Nothing you do is going to make this go away. We’re stuck together, Belle. Always.”

But there *was* something. Something that would make him hate her enough to go. Something that would cut him loose from the destructive love inside her. She sat there, trying to find a mask he might believe. Maybe she *was* hiding. It didn’t matter anymore. All that mattered was making him leave and making him take the truth with him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” she said finally, finding a firm voice from deep inside. “You still haven’t asked about the baby.”

She listened for the sound of his breath, but there was nothing to hear. Finally, picking up her head, she speared him with her angriest gaze. She had to be angry. She had to be cruel. It was the only way. Then he’d be free and she couldn’t hurt him anymore.

He stood there, dark blue eyes looking faded and cautious.

From somewhere within, she found the strength to stand. To hold her chin high and dare him to believe her.

He held out his hand to ward her off. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” She advanced on him for once.

Her heart broke a little at the look on his face. Pale. Afraid. Of her and her secrets. “Belle, don’t.”

“I did exactly what I said I would, Lucas. I didn’t lie. You were right never to ask.”

He shook his head rapidly. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Yes, I would. Not everyone had your opportunities. Not everyone had your abilities. I was eighteen, with no future, no prospects and a father who’d thank his lucky stars if I fell off a bridge. I couldn’t be pregnant in that house. He would have killed it. Killed me. Probably have gotten around to killing you. I did what I had to do. If that makes me a coward in your eyes, so be it.”

He didn’t want to believe her, but pain was filling his eyes and drawing his mouth into a flat white line.

“I told you you deserved better than me, Lucas. Now you know why.”

He turned away from her, crossing to the door again, taking the knob in his hand and all but crushing it in his hold. It opened and shut twice before he looked at her again, the agony there something she knew would sear her ’til the day she died. A day she knew—if there was any justice in the world—would be very far from now.

“For the record, Belinda Lynn—” his voice gritted so roughly her own throat felt raw, “—I wouldn’t have thought you a coward for what you did. It might hurt, but I could understand it. The only thing that makes you a coward is the way you’re using what you did to push me away.” He looked her up and down with so much pity she felt it like a scourge. “By the way, you just lost the game.” Then he opened the door and walked out of her home. She looked down at the cigarette, realizing what he meant. She laid it on the sugar bowl and let it burn to ash. She never got around to crying.

You had to have a soul to cry...and hers had just disappeared.



## Chapter Ten

“She doesn’t deserve it,” Kyle had grouched when Lucas explained why he was out of bed. He’d been explaining a lot to Kyle the last six weeks. None of it was anything Kyle didn’t know, though. The secret things, the most painful things, Lucas kept to himself.

“Yes, she does.” It took an hour just to get dressed, which was why Kyle had such an easy time of arguing. But it didn’t stop Lucas. Nothing would stop him. He’d wheezed his way down the stairs of his building to the cab waiting below.

“She’s not going to be grateful,” Kyle had tried one last time, holding open the cab door, a look of resignation finally on his face.

Lucas had sat, coughed into his kerchief and nodded. “I know.” And he did know, even as he now stood in front of a familiar green door, dizzy and exhausted. But he still reached out and pressed the doorbell.

The door opened like a force, revealing an aged version of an old nightmare. Adam Riggs looked down his nose, his hawkish eyes suspicious at once. “What do *you* want?”

*No danger of being forgotten* here. “Is your wife home?”

“She’s busy.” Adam had to raise his voice over Lucas’s coughing. His thin slash of a mouth curled in disgust. “What’s wrong with you? You look sick.”

“Pneumonia. What’s your excuse?” Lucas asked, too tired to be as polite as he’d planned.

“Listen to me, you snot-nosed little punk—”

“Who’s at the door?”

Adam stopped talking at the sound of his wife’s voice. He gave Lucas another angry once-over before pushing open the door and walking back into the house. “Ella’s brat.”

Despite himself, Lucas smiled at the description. Wider when Amanda came out of the hallway while he entered, already asking, “Lucas?”

He’d earned that title when he began defending Belinda. When they were small, it was in simple ways. Taking her hand and running with her into the trees behind his house. Later it was in small pranks, like pulling Adam’s tools out of reach when he was working on his rig. Then in supplying Belinda with things that would make her father furious, such as a way home from after-school events he didn’t want to pay for or deal with, art supplies, even borrowing his father’s tools so she could tinker with machines in his garage. Kyle had often played interference, as did his parents, but Adam always knew who to blame. Ella’s

brat.

“My lord, what’s wrong with you?”

“Just a little sick.” A lot sick, according to the doctor Kyle dragged him to. His condo had one main feature worthy of complaint—everyone used the same stairs. Which was why everyone always managed to get sick together. Normally, Lucas could shrug off a cold or even a flu. But he hadn’t been interested in running. Or eating. Or even working, which was what had Kyle rushing him to a physician. A copay and twenty minutes later, the man told him what he already knew—he was sick. Sleep came and went, but when it refused to come, there was always a puzzle to be dealt with. Anything was better than thinking about Belinda. But no matter what he did, he couldn’t seem to stop.

He wasn’t angry, which surprised him.

He simply felt empty.

“You look like death.”

Or dead. Hard to say which was more apt. “I’m fine.”

“You should be in bed,” Amanda continued. Worry stained the shadows in her blue eyes. She’d aged well, all things considered. Belinda looked a lot like her, but for those eyes. They had the same pale, sleek hair. But where Belle was all hard edges and sinewy muscle, her mother was plump and short. She helped him to the couch, where he sat and coughed for several minutes while she bustled off to make tea for him.

Adam sat in his recliner, ignoring him for the TV. Some things would just never change. Lucas dozed for a few minutes while Amanda was gone, waking abruptly when someone kicked the side of the couch. He stared up through bleary eyes at the older man. He’d once been powerful, but too many years driving and drinking had added plenty of padding to his middle and his jowls.

“Don’t come in my house and sleep on my couch, you lazy—”

“Adam, leave that boy alone. Can’t you see he’s sick?” Amanda called from somewhere far away.

“Then he should go home.”

“Can’t go home.” Lucas rolled his head back and listened to the bones crack. “I need to talk to you about Belle.”

“Who?”

“Belinda.” God, his focus was really gone.

Adam shook his head, *harrumphed* and went back to his chair. “She dead?”

“Adam!” Amanda brought out a tea service on a tray and set it on the table. “Ignore him, honey. Here, this should help. There’s some lemon. We don’t keep brandy anymore.” She pushed a mug into Lucas’s hands.

“Something’s got him out here when he shouldn’t be, don’t it? Girl’s either dead or dying, right?”

“She’s going to be at a function tonight. A commission.” This damn coughing was making him crazy. “You should be there,” he finally managed. Rather than try to explain, he brought out the announcement

he'd grabbed as a memoir from the gala at the park. Now he handed it to Amanda, who sat next to him. "Her design might be chosen for Balboa Park."

Her eyes widened, and she stared at the glossy pamphlet while he made himself sip the tea. "She's doing this with those toys she makes?"

Lucas shook his head. Didn't they know anything? "Her fountains."

"Like the one she made in the backyard?"

Probably not, but he nodded anyway.

"She getting any money?" Adam asked, at last showing some interest.

"Not yet. But it'll jumpstart her career."

His interest disappeared.

Lucas didn't care. He wasn't there for Adam. "Would you like to come?" he asked Amanda.

He knew her answer the moment she looked away from him to the lump of idiot in the recliner. Adam met her gaze and shook his head. Amanda's frown was sad, but it wasn't rebellious. Not a spark of fight. Had it been beaten out of her or did she just not care enough? Lucas couldn't decide which would be worse.

"I'm sorry, honey, but I don't think I can tonight."

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of event." He'd gone there to try. His conscience wouldn't let him go if he didn't push at least once. "She'll be seen as one of the city's best artists after this. One of the best in the state. It would be important to her if you came."

"If it was so damn important to her," Adam drawled, sounding a lot like the Devil in Lucas's tired mind, "why didn't she come here and invite her mother herself?"

Lucas looked Adam up and down with open distaste. "I think we all know why Belinda refuses to come here."

Amanda's pale cheeks reddened and she looked away.

"She don't need you fighting her battles, boy," Adam replied with a grunt.

"No, but I will." Lucas met the older man's gaze and held it until Adam's finally faltered. He turned back to Amanda, but he knew the answer already.

"I'm happy for her, Lucas, I really am—"

"You should be *proud* of her." His pounding head made it hard to think clearly. "She's worked hard to overcome all this. To make her dreams come true. She shouldn't have to feel as if all her work means nothing to you."

Adam, apparently, had enough. He stood, trying to intimidate. Lucas ignored him, keeping his gaze on Amanda. "Please. Come with me to see her."

For a brief second, Amanda wavered. She looked to the door, back to her husband and finally down to her own hands. "Things have changed a lot around here, Lucas. They really have."

Lucas shook his head. "I wish that were true, Mrs. Riggs." He waved off Adam's move to help him to

his feet, getting up all on his own. “Thanks for the tea.”

Creaking his way to the door, he looked back briefly to see Amanda rubbing her fingers over the glossy announcement, her head bowed. No, some things probably never did change. But Belinda had found her way out of here and that alone was enough change for him. Someday, hopefully not too long from now, she’d realize what an accomplishment that was.

He could only hope to be there when she did.

It was a month and a half before Belinda came out of her haze. She woke up every day, ignoring the wetness on her cheeks, to take a shower, feed the dog and go back to work on her novelty items. Work, if lacking in creativity or passion, did pass the hours. Then the days. Eventually the weeks, but it didn’t fill the hollow space that only seemed to grow in her.

Lucas didn’t call. She didn’t expect him to. For the first time in years, the three blocks to his apartment seemed too far to travel, too painfully close to bear. Not that she ever saw him. Either he holed up as tightly as she had or he made it a point to steer as clear as humanly possible from anywhere she might be.

She didn’t blame him.

After she’d pushed him out of her apartment—her life—she didn’t have the energy to blame anyone. To *feel* anything. She was just a blank space people called Belinda. Corrine called several times, each time more worried than the last, never reassured by Belinda’s unimpressive claims to be fine.

She roused herself—at Kyle’s insistence— to attend the far smaller hotel ballroom party to announce the winner of the New Cultural Designer of the 21st Century fountain design. Apparently, Kyle had finally talked his Jessica into speaking to him, so she came along. Jessica had a somewhat nervous look about her, as if she weren’t completely convinced Kyle wasn’t planning to spring an invitation to a threesome on her. Belinda didn’t comment on her misapprehension.

Kyle, unfortunately, had no trouble expressing his suspicions.

“You look like shit.” He sat next to Belinda in his nicest suit, Jessica in the opposite seat, *tsking* at him. Behind them, on a screen that descended above the podium and stage, played the design schematics of each finalist’s design, introduced by none other than Yvonne MacInerney, interrupted every now and then by the sound of someone coughing in the back of the room.

“Screw you.” Without any malice, the words didn’t mean much. She watched the rotating designs, considering the cost and manpower required to build each one. It was going to be close.

“Kyle, you’re not helping,” Jessica admonished politely. She tipped her head to the other four people at their banquet table, all of them listening to Yvonne yammer on about each designer’s history and approach to the project. Belinda blandly noticed how comfortable Yvonne appeared on stage, her newly

long and coppery hair pulled into some kind of complicated updo. Her comfort wouldn't last long.

Belinda scooted back her chair, stretching her legs out between her and Kyle. She hadn't dressed up for the event. She'd basically put down her blowtorch and got into her car to meet them at Kyle's place. She was wearing her work boots, her overalls, a paint splattered black shirt and the bandana she used to cover her hair. Thankfully, it was growing out. She didn't bother to get it dyed back to black. It wasn't worth dealing with.

"Our final designer tonight is local city artist, Belinda Riggs." Yvonne choked for a second, plastering a smile on her face while her eyes darted around nervously so she could avoid the teleprompter. The crowd waited, including the cougher, for her to continue, but Yvonne continued to fight the pained expression trying to form on her face.

Kyle caught the flub, but rather than think anything less of Yvonne, he turned back to Belinda. "What did you do?"

She ignored him, her eyes on the woman on stage, resplendent in gold lamé, right up to the highlights that made her poofy hair resemble that of an electrocuted Jane Fonda.

"Belinda...was born and raised here in San Diego County to...Adam and Amanda Riggs, who will be...celebrating their thirty-fifth anniversary by the time this fountain is completed. She's worked her ahh...she's worked for many years to reach this point in her career, making pieces of sh—*sheet* metal art for commercial art shops all over the county. Her work represents a life dedicated to the self...lessness and the pursuit of...true...art."

"She's fast on her feet," Belinda mumbled more to herself than anyone else as Yvonne took a visible sigh and the crowd applauded politely. The speedy editing almost sounded like a tribute instead of the diatribe she'd written about the crappiness of her life. Kyle's sharp gaze was joined by his tight grip on her wrist and a brief, firm shake of her hand. Nothing of his urgency registered. Not even the old fears triggered.

"Are you *trying* to cost yourself this commission?" he snapped in a low, angry voice.

"Kyle, no." Jessica laid a hand on his shoulder and glanced around at the other people there who no doubt had caught on to them.

He didn't seem to care. "Answer me!"

But Belinda didn't have to. She just looked at him, letting him see the shell that was left of her.

He dropped her hand and swore disgustedly. "What are you two doing to each other?"

"Nothing." She and Lucas could do nothing to each other. Not anymore.

He looked like he wanted to say more, but before he could get started—not that she would have listened—Yvonne was opening the envelope with the winner's name on it.

"Oh, this is so exciting!" she cooed, tearing past the red sticker seal with a flourish. "And the New Designer of the 21st Century is..." She frowned, paused as if rereading to make sure she was understanding

her note correctly. “Belinda Riggs.”

And that’s when it happened. The haze dissipated. Suddenly the lights burned, the flashing bulbs stung Belinda’s eyes and shock like she’d never known slammed sensation into her.

She stared up at the dais, to the animated 3D computer representation of her fountain—with its smooth steel curves and carved glass bricks and balls forming its joints—and realized it wasn’t a dream. She’d achieved something.

But Lucas wasn’t here to see it.

Just that quickly came the pain. Blinding, crushing pain. Behind her eyes, in her chest, in her middle. Kyle pulled her to her feet, his anger put aside by his concern. He walked her up to the stage steps as he would lead a child on its way to bed while she clung to his arm and shook her head wildly. This was wrong. It shouldn’t be him there, holding her hand. It should have been Lucas.

But she’d destroyed that. She’d ripped out her own heart because she’d been too afraid of his kindness. Too afraid of her love for him. But it was there anyway, with or without him. And it ached for him.

Kyle extended his arm, guiding her up the three steps to where a stunned-looking Yvonne held the crystal award with both hands. Not that the woman was looking at her. No, she was staring at Kyle, her mouth pinched and twisted. Like a woman rejected.

Belinda nearly ran back down the stairs.

Yvonne stepped forward and shoved the heavy thing into Belinda’s hands with a fake hug. “Enjoy it while you can,” the woman sneered in her ear. “Your fountain will never get built. It was a mistake to let someone like you in this contest but it *will* be corrected. When I’m done with you, you’ll wish you were never born.”

Belinda nodded automatically. She *was* a mistake. She’d heard it all her life. It stood to reason someone like Yvonne would notice as well. Like a familiar old coat, the weight of the acknowledgment clasped her shoulders and weighed them into a slump. She stepped past the woman to the podium where she was being directed. Unfortunately, the lights were brighter there. It was difficult to see past them to the crowd beyond, even when the clapping stopped and they waited silently—but for that person coughing roughly in the back of the room—for her to say something.

All she could do was frown down at the crystal. It had her name on it, same as the medal she’d pulled from Lucas’s pocket. *You earned something*, Lucas had said, wanting to make sure she made the distinction. *You and your design. You should be proudest of that.*

Tears stung her eyes and slid down her cheeks as she remembered the look on his face, his gentle smile, the kindness of his touch as he’d given her a gift no one else ever had. *I’m proud of you.*

A sob broke through her thoughts, echoing through the silent hall. There was more rough coughing in the now far-too-extended quiet, but she couldn’t quite speak.

This really was hers. Lucas had said her designs were worth being proud of. That *she* was worth being proud of. She hadn't believed him. He might be gone, but somewhere under all her heartache, the faith he'd planted tried to shine...and finally caught flame.

"I never thought anyone would see anything worthwhile in me." She choked, pushing the words past the bottleneck that tried to form. "In my work." Tears slipped over her cheeks onto the fine, clear stone in her grip. She wanted Lucas there. Wanted him to see she wasn't a complete waste of his time. But those were selfish wants. Lucas deserved to be free of her and all the pain she brought into his life. Still...

"Someone did once. And I'm so grateful to him. For always seeing something worthwhile. He'll never know how many times he saved me, no matter what I said afterward." She heard the cough again, wracking and forceful enough to be heard over the loudspeakers. Squinting to see past the light, she finally made out the familiar shape of a tall man near the exit. But it couldn't be. Why would he be there? How would he even know to come?

"Lucas?"

The figure turned and left the room.

"Lucas!"

She rushed past Yvonne to the steps where Kyle waited, calling her name, trying to grab her arm. She shoved the award into his hands and kept going.

It *was* Lucas. She knew every line of his body, every shade of his motion. He was there. Sick, too, by the sound of that cough. If she were the right woman, if she were the kind who could stick to doing what was right instead of allowing her emotions to lead her, she would have stayed and let him get away. But her heart had her sprinting after him, desperate to apologize, to have one more chance to be better than what she was. She ran past the tables and out the doors to the main hallway. She didn't stop until she found herself outside the hotel, looking around wildly. But there was no one to find. Nowhere to go.

Nowhere but home.

Without Lucas, she had no idea where home was supposed to be.

"What's that?" Lucas asked when he found Kyle and Jessica at his front door holding what looked like some kind of space-age lump of glass.

"It's an award, brain child." Kyle shoved it into his stomach, starting off another round of coughing Lucas needed like he needed mold on his ass. Jessica followed his brother into the apartment with a shrug, closing the front door and making herself right at home by heading off to the kitchen.

"Isn't she here?" Kyle asked, looking down the hallway toward the dark bedroom.

"Isn't who?" Lucas wheezed. Like he didn't know. To hell with Jessica in his kitchen. She and Kyle had been there off and on for a week. No doubt she'd make him a pot of tea and try to push some soup on

him. For such a brisk woman, she had a strange strain of caretaker in her. He made his way over to his couch and collapsed on it, pretending he wasn't in a cold, dripping sweat.

"You suck at undercover work, buddy. Everyone at the banquet could hear the asthmatic in the back of the room hacking through the speeches. I thought you were just going to talk her parents into going."

Lucas closed his eyes and willed his brother to go away. "They didn't feel like listening to me. Someone had to be there for her."

"She saw you," Kyle added like an accusation.

"No, she didn't." Not for sure. For all she knew, her mind had been playing with her.

"She ran after you."

"In this condition, she'd have caught me." Which was why he'd taken his death rattle into the nearest other event he could get into.

"In that condition, you shouldn't have been there in the first place. Didn't the doctor say something about bed rest?"

So what if he had? Doctors didn't understand needing to know she was all right. His doctor, in particular, would never understand needing to be there when Belinda finally discovered a trace of her own worth. That man only understood syringes and melodramatic diagnoses. "It's pneumonia, Kyle, not emphysema. Go away, I'm fine."

He didn't care if it put him in his bed for another month, being there for that moment was worth it.

"Sure, just like *she's* fine. Did you get a good look at her?"

Of course he did. Once they'd called her name and she stepped into the lights, he hadn't been able to see anything else. That was his Belle, her hair tied back, in her chunky boots and singed overalls, not a trace of make up on her face or crap in her hair. She was ridiculously out of place and absolutely perfect just the way she was. Aside from the gauntness on her too-pale face, but surely it was the lights making her look haunted and lost.

"She looked only marginally better than you and you look dead." Kyle sounded disgusted, pacing in front of Lucas's purported deathbed. "Why won't you let me talk to her for you?"

"Because you were right," Lucas finally sighed. Maybe he *was* dying. He certainly never expected to say that out loud. On the other hand, if he survived, he could blame the fever.

Kyle's frown only deepened, but at least his thumping feet stopped moving. "What?"

"You were right," Lucas repeated. The words tasted no better a second time. "No matter what I do, we don't have a chance until she accepts I'm not like her father and she's not like her mother."

Kyle didn't seem to have a response for that, ill-prepared as he had to be for the possibility of being agreed with. Lucas closed his eyes and tried to breathe. That was work enough.

"Here's some tea." He felt Jessica's cool hands on his brow. "Oh, Lucas, when's the last time you checked your temperature?"



It took effort to raise an eyelid to glare at her. “You come anywhere near me with a thermometer and I’ll ruin his taxes for the next five years.”

“I’m a finance lawyer, Lucas,” she replied without batting an eye. “I’ll just have you thrown in jail. Now where is it? And don’t make me look because you won’t like where I stick it.”

“Bedroom bathroom,” he snapped, too tired to fight with her. Jessica could argue a snake out of its rattle when in a mood. Made her perfect for his brother, but it sucked for damn near everyone else. She left and he groaned. “Can you please get her out of here?”

“You willing to let me take you back to the doctor?” Great, now Kyle sounded concerned again.

“No.”

“Then I suggest you let her take care of you.” For a second, there was the feel of another hand on his forehead, then another bout of swearing. Lucas decided he probably drifted off right then because when next he heard anything it was Jessica on his phone.

“Hundred and four point seven. I don’t know if he’s still passing water, he’s asleep. Do we need to bring him in?”

“Go away,” he tried to yell at them. They didn’t seem to hear.

“All right, I’ll call if it comes to that,” she said distantly. “Since we don’t know his intimate details, they want us to bring him in if he hits a hundred and five, but we should try to cool him down.”

There was a pause before he realized Kyle was lifting limbs that felt like cement and hefting him on his own back. “Don’t say I never did anything for you, buddy.” Kyle grunted, half dragging Lucas through the hallway to the bedroom and into the private bath. Then, thankfully, Lucas drifted away again as his buttons started slipping. Drifted to visions of Belle, black ribbons and moonlight on the glades...

“Why are you coddling her?” Adam Riggs’s deep voice drifted past Belinda’s dreams and roped her back to reality. Reality, where Lucas was out of her reach and far safer there. “She’s in the way.”

“She’s never in our way, Adam. Besides, she won that fountain thingy. You should be proud of her.”

“Yeah, whatever. Where’s my Coke?”

“Second shelf.” The bustling sounds of people moving around in the kitchen cleared Belinda’s head a little more. She scrubbed at her cheek, which was still textured from the couch pillow she’d been sprawled on.

A chill made her lift her head to see her father towering over her, eyes thin and mouth twisted. She hated the part of herself that shrank back. “What do *you* want?” she asked instead.

“Get your feet off my couch.”

She was tempted to leave them exactly where they were, but in deference to her mother—arriving behind him with a tray of breakfast and coffee—she slipped them to the ground. Adam stepped around her

to his recliner and immediately turned on the television to some sports preshow.

To Belinda's surprise her mother put the tray over Belinda's lap. "What's this?"

"Breakfast," Amanda answered as she sat on the edge of the coffee table in front of the couch. "You look like you haven't eaten in weeks."

"What about *my* breakfast?" Adam demanded.

"It's in the kitchen," Amanda answered, not even looking at him. Her light blue eyes were trained on Belinda, eager and pleased somehow at the same time. Adam groused a little, then got up and stomped into the kitchen.

Belinda watched him go with wide eyes. "Mom, are you okay?"

"Sure, honey. Why?"

*Why?* She pointed after her father by hooking her thumb over her shoulder. "Adam is getting his own food."

Her mother's happiness dimmed a little because of her usual refusal to call Adam "Dad", but not much. Belinda wondered if she'd crossed into the Twilight Zone when she'd knocked on the door the night before. Maybe it had happened when she fell asleep on her parents' couch.

"If you came around more often, you'd know things have changed a lot around here." Her mother raised her hand at Belinda's automatic eye roll. "That's not an exaggeration, I swear. Just the truth. He's a different man, honey."

Yeah, Belinda would believe that when he stopped hoping she would drop dead with every glare.

At the loud complaints coming from the kitchen, Belinda set the tray aside, trying to remember what had brought her here.

Amanda watched the plate of food go untouched, her eyes registering another degree of disappointment, then she grasped Belinda's hand and pulled her to her feet. Together, they left the living room and headed through the hall to the bedrooms at the back of the house. Familiar worn carpet led the way to Belinda's room, once shared with two of her sisters. Last night, Amanda offered the room, but Belinda had refused. Now, there was no choice.

The old twin beds were still in place, three of them equidistant from one another, still covered with pink, frilly bedspreads. Belinda smiled down at them, remembering how out of place she'd felt under those frou-frou pieces of pink lace. At least, that's what she'd resentfully told herself while swimming in her mother's joy of having daughters. Some of it must have stuck, though, because even now her room felt wrong without something lacy. Something pretty.

She sat on her old bed, felt the still familiar sag to the middle from having so many people on it at the same time, all the time. Even when they weren't scared, her siblings found their way into her bed.

"I always admired that about you," Amanda said quietly, standing, hands clasped in front of her.

Belinda looked up at her, but even though she was sitting, it wasn't very far to curve her neck.

Amanda Riggs was tiny, her cap of pale blonde hair dusted liberally with white now, as if she'd forgotten to shake flour out of it after a baking day. In a lot of ways, Belinda knew she looked like her mother. The same hair, the same fine pale skin. But where Amanda was dainty, Belinda had taken her father's rawboned height and dark eyes. Not to mention his big mouth and apparently, his ability to take the world on the chin.

"Admired me?" she asked, confused.

"Oh, yes." Amanda sighed, finding a place to sit on Corrine's old bed so that their knees nearly brushed. "That strength you had. The tenacity. You took all your brothers and sisters under your wing, did more for them than I did. You never went to anyone for help, always insisted you could do it all by yourself. Even when you were a baby, you were so independent. You never needed anyone."

Belinda thought of Lucas and knew how untrue that was. Immediately, her eyes began to fill again.

Amanda sat next to her and took her hands into her own. "I always wondered what I would do if you ever needed me. I know it won't make up for anything, but if I can, honey, I'll do anything you need."

Could she? Would her mother even be able to understand?

Then Amanda asked the one question Belinda couldn't deny. "Is it Lucas?"

She laid her head on Amanda's shoulder and sighed, closing her eyes and letting her tears fall. Immediately, her mother turned and took her into her arms, giving Belinda the one place she could let down all her walls and cry. Amanda crooned, laying Belinda's head on her lap, running her hands through her hair until the storm was over.

"I know you think I don't know what real love is," Amanda murmured, still brushing Belinda's hair back from her face. "You don't respect me because you think I let him break me and crush me."

"Oh, Mama." She'd never wanted to say that, but it couldn't be missed. All the silences had to have been easy to put together.

"If I could take back all the hurts you kids had, I would. If I could change my choices, I wish I could say I would do things differently, but I'm not sure I could have. You don't get to choose who you love or how you love them. Or even how they go about loving you. I know it doesn't excuse anything, Belinda, but I do love him. Good and bad, I love him."

"He hurt you." Didn't that make any difference?

"I hurt him, too." Amanda chuckled. "Remember the time I went after him with the rolling pin?"

Belinda frowned, then suddenly the memory of her father—half shaved, in a pair of boxers—running for his life to his rig while her mother swung that old wooden rolling pin, still covered with flour and pastry. Her smile and laugh caught her by surprise.

"He didn't have his keys." She remembered his panic, once he realized his underwear didn't have pockets.

"And he climbed on top of the cab, yelling for David or Ella to come and save him." Amanda laughed, probably at the thought of Lucas's parents rushing to her husband's rescue. They were nice

people, but Adam was better off without his fate in their hands. “It wasn’t very funny at the time, but every time he’s a jackass, I remember how he looked up there while you kids laughed and pointed at him. That’s one of my best memories.”

“Why *were* you chasing him?” Belinda wiped her face with the back of her hand, reluctantly coming back to a sitting position.

Amanda’s smile stayed as it was, her gentle touch soothing Belinda’s heated skin as she wiped the other cheek dry of tears. “Oh, who knows anymore? Most of the things we argued about were stupid. I know you don’t believe it, but I gave as good as I got. Your father was always louder than he was smart. A good wife knows how to get her husband where he’ll miss it and he eventually stops doing the things that make you craziest.” She laughed again, a knowing laugh that Belinda couldn’t join.

She felt her humor drift. “*I* didn’t know how,” she said softly.

Amanda, still smiling, looked at her absently. “What?”

“*I* didn’t know how to get him where he’d miss it. Not for a really long time,” Belinda repeated, watching Amanda finally realize what she meant. The words she’d never said, had tried not to think. The things she’d blamed herself for...when she shouldn’t have. “I was just a little girl. And you never stopped him.”

Amanda’s shoulders sagged further. “I always wondered when we’d get around to talking about this.”

Belinda shrugged, then stared down at her worn boots. “There never seemed to be much point.” They would have just argued.

“Maybe,” Amanda agreed. “Most of it should never have happened. And I should have done more to protect you from it. I know that now.”

Now? She’d had to *think* about it? “Why didn’t you know it then?”

Amanda sighed heavily. “Truthfully, there were times I thought you had some of it coming. You were always so provoking as a child. The way you prodded him... It’s like you *wanted* him angry at all of us.”

“*I wanted* him to go away,” Belinda corrected, rising to her feet. “I wanted to feel safe, Mom.”

Amanda just shook her head. “It’s like I’ve always said. For being so alike, you and your father are never going to understand each other. If you’d just consider the way he thinks—”

“I shouldn’t *have* to understand, Mama,” Belinda said tightly. She hated to admit she was like the pigheaded man in even the slightest ways, but the will she used to stand up to him all these years obviously hadn’t come from her mother. “There’s nothing to understand about dragging your child across the room by her arm or her hair.”

Amanda paled, her hands slowly drifting to her lap.

“I shouldn’t have *had* to understand when he slapped me instead of hugged me. When he wished over and over again that something bad would happen to me, like it was a joke. When he says he’d be glad if I never came home again. What’s to understand?”

Her mother wanted to say something typical. Belinda could see it on her face, but this time, she couldn't let the old excuses end the discussion.

"It doesn't matter that he was drunk. He wasn't any different when he was sober. Maybe I did provoke him sometimes, but he *never* had the right to do that to me. Or to you. I don't care what he's like now. It doesn't even matter what he was like *then*. Don't tell me to blame myself. I won't excuse him or say it was okay, because it wasn't, Mama. It *wasn't*."

Belinda realized that while her hands had fisted, the words had finally come out. No more bottlenecking. No more cold feelings choking the sense right out of her. She was calm.

And she was right.

She wasn't to blame for her father's behavior. All the abuse, all the abasement. It was never her fault.

She looked at her mother with suddenly clear eyes. The urge to protect her was still strong, but the knowledge that you couldn't save people who didn't want to be saved leached the anger from her soul, leaving only an old heartache behind. Amanda remained sitting on the bed, her face so sad, strangely looking aged in a way Belinda had never noticed before. She was fragile, awaiting accusation and hate, expecting to be crushed.

Was that what Lucas meant about *her*? That she'd had no faith in herself? Had she spent all these years trying so hard not to be her mother only to end up exactly like her, locked behind fears and rationalizations that never rang true?

"Why didn't you ever leave him?" Belinda asked.

Amanda's smile was solemn. "I loved him."

"Didn't you love *us*?"

"Oh, sweetheart, of course I did. I *do*. I love all of you." She just didn't love herself. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

Belinda ached, knowing it was true. Amanda Riggs didn't know who she was without Adam to define her. But what about herself? Who was she to point fingers? Hadn't she fallen apart without Lucas?

But somehow, her broken heart was different.

Lucas didn't define her. Making him happy wasn't how she spent her day. She didn't worship him. She didn't make every decision by his leave. In fact, for the last twenty-five years, she'd made her decisions whether they aggravated and annoyed him or not.

He was gone and yes, she'd folded emotionally. She'd been lost, like a compass blinded to north. But she'd still continued. The world kept turning. Her work continued getting done. Even the dog had gotten fed on a daily basis. Losing Lucas hadn't been the end of her existence.

Just the dumbest decision of her life.

They were never going to have a peaceful life together. He was too grumpy, stodgy and pushy. And those were his good points. He was also loyal and determined, and he had the kindest heart she knew. He

would never ask the things of her that Adam demanded from his wife. And as his wife, she would never stand to be dominated.

She decided to skip a list of her own good qualities—that wouldn't take long and really, the groveling should be saved for when he'd hear it.

Looking down at her own hands, Belinda forced them to open, forced herself to push her hurts and her fears away, sighing when the coiled energy seeped from her fingertips into the house that had borne them.

"I have to go, Mama."

"To Lucas?"

Belinda tilted her head. "How did you know about him, anyway?"

Amanda smiled. "He came to see us yesterday. About you and your fountain."

*Lucas? Here?*

"He must love you very much, honey. He was so sick, but he came anyway. I've never seen anyone treat your father like a gnat before. He's been a royal pain ever since." Which usually involved his stomping and other people ducking, but Amanda simply looked amused. "I knew he would wear you down sooner or later."

"I thought you wanted me to marry Kyle." Her mother's sense of reality did not need some misconceptions about which Lonnigan was which.

"Heavens, where would you get that idea? I love Kyle, truly, but you'd be walking all over him in no time."

"You wanted me to marry the *nice* Lonnigan boy, remember?"

"I know. Lucas *is* nice."

Because nice men were capable of treating her father like a "gnat"? Better to let Amanda rewrite history. Fixing it would take more time than Belinda had. Right now, she wanted to get to Lucas.

Amanda stood quietly, immediately smoothing the blanket from the rumpling they'd created over the old dents. Belinda watched her, then took her mother's hands and pulled them over her own heart. No matter her own hurts, she still loved Amanda. Still wished she could do more for her.

"There's room for you with me," she whispered. "There's always room for you. That won't ever change."

Her mother's faded blue gaze met hers with understanding. Then she shook her head. "My place is with your father. I'm happy with that."

*You can't change them*, Lucas had said. Maybe that had been part of it, too. She had to stop trying. There had to come a time when she lived her life for herself and it had to start now. She let go of her mother's hands and stepped back. A few steps later, she was out of her childhood room, leaving the hurts there where they belonged. As quietly as she'd come, she left the house.

She knew where home was now and for the first time, she wasn't scared to go there.

“How sick is he?”

If Lucas didn’t know his fever was ridiculously high, he’d have thought Belinda was in his apartment. It sounded like her—loud, brash and pissed off.

“For God’s sake, Lonnigan, what have you done to yourself now?” her imaginary voice asked in his head.

Lucas managed to lift a ten-pound eyelid to see her peering down at him, pale, worried and touching his face with cold, cold fingers. Well, if he was going to boil his brain, at least he got nice delusions like this.

“Oh, the usual,” Kyle was saying tiredly. “First, he worked himself into a state. Didn’t eat, didn’t sleep, and then I guess one of his neighbor’s kids here had a nasty case of bronchitis, which Lucas caught along with half the building. Did the moron go to the doctor? No. He spent two weeks turning it into a lung infection, then pneumonia. I’m surprised he’s still alive, he’s been so damn stubborn.”

“What’s his temp?”

Keeping his eye slit open took too much energy, so Lucas let it drift back shut. He could still hear them, could still feel her next to his bed.

“Just under a hundred and five. We made breakfast on his forehead this morning.”

“Why didn’t you take him to the hospital?”

“He won’t go. The doctor says to keep him cool and to keep fluids in him, but we can’t even keep the medicine in him. I’m not looking forward to making use of that suppository—”

“Go home, Kyle,” Belinda interrupted, just the way Lucas hoped she would. Someone had to. Fever or no fever, he’d kill Kyle before that particular indignity took place.

“I’m not leaving him here with you.” Great, *now* Kyle was playing the grand protector.

“Then go out to the living room. You need some rest. I can take care of this.”

“He’s not a slab of metal, kid.”

“No, he’s not. But if you stay on your feet much longer, you’re going to end up just like him, and unlike you, I’ve got no problem making use of suppositories on others.”

It sounded like Kyle was thinking about it. What the hell was there to think about? *He* would have ditched by now.

“You can’t just spring in and spring out again, Belinda,” Kyle said quietly. Lucas tried to strain to hear, but his voice grew softer and the blackness of the fever started sucking him down. “I won’t let you hurt him anymore.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied, sounding dismissive and...worried? Lucas knew then that this was just another hallucination of the fever. Her hand slid into his and her hold followed him into the

darkness, along with her dreamed words. "I'm not going anywhere, ever again."

It was a nice dream.

Well, it was until he heard her voice again.

"...sorry, Lucas, but I'm guessing this is probably going to hurt."

"What is?" he managed to say through lips that felt cracked and dried. Why did all his bones ache this way? And why did he feel so dizzy? And when did he stand up?

"This is," she said, then he was sprayed with ice cold blades. At least, that's what it felt like. Minutes later, he realized it was only water. And she was in it with him. The unrelenting heat started to abate, in tiny steps, but the cool water turned hot by the time it reached his feet. "There you go, let's lean you back into this chair..."

How she got a chair into his shower, he couldn't imagine, but he settled into it like a sagging bag of aching bones and the cold water streamed against his face. A touch of heaven in the pit of hell.

"This is the best dream," he said to himself.

"Sure it is, Lonnigan," Belinda's dream-voice said. "I'm sure you've *never* had better dreams than a raging fever and ice-cold showers."

"Dream of you every night. This time you feel like you." He lifted sore arms to double check she was still there, letting his hands slide over her whipcord body. Her skin felt smooth, its familiar texture even more defined beneath the fever-magnified sensitivity.

"Open your mouth." She held something in her hand, something long and obscured by the overhead lights.

He did as he was told, surprised to taste sweetness on his tongue. Thick and sweet. Orange. But it was quickly gone. Every now and then, she'd ask him again to open his mouth, gifting him with another taste of oranges. Between the cold water and the gentle rub of her hands over his aching body, he felt himself relaxing a little more. Soon, he was being dried and shifted again.

"Stay with me?" he asked. It was wrong to ask. She hated being asked for anything. But this was a dream, and in his dreams, Belle didn't mind slipping into his bed with him, beneath the sheet, just to hold him in her arms.

"I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with me now, remember?"

He smiled, sleep starting to claim him again, pulling her close, where she felt best. "Been stuck with you forever, Belle. But I like it."

"Yeah," she said softly, brushing her lips against his forehead. "I like it, too. Now go to sleep, before I slug you one."

Holding her tight, that's exactly what he did.



## Chapter Eleven

It took two more days to break the fever. Belinda leaned back in Lucas's chair, watching him sleep peacefully. He still coughed, but the weak thrashing and heaviest wheezing had stopped. They'd managed to bully him to his doctor's office once his fever was low enough to move him, and he'd received a shot of concentrated antibiotics as well as strict instructions to keep him hydrated. Her little trick with the liquid Motrin, fed in painfully small drops at a time, chipped away at the fever, giving him faint relief while the antibiotics did their work.

She wished she could climb in his bed the way Sparky had the second he'd arrived, but apart from a few minutes after that shower, she'd kept herself clear. Jessica had run errands for her, going to her loft for some changes of clothes, a few special items and to collect the dog. The three of them had created an indefinite sense of shifts. She stayed with him overnight, the only one of the three who had no trouble being awake all night long. Kyle made her sleep for an hour or two when he took over in the morning, but for the most part, she stayed by Lucas's side. Every hour, she managed to get sips of water into him and at least a few spoonfuls of broth. Sick unto falling down or not, he wouldn't accept more than a leant shoulder to help him to the bathroom to relieve himself, which she counted as something in their favor. As long as his body was working—and he was cranky about it—he had to be on the mend.

Finally, at four a.m. on the second day, his brow was cool. She let her hand remain there, being tickled by his inky hair falling over his forehead. She gave herself the luxury of ruffling her fingers through it. It rippled under her touch, the straight strands finally long enough to fall back into place. She couldn't remember the last time Lucas had let his hair grow beyond military lengths. The thick masses had always been his best feature, but he kept them shorn, probably to differentiate himself from his brother. As if they needed a haircut to be told apart.

She longed to stretch her limbs out next to him, to lay her cheek over his heart and listen to the steady beat. For now, though, she contented herself with touching his face.

His lids fluttered, the heavy lashes lifting carefully. He blinked slowly, probably realizing the haze was gone. Then he must have registered her touch, because he lolled his head her way, confusion in the dark blue gaze that met hers for the first time in days.

"You're really here."

She nodded, feeling tears sting her eyes. "Yup."

"Did Kyle call you?"

"No, I came all on my own. He tried to throw me out a couple of times, though."

"Yeah?" His barely-there grin made her chest swell with relief. He really was going to be okay.

"I swear." She raised her hand in a girl-scout pledge. "It's just lucky I'm wearing my clodhoppers or I'd have been pitching my tent at the front door. He'll be walking funny for a few weeks, but at least he stopped trying to get rid of me."

"He's protective."

"Yes, he is. He's a good brother, Lucas."

"I know, but he's still a moron." He finally lost the battle to keep his eyes open and went back to sleep.

She let him, content to watch him for a while. When she finally tried to slide her hand free from him, he startled back awake. "Don't go."

"I won't," she said, ridiculously thrilled that he still wanted her. He shouldn't. He was a smart man. He should have ditched her spiteful self years ago and never looked back. But he never had...and she was going to spend the rest of her life making it up to him. To herself. "You keep forgetting. You're stuck with me."

"Love you," he said, almost sounding like he was correcting her.

"I know you do." She pressed her lips to his cheek and eased her arm free. "I love you, too. Now sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

"Promise."

"I promise. Now sleep."

He tried to say more, but he was back in the hold of sleep and there was no getting free. She crept from the room, taking Sparky with her so the pup could get some fresh air. She stayed quiet, finding Jessica asleep on the couch in the living room and Kyle in the kitchen, sitting at the breakfast bar, head resting on his forearm.

Kyle lifted his head, blinking blearily at her. "Everything okay?"

Belinda nodded. She could say a lot of things about Kyle, but she'd never again accuse him of always putting himself before his brother. "Fever broke. He's sleeping now, but I think he's through the worst of it. My brothers both got this when they were little. Losing the fever is a good sign. He just needs sleep now. I was wondering, could you take Sparky out for a bit?"

"Sure." He rubbed his face with the back of his hand. As he passed her, he surprised her by laying a kiss on her cheek.

She frowned at him. "I thought you were mad at me."

"I was. But he's better and you're still here. Gives me hope that I wasn't wrong about pushing you two together all these years."

"You need *your* temperature checked." She pushed at his side, making him laugh.

“You’re good medicine, kid. Bitter, but good.”

“Thanks.” She rolled her eyes and headed for the small table on the other side of the room. The snick of the front door closing behind him was a relief. The vigil had taken its toll and the relief was almost as exhausting. She ached for the chair and just a minute or two to close her eyes, but she had the strangest sense of someone watching her. She turned, ready to threaten various precious parts of Kyle’s anatomy only to gasp at who she found. Lucas, wearing a dark blue robe, rumpled hair and the sexiest frown Belinda had ever seen.

“Where were you?” he demanded as if he’d been looking for her for hours. Given his exhaustion, he probably felt like he had.

“Right here.” She tried not to smile. He wouldn’t appreciate it.

“You said you were staying.” The accusation in his gaze was the same as she’d seen when he was six. And just as cute.

“I am.”

“Good.” Except now he looked more aggravated.

Belinda pushed her tiredness away and put an arm around him. “Come on, big boy, let’s get you back to bed. Better yet, another shower. Your sheets need changing.”

“It’ll wait.”

“No it won’t.”

He stopped her in the hall by leaning against the wall and scooping her in front of him. “It’ll wait.”

She swallowed, meeting his fiery gaze. “All right.”

The cute look disappeared, leaving an impatient strain to his mouth and his breathing. “Say it again.”

“Say what?”

“What you said when I was falling asleep. Say it again.”

She thought back, then smiled as his hands cupped her jaw. She took his lapels into her hands and shook her head at him. No bottleneck this time. “I love you, Lucas.”

He looked down at her, then closed his eyes as if he were savoring the sound. She rose on her toes to whisper it again, right in his ear where he’d hear it for sure. His arms tightened around her, pulling her close and breathing deep against her neck.

She let herself enjoy the embrace, but not for long. He shouldn’t be up. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up. There’ll be plenty of time for talking later.”

“You’re sure?”

Not really, but she would try to be. She nodded and he finally let her lead him back into the bedroom.

Lucas let her fuss with his bed after he showered and brushed his teeth. His skin felt raw, his gums

were swollen and he was pretty sure he'd die if he didn't lie down again soon, but there was still some measure of happiness that she was insisting on fresh pillowcases and fluffing his pillows first.

She finally let him sink into the soft, crisp fabric and he sighed in relief. Then he tumbled her down next to him with a yank on her hand.

"This is not going to help you get better, Lonnigan."

He coughed, none too pleasantly, and had to agree with her. "Even if you did all the work, I'm not sure I could handle you."

"Since I'm such a slave driver when it comes to sex, better for you to save your strength." She settled him back against his pillows, but stayed on the mattress with him, leaning her head on his arm, her bent leg over his and her arm around his waist. It was nice, lying together peacefully. It wouldn't last, but it was nice.

"You ready to talk to me now?" he asked, watching her face for any sign of panic.

She grimaced. "Probably not."

"Belle, I'm a sick man. Show a *little* mercy."

She shifted, rotating until she could cross her arms over her breasts and her feet at the ankles. He watched her stew, wondering suddenly if those were his socks on her feet, and waited for her to talk.

Maybe he could fit a nap in.

"I don't know where to start," she complained, ruining that idea.

He stifled a yawn. "Anywhere's good."

"Thanks, that helps a lot." But she sounded more amused than angry. Always a preferable tone.

"How about where you were before you came here?"

She shrugged. "My mother's."

That gave him pause. He didn't remember being too friendly with her father. If Lucas had made him angry and she walked blindly into it... The thought made his blood cold. "Did he hurt you?"

"Oh, he was warm and loving as always. But don't worry, he kept his hands to himself."

"He damn well better have." Coughing erupted from his chest without warning, burning his lungs from the inside out while he strained to get it back under control.

"We should do this another time," she said, now on her knees on his bed, pushing his hair back with a worried expression on her face.

"We do it now." He dragged in a shaky breath through gritting teeth.

"It can wait."

"I've waited my entire life, Belle. No more."

She nodded, but made him sip at some water before she'd say even one more word. "After the banquet— No, I should start before that. When we argued. I didn't mean what I said, Lucas. Not any of it. You were right. I *was* terrified. I couldn't make myself stop sniping at you and when you said those

things—”

“What things?”

“You called me a faithless, fragile coward,” she reminded dryly.

Damn, but it sounded like something he’d say if pushed too far. He couldn’t remember clearly. Then again, it wasn’t what *he* said that stuck with him.

“You didn’t mean what?” His tired body managed enough energy to stiffen with tension.

She paused, took a breath and pushed it out. “I lied about the baby.”

He expected relief, but all he felt was more hurt. “Why would you say something like that if it wasn’t true?”

“Because I wanted you to go. I wanted you to hate me and I knew nothing else would—”

“Why?” he demanded. A hacking cough begged to burst forth, but he clamped his throat around it to keep it in.

She looked him in the eye, abject misery all over her face. “Because I realized that day that I *wasn’t* like my mother. Part of me is still afraid I might get there, but the truth is, I’ve never taken after her. I’m like *him*,” she growled, self-disgust draping her shoulders, causing them to slump. “I *am* a selfish, fragile, faithless coward. I’ve needed you in my life, all my life. And I think I resented that.”

“Resented?” Past tense. That was good, wasn’t it?

Belinda climbed off the bed to pace, her loose cargo pants barely hanging onto her slim hips. “Adam loves my mother. I’ve never been able to argue that. I’ve never known two people more in love than they are.”

“Belle, what they have isn’t love. It’s strangulation.”

She nodded. “I know. God, even they know it. But it’s still love. Under all the mistrust and abuse and anger and cruelty, it’s still love. It’s passion. When they’re good together, you have never seen anything so incredible. But they never should have had children. My mother was too weak to fight for anything but her right to be with him and my father...he was too jealous.”

As if Amanda had ever thought of anything but Adam. “Of what?”

Belinda shrugged, stopping and shoving her hands into her uppermost pockets. “Of us. Of the time she needed to spend on us kids. He wanted to be first and only in her life. We got in the way. We needed time, money, food, energy. He resented the hell out of us. Especially me. Because I was first.”

Lucas stared at her, trying to get his brain to see where she was going, but his insight wasn’t fast enough. He couldn’t pull her back.

“Of all of us kids, I’m the most like him. I don’t back down from a fight. I don’t kowtow to his bullying. I’m a bully right back. He doesn’t know what to do with me and I’m the biggest threat to his peace with my mother.”

“You’re her protector.”

"I tried to be," she said wearily. "I tried so hard." He saw the tear that fell from her bowed head, but she didn't seem to want him to. "You can't fight for someone who doesn't want to be saved. I saved my sisters, though. And my brothers. Some of them, anyway. He was too busy fighting me off to bother with them. I don't know about the others."

He might be running a little slow, but he wasn't *that* slow. "What others?"

Now she looked up at him, this time her face truly guilty. He knew by looking at her that she hadn't let it slip on accident. This was the secret she held the tightest, the one he could never get her to explain. "Adam has other kids. Another wife, another whole family."

Lucas struggled to sit up further. "Why haven't I heard about this before? How do you know?"

"I...I followed him. I found two of his sons. They look like Bailey, if you can believe it." The same dark hair and dark eyes as her brother. Spitting images of their father.

"Adam knows about this?"

"Oh yeah." She started pacing again. "I made *sure* he knew. I walked right up to the door and waited for the bastard to open it up. Why do you think he finally started acting like a human being? Well, to everyone else. He knows if I tell my mother he has another family... God, he drove cross-country. There could be dozens of other Riggses all over the place. If she knew, she'd leave him. Even my mother has her limits."

None that Lucas had ever heard of. "You're protecting him?"

Belinda shook her head. "No, I'm protecting *her*. All of them. For the rock-bottom price of his utmost hatred, I made him quit drinking, treat his children like they're his and keep his hands to himself. If he raises so much as a finger to her or those grandkids, I'll ram the truth down his throat so fast he'll choke on it before she ever gets a *chance* to leave him. He hates me anyway, so I figured it was a good deal."

"Except?" There had to be a *but* in there somewhere.

"Except...most nights, I think about the two boys I saw in that house. It's been ten years, but in my mind, they're still about eight years old, staring at me, trying to figure out who I am and why their father never comes home anymore."

"Belle." Lucas reached out for her, but she shook her head and stayed too far away.

"I was autocratic, so damn full of myself and what I wanted. I destroyed those boys' family without even thinking about it. That's the kind of person I am, Lucas. That's why I didn't deserve you. I couldn't even imagine what I would do to you. I didn't want to know what it would be like when *your* eyes were the ones I was haunted by. But I was haunted anyway."

"Belinda, you're not like him," he said with as much authority as he could. "You're a pain in the ass—no one in their right mind is going to say otherwise—but you don't hurt people because it makes you feel better about yourself. You've never built yourself up by tearing anyone else down. If anything, you're so busy tearing into yourself, you don't have the damn time to do it to anyone else."

Her eyes finally met his, wet and tortured. "I did it to you. I faked cutting up the lace so you'd leave me alone, once and for all."

He stared at her, speechless.

"Are you stunned or angry?"

"I think I'm too tired to decide." Didn't she realize cutting up the lace was what finally got them together? Or would a smart man keep quiet?

"I was worried your ego might get dented." She shook her head, obviously reassessing.

Hell, some people would say his ego was indestructible. "The only thing that ever really hurt me was watching what you do to yourself."

She finally smiled at him, a shaky grin despite the tears on her face. "You were at the banquet, weren't you? I didn't imagine you?"

He nodded.

"Why did you leave?"

"Aside from the fact that I was about to lose an organ coughing so much?"

She walked back to his side of the bed. "Aside from that."

He took hold of her hand and pulled her down to sit next to him. "Because if I didn't leave, I was going to go up on that stage and drag you home until I could shake some sense into you."

She looked around, amused. "I can see how your leaving really prevented that."

"Yeah, well." He watched her coil her fingers through his, then he made room for her when she kept his hand around her waist and lay back down with him, snuggling into his side.

"You had me really worried, Lonnigan. Kyle's lost half his hair and Jessica has enough soup stock to last you the next six months."

"Sorry." He smiled into her hair. "A man has to do what he has to do, I guess."

"Please, do not even try to claim you got this sick just to get me back over here."

"It would have worked if it had been a plan."

"Just be grateful it wasn't. As it is, I have to spend the next couple of years making you pay for scaring me like this."

"Yeah, how many do you think it will take?"

"Oh, fifty, probably. Maybe sixty. People in my family seem to live for-freaking-ever."

He frowned. "Is this some sort of proposal?"

She tilted her face up at him, her cheeks flushing. "That depends, I guess."

*Damn woman and her conditions.* "On what?"

"On if you can forgive me."

"For?" This should be good.

"You're just going to make me say it all, aren't you?"

"My fantasy, *my* happily ever after, so I'm going to go with yes." And smile the whole way through.

"Can you forgive me for being afraid of loving you?" she asked softly, laying her hand over his heart.

"For being pigheaded and cruel? For hurting you?"

"What about for hurting yourself?"

She nodded resolutely, if not completely convinced. "I'm working on it."

"Anything you want to let me in on?"

"I told you I went to see my mother."

"And?"

She groaned, bringing her hand up to riffle through the blonde hair on her head, only slightly longer than his own. "I finally sat down and talked with her. I guess it started with what you said to me about what I deserved. At the banquet, Yvonne tried to threaten me when I won. She said I didn't deserve it. But then I had you in my head, telling me I should be proud of myself, of my work. No one has ever been proud of me, Lucas. I didn't know what to do with it. But when I looked at that crowd of people clapping, I knew I'd earned it. That I'd done something worth being proud of. But it didn't mean anything without you there."

"I was there." He pulled her as close as his sore arms and ribs would let him. "I couldn't have missed that night, even if you and I never worked things out. I needed to see you succeed."

"And after you did, you ran away like a little girl," she added sarcastically.

At least admitting she loved him hadn't changed her so drastically. "You have to work on your proposing skills."

She laughed.

"I'd pushed you enough, Belle. I could push and push all I wanted, but if you weren't ready for me, we were just going to keep hurting each other. Backing you into a corner wasn't the way to make you love me."

"We were trying to set each other free." She sounded almost awed. "Do you realize that's the one thing my parents were never capable of?"

"What your parents have might be love, Belle, but it's not the only kind out there. It doesn't have to be the kind *you* have. You have to trust yourself—trust me—enough to try for something better."

"I know. I realized when I was talking to her. We're not like them. They hurt each other to squeeze more love out of each other. The only reason *we* hurt each other is because we keep trying to protect each other from ourselves."

"It sounds stupid when you put it that way," he grumbled. He liked to think of their attempts as sacrifices.

"It *was* stupid," she insisted. "Which means protecting you can't be so high on my list anymore. I'll have to let you have it with both barrels now."

He'd be dead by dawn. "Have you considered talking instead of arguing?"



She looked up with a slim raised eyebrow.

Damn, couldn't she give him the smallest break? "All right, but we could at least try talking things out calmly *before* breaking down and yelling."

"Maybe we should work that into the wedding vows," she said with a laugh.

Lucas lurched to a sitting position, pulling her awkwardly up with him.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded, not helping in the slightest.

"Looking for my pants. What day is it? There's flights to Vegas every day, aren't there?"

"Lucas." She laughed, a tinkling, easy sound, even as she shoved him back into bed. "We're not going to Vegas."

"Yes we are. You change your mind too damn quick for anything else."

"No, we're going to have a nice wedding, with people watching and everything. I'm even going to wear that wedding veil you bought me."

That opened his eyes open. "That was a *wedding veil*?"

"Yes, dumbass. When else does a woman wear a twelve-foot-long veil?"

How was *he* supposed to know? "You'd really wear it? Do the entire embarrassing event?"

"The whole nine yards."

Lucas narrowed his eyes at her, looking for the loophole she expected to use. "The white dress and somebody's crying kid dripping their way down the aisle, too?"

"If that's what you want, that's what we'll get. I'm sure one of my sisters has an available drippy kid or two."

"What do *you* want?" he asked with a faint frown. "I don't want you to put on some show just for me."

"But *I* do. I want to show you off, Lonnigan. It's not every day I get to dress you up, drag you out in front of people you know and force you to be nice to them. That alone is worth letting my mom sob all over satin dresses. And there is the added bonus of making my father foot the bill."

"He'll want to walk you down the aisle," Lucas had to remind her. It would be the first time in history a bride might get into a brawl before being handed to her prospective husband.

She snorted. "Like hell he will, but he'll probably have to."

"You'd be all right with it?"

She shrugged, a touch of unease tightening her lips. "Five minutes on his arm for a lifetime on yours?" She shook her head, the fine strands of her hair falling over her forehead while her dark eyes sparkled. "That's not even a question, Lonnigan. The good news is that I get to leave him behind. Him and every bad memory he brings with him. We get to start over. You and me, like new."

"Does that mean you'll finally stop holding our childhood over my head?"

"I said *like* new. Be realistic."

The next question would probably kill the mood, but he had to ask. “What about having kids?”

He got the typical Belinda eye roll instead.

“It’d be nice to know what’s a possibility or not.”

She took a few minutes to think about it, laying her head on his shoulder, thankfully not squirming away. “I’m not ready for kids yet,” she finally said.

He held his breath, holding on to that “yet”.

“I don’t think it would be too bad of an idea to have one or two someday. Not seven, though, okay? And they’ll be the crankiest kids on the planet. You know that, don’t you?”

He grinned. This was really happening. It didn’t seem real...but it was. It really was. “Probably worse than either of us.”

“We’ll need a plan for childcare.”

He coughed again, this time on laughter. “We’re going to need a whole damn constitution.”

“No matter what, I keep working,” she insisted, her pointer finger already up for battle.

“You think *I’m* going to quit?” he asked.

“No.”

“So why should you? Which means we’re even. We’ve got a plan. We’ll get married.”

“And live happily ever after,” she added with a frown.

“Why do I sense another ‘but’ in there somewhere?” He groaned, burrowing the back of his head into his pillow. He wanted to sleep, damn it.

“It’s probably going to take me a while to get any good at this,” she said, sounding a little too similar to a horror movie.

“Good at what?”

“Being an *us*.”

“We’ve always been an *us*,” he replied, relieved. “We just didn’t admit it.”

“I’m serious, Lucas. I’m not my sisters. They seemed to take to couplehood like ducks to water. I’ve never taken to anything that way, not even art. I’m bound to get scared.”

He kissed her head. “So am I. But I’ll just hold on to you a little tighter. And you can hold on to me.”

“You really think we can make this work?” she asked, worried enough to be biting her lip.

He freed the flesh from her teeth with a gentle pull from his thumb. That was his favorite lip, couldn’t have her denting it. “I think we can. I mean, if you think about it, the only thing we *haven’t* done so far is try.”

Then she smiled. Without sadness, worry or fear. It was the most beautiful smile he’d ever seen in his life. And he knew, no matter what battles they might have, trials or aggravations, she’d be in his arms every day for the rest of his life.

“Sleep with me.”

“Anything else you’d like to demand?” she asked, her voice sounding far away as he let himself relax into sleep.

“Only forever, Belle.”

“All right, but only because you asked politely.”

He smiled to himself. He didn’t ask. But that was okay. He could let her think she had the last word. As long as he had her, Belinda Riggs could have any damn word she wanted.

## Epilogue

*I am not going to whimper.*

She groaned, thank you very much. She groaned and her legs fell open beneath the guiding hands of her husband. Absolute surrender had a way of turning her into a lump of jelly, something Lucas knew good and well. Not that he stopped, damn him.

Instead, she felt his smile against the wet lips of her sex. Then he delved his tongue inside again, a slow, devastating entry. He eased it into her, circling her internal walls with thorough swipes. When he'd laved every drop of moisture from her, he started all over again, slower than the last time.

*Ah shit, I whimpered.*

In response, he moved up again, swirling over her clit, surrounding it to draw it deep.

"Lucas!" Her body shuddered completely without her consent, her hands knotting into his hair to keep him exactly where he was while she rode the volcanic pleasure of her orgasm. Not that he seemed to have any interest in leaving. Why would he, when he was getting exactly what he wanted?

She let go, melting back onto their bed while he lapped lazily at her folds, easing her back down from possibly the biggest explosion she'd ever known.

"I think I like this game," he rumbled. His voice sent another shiver through her, which seemed to make him chuckle. His big hand settled over the small swell of her belly, caressing gently and making shushing sounds. "Just take slow breaths. You don't want to upset anyone down here."

"Oh sure, think of that *now*," she muttered into his pillow. Probably didn't have enough bite, since she couldn't wipe the stupid grin off her face. "And this isn't a game. I'm not going, and no amount of seducing is going to make me, either. Tell your moron brother he doesn't need me there."

Lucas stretched out his long, long body behind her, warming her already hot skin. Couldn't he hear her sizzling or was he just ignoring it? "Yes he does, you're his best friend."

Worse, he was stoking the heat up higher. She wiggled her ass against his cock, an invitation even he should have been able to pick up on.

His hands settled her hips, holding her in place so easy it was just ridiculous. He thought he was so in control here, did he? Just because he was turning her body to boneless mush.

"*Jessica's* his best friend." She blew her bangs out of her eyes in frustration. *Why isn't he inside me already?* "She's there. I don't see where he needs me."

"*Jessica's* the *bride*. She has to be there. And let me remind you, it's taken him three years to get her

there. Stop being a spoil-sport. You lost. Pay up.”

Belinda fake-sobbed, yanking her own pillow out from under him to hold over her face. “I hate weddings.”

“You liked *ours*.”

“I got to *drink* at ours.” Thanks to the two little morsels he’d knocked her up with two months ago, tequila shooters were not going to be on the menu. “As cranky as these kids are, I’ll probably throw up all over the reception table.”

“Probably.”

She pulled the pillow off to look over her shoulder at him. “You could sound a little more sympathetic about it.”

“I sympathize.”

Sure he did. That’s why his hand had drifted from her hip to her bare breasts, which had expanded from a raisin smuggling operation to a grapefruit shipping company. Much to Lucas’s absolute glee, the pig.

“No. There’s going to be a whole legion of Lonnigans there. Everyone’s going to be feeling my stomach and giving me tips on morning sickness.” Which she didn’t need. If there was one thing a Riggs knew how to handle, it was morning sickness.

Lucas frowned. Then his fingers found her oversensitive nipple, earning a gasp. He squeezed it, making stars of sensation form in her eyes and her whole body arch. Her breast pushed into his hand and her ass lurched against his cock again, which slid against her folds like a tease. He made the whole thing worse by rocking back and forth against her. Sadistic bastard.

“You said if I made you come in less than a minute, you’d go. I held up my end. Since when do *you* renege on deals?”

Since pregnancy had turned her into an orgasm machine. The man barely had to breathe on her anymore and she was so hot to trot she practically exploded at the sound of his voice.

If they’d told her that was a side effect of pregnancy, she’d have considered getting knocked up on their honeymoon. But no, dumb as she was, she’d waited until she was sure they wouldn’t kill each other with the day-in, day-out grind of being together. They’d had a few drag-out arguments—Lucas was just never going to learn how to give in gracefully—but so far, all the furniture was intact and the dog was alive and well. Then there was all that happiness she kept feeling. Didn’t seem fair to keep it to herself.

Of course, she hadn’t expected Lucas to hit double-trouble the first time out the gate. He was going to pay for that one.

“I’m not reneging,” she finally relented. Curving her back into his chest, she lifted her leg and slid it over the top of his, leaving herself wide open for him. It was his turn to groan, the broad head of his cock sinking just deep enough into her before slipping out of alignment that it counted as a kiss. “I guess I was

just hoping for double or nothing.”

She wriggled for him again, smiling when his ocean-colored eyes darkened. *Got you.*

“You sure you can take me?”

Her fingers slid down between her thighs, one nudging her clit while the others stroked his cock back where it belonged. Inside her. She smiled at the sense of completion. Knew by his answering grin that he felt the same way.

“Mm-hmm, Lonnigan. Any time, any place.”

He thrust against her, shuttling through her depths and sending her nerve endings singing. She gasped, already starting to cry out when he did it again, this time coupling it with a pinch to her nipple.

“Just remember, Belle.” He clutched her close, teeth at the sensitive cord of her neck, pressing even deeper. “You dared me.”

She was too busy coming apart around him to argue.

## About the Author

Dee Tenorio is a sick woman. Really sick. She enjoys tormenting herself by writing romantic comedies (often with sexy, grumpy heroes and smart-mouthed heroines) and sizzling, steamy romances of various genres spanning dramas with the occasional drop of suspense all the way to erotic romance. But why does that make her sick?

Because she truly seems to enjoy it.

And she has every intention of keeping at it!

If you would like to learn more about Dee and her work, please visit her website at [www.deetenorio.com](http://www.deetenorio.com) or her blog at [www.deetenorio.com/Blog](http://www.deetenorio.com/Blog).

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Test Me!

### *Coming Soon:*

Shaken



*He found the right girl...too bad he's the wrong date.*

## All Of You

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### *The Lonnigans, Book 1*

Kyle Lonnigan can't say he hasn't enjoyed the bachelor life. Good times and good money have always come easily to him. But now he wants something more, maybe even—gulp—a wife and family. Always the man with the plan, he consults the expert in boring, his identical twin Lucas, who suggests secretly switching dates for a night. Kyle never expected to meet his dream woman...and now *she* thinks he's someone else.

Career-minded Jessica Saunders fully intends to break up with Lucas, but the man who meets her for dinner is soooo delicious, she can't resist seducing him first. When she learns she's been duped—worse, that Kyle wants more than a part-time lover—she sends him packing. Jessica doesn't believe in happily ever after. If her early life taught her anything, it's to trust no one but herself.

Yet for a man who's done everything wrong, wants everything she's not and drives her absolutely insane, Kyle is getting under her skin. And into her bed. And, if she's not careful...into the heart she thought no longer existed.

Enjoy the following excerpt for All Of You:

Jessica let out a squawk when Dory suddenly shoved her inside the car with the force of a middle linebacker. It was all Kyle could do to catch her as the doors shut in front of Dory's waggling fingers.

"I'm not sure who to kill first, you or her," Jessica said into his shoulder. She found her footing and had just leveled him a dirty look when the elevator gave a sickening lurch and tumbled them into each other all over again. The lights flickered overhead and the bottom of Kyle's stomach disappeared entirely.

"Her," he heard himself saying, never afraid to throw an old lady under a bus when she had it coming. "Definitely her." As last words went, they probably weren't all too heroic, but he didn't have much time to take them back. The lack of movement was registering in his brain and he expected the panic to follow as soon as it did. His throat was already tightening. He watched his hands claw around Jessica's shoulders, denting the felt fabric of her coat. Against his will, he looked up at the sealed doors. Sealed. Like a tomb. Like the cold, metal box of death it was.

Dory wouldn't lock him in an elevator, would she? *Could* she? She wouldn't do that to him. Not that he'd gotten around to telling her about his problem. His usually insignificant, fairly-easy-to-ignore problem.

"Kyle, you're hurting me," Jessica said quietly. Or maybe she just sounded quiet. Distant. It was hard to hear anything over the blood rushing through his ears. "Kyle!"

“What? Oh...sorry.” He pried his fingers off her and took the two steps backward he could. Her frown reshaped into a softer expression. He wedged himself into the corner of the car, finding small comfort in the cool mirrors at his back and even less in the decorative handrail. It was so thin it wasn’t going to do any good should the car suddenly plummet to the...not a positive thought. Was it Dr. Rosen who’d said to think positively? Positive thinking wasn’t going to open those doors until the power came back on.

“Does this happen often?” They wouldn’t be in here long. Five minutes, tops. Right?

“Does what happen? Timed abductions of lawyers?”

“Wouldn’t I have to get you out of the building to abduct you?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to check with our criminal department when the doors open.”

She didn’t sound terribly put out. He, on the other hand, could feel that cold tingling at the base of his spine. Soon, his throat would close entirely and the edges of his vision would turn black. But not before his lungs turned leaden. Air would stop coming in and then there’d be that embarrassing hyperventilating scene. If he was lucky, he’d pass out before she realized he was a frothing, lathering idiot.

“Well, point me to your best guy.” He forced himself to keep talking. Stave off the humiliation a little longer. “This is a double ambush, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Jessica grumbled, her tone dark and foreboding.

Not wanting to think what that could mean, Kyle concentrated on the carpet. If you focused your attention intently on one thing, breathing carefully, you could maintain control. Frowning, he stared down until he could see the faint repeating pattern of the carpet loops. He focused tighter, counting the number of loops before it began to repeat.

Amazingly, the trickle of cold sweat felt less like acid and his throat stopped squeezing itself so tight. Air swept into his lungs as he saw all the space between the loops. Tons of space. Miles and miles and miles—

“You should really sit down. It’ll help.”

“Help what?” Smooth, smooth. She’d never guess he was hanging on to the railing as if it were supplying his life’s blood.

Her mouth quirked. “I had a brother once who hated small spaces.”

*Just once? You mean you can trade them in?* “Who said I hate small spaces?”

“Considering you broke into a sweat the second the car stopped and you’re barely looking me in the eye, I put it together. My brother used to throw up. You’re not going to do that, are you?”

God, he hoped not. “I won’t if you stop talking about it.”

“Sounds fair.”

His breaths were coming in short pants. “You’re being awful calm for someone who just got knocked into a metal box with a man she hates.”

"I don't hate you." Kyle decided not to get his hopes up. "When I'm not absolutely enraged with you, I actually think you're funny and interesting. Since I have no idea how long we're going to be stuck together, I see no reason to waste energy being angry."

Yup. Smart conservation of optimism. "Not until you know you can walk out sometime soon."

"Exactly." She scrunched her nose and dropped her heavy bag to the ground. She sat next to it, her long legs extended in front of her, crossed at the ankles. She couldn't have looked more comfortable if she were on a pillow. "By the way, that counting thing you're doing will only distract you from your problem for so long. If you don't find a way to get past it, eventually, you'll run out of spots in the ceiling or cracks in the wall. Then it'll just be you, three walls and two locked doors."

"If you're looking for revenge, you're getting it."

"This isn't revenge. Revenge would be telling you we don't have one of those state-of-the-art braking systems that keeps us from skidding down the shaft to our fiery doom."

Kyle swallowed at her cheerful tone.

"I'd be lying, but that's not the point. It's no fun if you don't faint, Kyle."

"I'll have to do better the next time we get hijacked in an elevator."

"Careful what you wish for. Apple slice?" Jessica flipped open her satchel and pulled out a plastic container. He shook his head as she opened it, snatched a fruit slice and crunched into it without batting an eyelash. "How'd you end up this way, anyway? You're usually so easy in your skin."

Which didn't sound like a compliment. But it *was* interest. "Spend nine months in a small dark place with Lucas and no way out, and you'd be permanently scarred too."

She laughed, this time with none of the underlying anger. This could be positive. His chest lightened a little. "Yes, but I doubt that's what caused your problem."

"Why are you so interested in my psychological problems?"

"I'm not, but it passes the time. So, what happened?"

She waited, as if he were actually going to tell her. "I don't think so."

"If I promise not to tell your brother, will you tell me?"

"Isn't that extortion?"

"Yes. Don't look so surprised. It's not as if you really know me. We had a nice night together, but good sex doesn't mean I'm not capable of eating a man alive."

Even in his strained state, Kyle had to smile as she realized what she'd just said. Her hand stuttered on its way to her mouth. She popped the remaining apple bit into her mouth and with wide eyes began chewing as if her next breath depended on it. She'd almost had him for a second there. Right up until she choked on her double entendre.

Why was she working so hard to make him think she was unfeeling? She was right, he didn't know her favorite color or why she ate in those tiny, nibbling little bites. But did she think he didn't remember

those hours they'd spent before trying to devour each other in her bed? She hadn't wanted to, but she'd shown him her personality, her interests, a tantalizing peek of the woman behind the professional mask.

Enough to make him want answers to those other questions.

He wanted to understand why just looking at her made him feel like the world stopped spinning. Or why sparring with her verbally gave him such an adrenaline rush. Why touching her felt better than touching anyone or anything else in the world.

Why she was so damn scared of him. "We could always talk about us."

"Oh no. Every time you talk about us, it's a new approach to get back in my bed."

He slid down to the ground, still holding on to the rail but feeling less desperate. "You have a nice bed."

"I know. And I don't plan to share it."

"Ever?"

"Allow me to rephrase. I don't plan to share it with *you*."

"Why not? You didn't have any complaints last time."

She made a choked, incredulous sound. "I've had nothing but complaints!"

"Not about the sex."

Her mouth pursed tightly, but rather than admit the truth, she shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm not going to sleep with you again. So all your elaborate plans, the meals, the plants, the ambushes...there's no point. Set your sights on easier game."

"Hey, I don't *hunt* women. The women I sleep with know what's going to happen and they're equal participants. Even you. And they all knew there weren't any promises. No commitment. No happily ever afters."

"What about the last few days? What do you call that?"

*A change of heart.* "You're different," he finally said with a shrug, not wanting to lie, even in this. Maybe especially in this. "I've never been with a woman who challenged me on so many levels. A woman like you brings a whole other dimension to the word stimulation." He paused, watching her until he was sure she was taking him seriously. "The truth is, one night with you just wasn't enough for me."

She stared at him, her blasé mask finally gone. But she didn't look happy. "It was hardly a *night*." He made an effort not to raise his brows, but one might have gotten away from him because she sighed. "Fine, since you're never going to let this go, yes, I liked what happened between us. But all I want in a man at this point in my life is one who can be good in bed and good enough to leave when we're done without taking it personally."

"I can do that."

She rolled her eyes. "It wasn't an invitation, Kyle."

"Wasn't it?"

She was cute when she stumbled through an attempt to speak. Her cheeks colored a soft rosy shade and she puckered her mouth over and over again, trying to find a word.

It was impossible to ignore.

He leaned over, letting go of the rails, and pressed his mouth to hers. He felt her gasp and was careful to keep the kiss gentle. Caressing. He could easily push too hard, move too fast, because of how hungry he was. He let himself breathe in her honeysuckle scent, savored the softness of her lips and felt pure relief that she wasn't pushing him away. He smoothed his hand over her jaw, gliding his thumb over the silk of her cheek, tipping her chin closer. Her lashes fluttered closed, but she didn't return the kiss. No matter how much it pleasure there was in just touching her, it wasn't enough.

He needed more than acquiescence. He needed her to want him back.

"Say yes, Jess."

Her heavy-lidded gaze met his.

He licked her bottom lip, almost a nip. "You know you want to."

The dreamy haze in her eyes cleared in an instant. Too fast, damn it. He knew it. Too eager. He braced himself for her retreat.

Instead she slid her arm over his shoulder and pulled him down for her kiss.

|

*Love can tame the wildest heart...*

## Golden Eyes

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A prequel to *Amber Eyes*

After Duncan Kennedy stumbles across poachers in his mountains, he is understandably angry. His discovery of an injured cheetah makes him even more furious. He takes the cat home until he can summon the local vet, only to get the shock of his life. When he checks on his charge, he finds not a cheetah but a gorgeous, very naked woman.

Aliyah Carter spent the past six months trapped in cheetah form, a prisoner of the poachers who took her to use in an illegal exotic-game hunt. Finally she's escaped, but now she faces another problem. A devastatingly sexy sheriff who knows her secret.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Golden Eyes:*

Duncan paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, his mind ablaze with the day's drama. A cheetah. She was a fucking cheetah. As mind-blowing events went, this one topped the list.

Apart from the fact that he had a beautiful, naked cheetah-woman camped out in his bed, he also had to deal with the fact that poachers were turning out animals to hunt in his mountains.

And to think he'd lamented the fact that nothing exciting ever happened in Elk Ridge.

His first priority... Hell, what was his first priority? He had an injured chee...woman. What was he supposed to do with her? And he had poachers to catch and make damn sure their days of importing exotic animals were over.

He spun around, took two steps toward the bedroom then stopped and walked back to the fireplace again. The bedroom was out. She was in his bed. Naked. There was only so much temptation a red-blooded man could take, and a voluptuous, golden-eyed goddess laid out like a Christmas present might well be construed a temptation.

He flexed his fingers then curled them until the skin stretched and whitened across his knuckles.

A sound from the bedroom had him yanking his head around.

He strode out of the living room and rounded the corner into his room. He caught the door frame with his hand as he came to a halt.

His breath stuck in his throat, swelled and rebounded into his chest.

The fur he had covered Aliyah with was bunched around her feet. She lay on her hip, but her upper body was twisted so that her back was pressed to the bed. Her left arm was thrown wide to the side, and her right hand was curled into a fist at her shoulder.

She was...quite beautiful, even in her state of distress. Apart from the inflamed-looking wound on her

leg, her skin was unmarred by a single blemish. Slender legs led up to rounded hips, a tiny waist and two spectacularly formed breasts.

Jesus, they were perfect. She was perfect.

Gently rounded nipples, a soft peach color, so soft looking that he caught himself swallowing as he imagined tasting them.

He closed his eyes. He couldn't go there. He was turning to leave when she moaned again. As he looked back over at her, he could see a sheen of sweat glistening on her forehead. Her head twisted from side to side, and then her eyes blinked open.

They glittered gold, and the pupils elongated and shrank to a vertical sliver. Her muscles twitched and jumped, and he realized she was fighting against her instinct to shift.

Unsure of whether he should stay or whether he should get the hell out of the bedroom and lock the door, he stood there not knowing whether to shit or go blind.

Her distress decided things for him.

He hurried to the bed and knelt over her. "Aliyah," he whispered urgently. "Aliyah, wake up, honey." He reached down to touch her damp face. Tenderly, he pushed a tendril of golden hair behind her ear, and she nuzzled her cheek into his palm.

Her eyelids fluttered, and he breathed in relief when he saw her eyes were back to normal.

"Duncan?"

"I'm here," he said. Then he looked down and realized his hand still rested against her cheek. He started to pull it away, but she caught his fingers in his hand.

"No, don't go," she said. "Please."

To his utter astonishment, she reached over and wrapped her arms around his waist then proceeded to snuggle into his body as tightly as she could go. Oh hell.

He relaxed on the bed to alleviate the awkwardness of the position, which sent her seeking further into his arms.

"It's been so long," she whispered.

"Since what?" he asked as he smoothed her hair with his hand.

"Since I felt another's touch on my skin." She rubbed her cheek over his chest and then impatiently shoved at his shirt, raising it so she could press her face to his bare skin.

She ran her hands up his ribcage and over his chest as if she couldn't get enough. Her warm lips glanced over the hollow, and he groaned as his cock, which had jumped to attention the moment she touched him, swelled painfully in his jeans.

"Aliyah. *Aliyah*," he said louder when she ignored him. "Honey, you have to stop." He tried to pry her away, but he didn't want to hurt her. He grasped her wrists and pulled just as her lips met the column of his neck. "God." It came out more as a groan than an actual word.

“Touch me.”

“Aliyah...we can’t...don’t do that...ah damn it.”

Her lips whispered close to his ear, and she nibbled delicately at the lobe.

“Touch me,” she whispered again. “Please.” She captured her hands in his and raised them to her breasts.

He might have resisted even that, though the weight of the soft mounds resting against his palms made his fingers itch to rub over her nipples, but when she reached down and slid her hand between his legs to cup the discernible bulge there, he was lost.

“Slow down, sweetheart,” he said. “I don’t want to hurt you. We have to take it easy. Your wound isn’t healed.”

He groaned even as he said it. Surely this qualified him for sainthood. He had his arms full of a curvaceous hellcat intent on rubbing herself over every inch of his body and he was saying shit like *let’s slow down*.

He might as well cut off his dick and throw it out the window.

With a delicious-sounding purr, she arched her body and slid along his chest until her breasts bumped him right in the mouth. Unable to resist such a sweet offering, he nipped at the swell then lapped at the nipple with his tongue.

She threaded her fingers into the hair at his nape and pulled him closer until he sucked the tender bud into his mouth.

“Yes,” she whimpered.

No longer able to fool himself into thinking they’d be taking anything slow, he wrapped his arms around her and lowered her to the bed. He was tugging at his jeans while she yanked at his shirt. And then he had an awful thought.

Oh Jesus, let him have something. He shot off the bed and hurried into the bathroom to yank open the drawer. Hallelujah. One half-empty box of condoms. He hoped like hell the damn things didn’t expire because it had been a while since he’d used them.

When he returned, Aliyah was spread out all over his bed, her lips parted, hair splayed out on his pillow, and those delectable nipples were puckered and just waiting for his mouth.

Her gaze wandered down his body, and he felt himself harden further when her eyes glittered in appreciation. He wasn’t a vain son of a bitch, but when a beautiful woman looked at you and liked what they saw, it definitely added two inches to your dick.

He tossed the condoms onto the nightstand and then crawled onto the bed beside her. The wound on her thigh was still red and angry, so he bent down and kissed the area just above it.

Her hand tangled in his hair and coaxed him away to the rest of her body. He was hard and impatient, and he was positively itching to get between her legs. But he figured the quickest way to fall out of grace



with a woman who practically threw herself at you was to make it all end in three minutes flat.

As he lowered his body carefully to hers, she moaned in pleasure.

“You feel so good,” she murmured as her hands ran over his back. “Hard, strong. My people would call you a warrior.”

“I’m hard all right, sweetheart, and it has nothing to do with being a warrior.”

*Be careful what you wish for. It might come with an expiration date...*

## Boyfriend in a Bottle

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Josie's well-meaning friends just don't get it. It's not that she's overjoyed to be thirty-two and celibate since her boyfriend dumped her. She'd love to settle down, but she refuses to settle for just any man. After all, better single than a sucker. Nevertheless, she humors her friends and follows the instructions attached to the gift they've given her—a beautiful bottle from a new-age shop. Lick, and the perfect man will appear.

It works. The naked man she finds tied to her bed is everything she's ever wished for. Except Mr. Perfect comes with a time limit.

Kede is tired of living life by the hourglass. Once, fulfilling the desires of the women who freed him was enough, but now it's just another job. Josie is different, though. She sees him as a real man—a man she wants for all time.

Kede wants more than a moment. He wants a chance at life outside the bottle, and he wants a life with Josie. But he belongs to the goddess Inanna, and his time is running out...

*Warning: This title contains a little magic and a lot of wish-fulfillment sex. It also contains a perfect man created by a goddess solely for a woman's pleasure, and it may cause you to feel compelled to lick strange, random bottles in search of your own Inanu.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Boyfriend in a Bottle:*

Josie tried to find somewhere else to look. But her eyes kept tracking back to the gloriously naked man tied to her bed, offering sex. What else would he be offering? What was she supposed to do? The smart thing to do would be to leave the room, close the door and go to sleep on the sofa. But her body thought it would be an excellent idea to get laid. Heat spread from her centre, making her thighs tremble. The daring thing to do would be to take him up on his offer.

One night of lust. She ran her teeth over her lip. Until now her lust-filled imaginings had never involved hot men tied to her bed with magic rope. They would in the future, they would all feature...him. What was she thinking? She didn't even know the man.

"I'm not having sex with you." Damn. She'd just admitted to thinking about having sex with him which was exactly what he wanted. She stumbled on, trying to cover the slip. "I don't know you."

Her stomach tightened every time her gaze accidentally slid below his neck, or above his ankles. He had nice feet. Nice legs. Nice chest.

He was watching her watching him. His eyes darkened. "I'm Kede."

His name rolled around her skull, foreign and exciting. Tempting. She crossed her arms, determined not to be drawn in. "What kind of a name is Kede?"

Kede shrugged as best he could. He was really taking this very well for a man who was effectively trapped, and as he had said, at her mercy. “The one I was given. And you are?”

“Josette.” She cringed as the name left her lips. No one except her mother called her Josette. Grant had said it made her sound like a French stripper. Why had she given Kede that name?

“A pleasure to meet you, Josette.”

Her name rolled off his tongue, wrapped in an accent drenched with intent. He tilted his head, and she was sure if he were free he would’ve kissed the back of her hand. Her skin gave a quiver. If he could do that with her name, what could he do to her? She curled her bare toes into the carpet. She could imagine later, after he was gone.

Josie forced out a breath. She’d kissed him and now the game was over. He’d given her enough to keep her happy for another twelve months without going any further.

“It’s okay if you’re an escort. I’ll tell my friends we did it. You can keep the money.”

A flicker of frustration twisted his features but was gone so fast she could’ve imagined it. He flexed his fingers. “I’m not here for money. I’m here for you. Look at the hourglass. It reset when you kissed me.”

Josie glanced at the timer. *No way.*

Not possible. No one had touched it. Red sand now filled the top section. A few grains coated the bottom. Thousands more waited for their turn to fall. The hairs on her arms prickled, plucking at her skin. The chill swept over her body and pinched her tight nipples hard. This was really happening. The lick-and-wish spell worked. Kede had come out of the bottle with a magic hourglass and magic rope. The Universe had answered her wish—in a roundabout way.

“You really came out of the bottle.” She touched the sand timer. It was cool and solid beneath her fingers.

Kede nodded. “I am Inanu.”

“Inanu.” The word conjured up images of tangled sheets and sweaty sighs. He was tied to her bed, ready for her. A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “For my fantasies, you say?”

“Mmm.”

The sound rumbled through her flesh, stroking her nerves with sweet temptation. She didn’t want to be ungrateful and refuse a gift from a goddess. And besides there didn’t seem to be another way to untie him—the knots were stuck, and scissors had no effect.

“So I could just...you know...and you wouldn’t...interfere.” Her cheeks burned. Could she be less confident?

Kede twisted his hands in the red silk rope. “Not until you are done.”

Did sleeping with a man who came out of a bottle make her cheap or desperate or gullible? Did it matter if no one ever knew? Her friends thought the spell had failed. It could be her little secret. The best birthday present ever. Kede was hers and he was too good to waste. She ran her hand down his arm, unable

to resist touching him. Lust for skin on skin flooded her being. Beneath his silken skin his muscles were tense as he waited for her decision. A shudder of delight ran up her spine. She was in control. Before she could change her mind she slipped out of her knickers, glad she'd worn the lacy underwear she'd bought as a birthday present to herself.

She opened the bedside drawer and pulled out a condom. She'd bought them with hopes of needing them in her new single life. That had been twelve long months ago.

If she didn't get some soon, she might as well join a convent. It wasn't that she'd had no offers, it was just that none had appealed. She looked at Kede. His grey eyes filled her with a warmth that crept into her blood, swirled through her body and pooled between her legs. The rubber squirmed in the foil packet between her fingers. Her breath whooshed out of her lungs. Could she really do this?



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