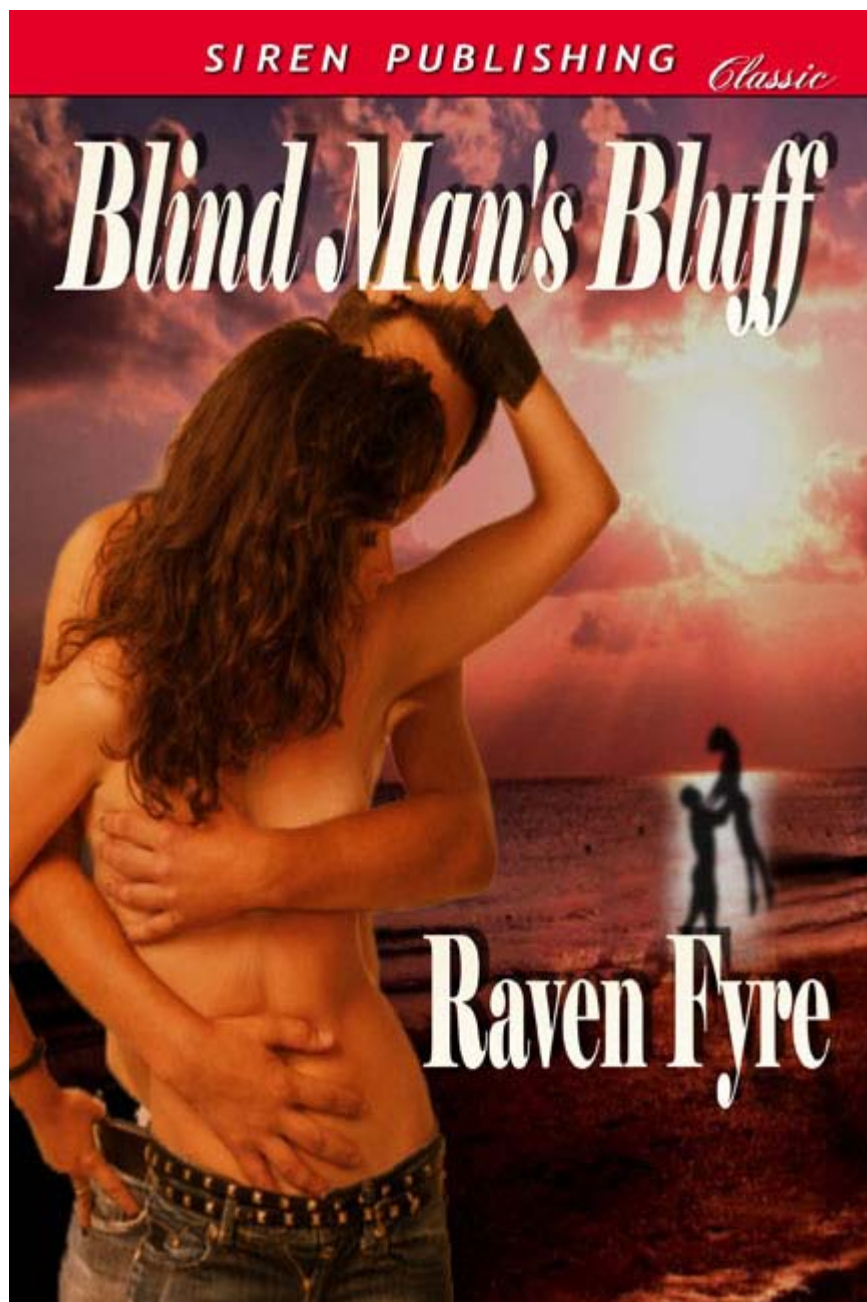


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

Blind Man's Bluff

Raven Fyre



Blind Man's Bluff

A blindfold, a little light bondage, and sensual pleasures beyond anything she's ever imagined...

Chloe Rezner believes her naughty nights at Sex On The Beach should be nothing more than a means to an end. An anonymous way to indulge her secret fantasies with a man who's strictly off-limits--namely because he's her new boss--while padding her bank account.

But when the sex is more passionate, more erotic, more *everything* than she bargained for, her desire for Jackson Sawyer is only magnified. Chloe is trapped in a sensual game of blind man's bluff, caught in a balancing act between the heaven of her Master's arms and the hellish reality of wanting more than fantasy.

And Chloe's ex? The lying, cheating, greedy SOB wants Chloe back in his life and his bed. Oh, and a little cold, hard, extorted cash wouldn't hurt.

How high a price must Chloe pay for happiness?

Note: This book contains anal sex.

Genre: Contemporary

Length: 43,071 words

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

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BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

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DEDICATION

For T, my own prince charming, here's to sixteen more *blissful* years.

BLIND MAN’S BLUFF

RAVEN FYRE
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Chapter 1

“Gram’s gone.”

With those two words, spoken in a tearful, agonizing whisper, Chloe Rezner’s world effectively began to spiral inward until it imploded. Her heart felt as if it’d shattered into a million teeny tiny pieces—pieces she’d never in a million years find and gather back together. There was such shock and utter sorrow engulfing her.

Yet Chloe had time for neither.

Her only thoughts now were for her younger sister’s welfare, of the promise made long ago never to let her down.

“Rachel, honey, where are you? Are you alone?”

“N–no,” Rachel replied. “Paul’s here with me now. So many others have been in and out. We’re still at the hospital. She c–coded. Her h–heart—the doctor said Gram’s heart just finally gave out.”

After Gram had spent so many years neglecting her health, among other things, in order to care for her two granddaughters, Chloe was astounded Gram had made it this long. “Ask Paul to stay with you. I don’t want you alone right now. I’ll be there as soon as I can, okay?”

Chloe heard the sniff of Rachel’s tears and battled back a hot wave of her own. “Yes. Okay.”

“Hang in there, sweetie. I’ll see you soon.”

The day Chloe feared most had come. The sky was still blue. Birds still sang from the branches of the nearby oaks. The ground beneath her feet was still solid. The sounds of laughter and clinking glasses broke into her thoughts.

How could the world go on around her as if nothing had happened?

Was this how Gram had felt when her only daughter, a mother Chloe had never really known, and son-in-law had been taken from her? Snatched away in the span of one evening? In a blink, really, in the grand scheme of things.

Oh, Gram.

Drawing in a deep breath, Chloe tried desperately to center her thoughts. Align her priorities. She'd need to speak with her college advisor, leave her contact info just in case something came up. Luckily, the beginning of the fall semester was still nearly three full months away. Time enough for whatever needed to be done—settling Gram's meager affairs, perhaps persuading Rachel to move now and be closer to her big sister, putting the little house on the market. Surely, these could be accomplished before Chloe needed to be back for the start of her classes.

Turning from the phone in her boss's private office, Chloe squared her shoulders for the next hurdle and made her way back through the kitchen, back out to the bar. "Thanks, Harry."

"Sure thing, doll. Everything okay?"

She slowly shook her head. "That was my sister, Rachel. Our Gram...She's gone. I need a couple weeks, Harry. Maybe more. I really just don't know right now."

Summer was always a busy season. Chloe hated leaving Harry in a lurch. But Rachel came first. Always had, always would.

"Damn tough break. The girls can cover your hours here and there. And that new kid, Jessie—I'll see if she wants to work full time 'til you can get back. You do what you need to."

“Thanks, Harry.” She smacked a quick kiss on the older man’s cheek. A fair employer, a friendly ear, and a good heart, Harry was a top-notch guy. He kept in shape, was easy on the eyes. Too bad he was old enough to be her father. And that she had sworn off men—all ages, shapes, and forms. “You’re the best.”

“Take care of yourself, doll. Drive safely now, and you call me if I can do anything.”

“You already have.”

Since it was so late, Chloe dialed her advisor’s office number and left a voice mail within the system. Then she rushed to her apartment and started tossing clothes and cosmetics in suitcases. Her roommate was nowhere to be found—not a huge revelation. Chloe left a note explaining the reason for her swift departure and a check for her half of the rent, which was due Friday.

Grateful for the fifty from the night’s tips, Chloe topped off the tank of her late-model compact car at a gas station down the street and headed south on I-65. She had little in the way of surplus funds to tide her over for the next couple weeks without her paycheck and those tips from waiting tables at Harry’s Bar and Grill, but thankfully, she wouldn’t need to shell out for a hotel.

She’d be in Orange Beach by morning and would catch some Zs at home in her old room at Gram’s. Maybe Rachel’s boss would let her pick up a shift or two, maybe even under the table, while she was in town. Rachel was always going on and on about the Sawyers, the brothers who owned the club where she worked. How nice they were. How great they were to work for.

And how gorgeous both of them were.

She’d also gotten an earful on their strict personal policy against dating among employees when Rachel had been ridiculously disappointed to find out said policy originated and ended with the two Sawyer brothers themselves. But Chloe couldn’t blame them. Harry wasn’t quite as stringent with his rules, and as a result, she’d witnessed firsthand the stress of working with two lovers on the outs.

Not fun.

So, if the Sawyers were such great guys and so great to look at, maybe they'd be willing to cut her a break while she indulged in a little eye candy. God knew looking was all she'd done in so long her thighs would probably creak if she tried to spread them. Her choice, though, she reminded herself. *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice...* Gram had lived by the old adage, and Chloe had come to think of it as her own personal mantra.

Men were, inherently, pigs. Some covered their muddy tracks better than others, but in the end, they were all the same. Only out for number one and a fresh piece of ass any way they could get it.

Jaded? Yes, yes, she was.

But then, Chloe mused, she had every right to be.

Road-weary and sick at heart, Chloe pulled into the narrow shale drive just as the sun was coming up over the horizon. She parked and grabbed her small overnight case. She could get the other, larger suitcase later. Right now, she was just too tired. Rachel met her at the door, and the two simply fell into one another's arms, embracing for what felt like hours.

Tears streaming down her face, Chloe eased back and studied Rachel's matching expression. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Paul's getting a shower. He's got to get to work. I was just making coffee."

Chloe followed her in and dropped her case on the couch in the cozy little den. The house was filled with familiar scents of lemon oil and wood and warm vanilla. The furniture was mismatched and covered with faded slipcovers, but everything was spick-and-span, clean and tidily arranged. Gram's *Guideposts* magazines were stacked on the coffee table next to a fresh-cut vase of bright pink azaleas and white wisteria from the side yard.

Rachel poured them each a cup of coffee and sat staring out through the sliding glass doors of the breakfast nook. "I just can't believe she's really gone."

“Neither can I. What do we need to do first?” Chloe needed to be busy—once she slept off the burn of travel. The chores would keep her focused, leaving little time or space for sorrow in the days to come. “Where is she?”

“Doc Lyman said the hospital would release her b–body to Radney’s as soon as possible.” The local funeral home. Chloe recognized the name. “Paul gave them all the info last night, and they promised to call when they have her ready.”

She’d rather not wait for the funeral home to paint Gram’s face or do up her hair. Chloe would rather see her now, just as she was. Just as she’d been. But that wasn’t possible. “I’m going to shower, and then I’m going to fall into bed for a few hours.”

Chloe carried her cup to the sink. “Wake me if you need me.”

She passed Paul, Rachel’s man-of-the-month, in the hallway and gave a perfunctory greeting. The tall, lanky young man had a kind smile, straw-colored hair, and keen blue eyes. And, come to think of it, he’d surpassed MOTM status a couple weeks back.

Huh.

The poor guy probably had no idea how significant a leap that was for her flighty baby sister.

He’d also unwittingly earned several points from Chloe for staying the night when her sister most needed his comfort and support.

Making a mental note to properly thank him once she could form a coherent thought—like after she’d had some shut-eye and several more cups of coffee—Chloe locked the bathroom door, stripped, and stepped under the heavenly, hot spray.

* * * *

The days following Chloe’s arrival were largely a blur of appointments, tough decisions, and an endless stream of compassionate visitors. There were the funeral arrangements to be

made and dozens of phone calls to be answered in between running to catch the doorbell and trying to reorganize the fridge to store the abundance of food sent over by Gram's neighbors and her church family.

Word spread like an epidemic of chicken pox before the blessed discovery of inoculation, and before long, Gram's carport was lined with five-day coolers that had been loaded down with ice to serve as makeshift refrigeration.

Chloe appreciated the sentiment. Really, she did. She appreciated that these people cared so much for her Gram. But it was only natural for her to wonder how this support might've aided her ailing Gram while she was alive. They'd never been what Chloe would consider dirt-poor, but times had been tough. Gram could stretch a dollar with the finesse of a Wall Street tycoon. Of course, knowing Gram's stubborn pride, Chloe doubted the woman would've accepted such blatant charity, anyway.

Chloe's Grandpa had been killed in a freak on-the-job accident nearly twenty-five years back. For years, Gram had existed on his life insurance policy and a settlement from the paper mill. She'd also taken in alterations and the occasional request for handmade dresses, usually children's clothes. Her steady, delicate fingers had been passed to Chloe through the bloodlines, and she'd spent hours passing on the tedious techniques of shadow embroidery and smocking—intricate, delicate handwork with needle and thread.

Chloe had dreaded the task, despite her apparent knack for mastering the skills. Ironically, those very skills had most recently served as a source of supplementing her income in order to pay tuition. Another year and Chloe would move into her clinical rotations as an RN, and then she'd gladly leave Harry's Bar and Grill behind for the not-so-glamorous world of healthcare.

Her life was a laundry list of *shoulda*, *woulda*, *coulda*.

She *shoulda* listened to Gram. Then she *woulda* stayed single and not married that no-good scum by the name of Clint Rezner, and she

coulda gone on to college right out of high school. Instead, she was a twenty-seven-year-old divorced woman, struggling to pay her way and determined as hell to make something more of herself. Her ambitions ran far higher than bussing tables and serving beer for minimum wage, leering smiles, the occasional wandering, beefy hand—which she had no trouble slapping silly—and meager tips.

But she'd made her bed, and she'd lain in it, literally, right up until the night she'd come home early from working her shift, only to find Clint passed out drunk—with not one, but *two* naked women.

In. *Their*. Bed.

He was a snake, the lowest, belly-crawling life form ever created in her book, but he was a pretty one, Chloe couldn't deny. And when he chose to turn on the charm, he could put a cobra to shame. Even when they'd dated, she'd known his eyes had the tendency to wander. Maybe even his dick, though she'd been too naïve, too blinded by young, foolhardy love to see it at the time.

No, like a fool, she'd overlooked his philandering tendencies, telling herself that things would change after she had his ring and his name and a vow for a happily ever after.

And she? Had been oh, so wrong.

Since she'd left the screen door latched and the front door open to catch the morning breeze, it took a minute for the knock to filter through her musings.

"I've got it," Rachel shouted, jolting Chloe back to the present.

There was the murmur of voices. Then Rachel called out, "Chloe?"

"Yeah, in the kitchen." She'd just put on a fresh pot of coffee and pulled a tray of cold cuts from the fridge. "I was just about to...ah..." Her mind stumbled a bit as her gaze settled on the man at Rachel's side. What was she doing? Lunch meat. Cheese. *Ah, yes!* "...Make a sandwich."

Licking her lips, she quickly decided the man would make a far more appetizing meal than the sliced ham and turkey. God help her,

her skin felt flushed and about three sizes too small for her bones. What on earth was wrong with her?

Stress. Lack of sleep. Yes, those would make a gal wonky, no question.

"Chloe, this is Jackson Sawyer, one my bosses from the club," Rachel explained needlessly. "Jackson, my sister, Chloe."

Rolling her tongue back in her mouth, Chloe struggled to find her voice. "Ah, yes. So nice to finally meet you." Chloe snagged a dish towel and wiped her hands before she accepted the one Jackson extended. "You and your brother have been a godsend to Rachel."

Instead of shaking, he covered her hand in both of his warm, strong hands and held it cocooned there long enough for her pulse to nearly race out of her veins. "The pleasure's ours, believe me. I've heard so much about you it seems like we've known each other for years. My deepest condolences for your loss." He finally released her hand and glanced at Rachel. "Tyler sends his apologies. He had a meeting in Loxley with a distributor. Are you sure there's nothing either of us can do?"

Though his words were obviously directed at Rachel, his piercing, blue-gray eyes—so full of concern, they stole her breath—searched Chloe's for an answer. "Thank you, but we're fine. In fact, we're overrun with food. Another day or so and we could set up a café and start selling lunches out of the carport. Can I get you a sandwich? Or a drink?"

"The coffee smells great."

"Coming right up."

"Thanks." He pulled out one of the wooden, ladder-back chairs and sat at the scuffed, round table where she'd enjoyed so many meals over the course of her childhood. Her grandfather had sanded and refinished it once, but time and use had again dulled the glossy coat.

Jackson Sawyer, all pressed and polished in his crisp, ocean-blue dress shirt and tailored khaki pants, looked completely out of place in Gram's humble domain. The outdated appliances were harvest gold,

and the hardwood floors, like the table, could've stood a good buffing and a healthy coat of varnish. Gram had never seen the need nor had she possessed the funds to replace the old, yellowing laminate countertops.

Yet, for all his perfection and his blatant affluence, Chloe failed to detect a single shred of condescension in Jackson's manner or his tone. He politely accepted the mug that sported a cross and one of Gram's favorite scriptures and helped himself to cream and sugar from the mismatched porcelain service on the lazy Susan. The sugar bowl was white with a cheerful frog perched atop the lid, and the tiny pitcher dispensed cream through the bill of a mallard duck.

Gram and her odd collections, Chloe mused.

"I hate to bail on you both, but my psych professor's letting me make up an exam I missed earlier in the week." Rachel grabbed her purse and rummaged the cavernous depths for her car keys. "I have to be there by one."

Jackson nodded. "I'll see you in the morning."

"The earlier the better. It'll be standing room only by ten." With a wave to Jackson and a swift hug for Chloe, Rachel rushed off.

"She's right," Chloe seconded. "The church is tiny, and Gram must've known every soul from here to Mobile."

Because she needed to busy her hands, Chloe stacked up several sandwiches with assorted meats and cheeses and sliced them into angled halves. Then she peeled one red and one golden apple. She brought the plates and her mug of coffee to the table and settled into a chair across from Jackson. Taking napkins from the basket, she offered him one and motioned to the plates.

"God *knows* they've all sent food. The freezer's overflowing with casseroles and cobblers. The carport looks like an ice chest convention. We could feed the entire Western world for a week...and I mentioned that."

God, she was rambling. But what was she supposed to do, supposed to talk about with this gorgeous stranger who caused her heart rate to accelerate just by looking into those mesmerizing eyes?

In contrast to his professional attire, she noted the lean, tanned fingers curling around the mug. His hands looked so capable and strong, a working man's hands. Odd, she thought, for an affluent nightclub owner. Chloe couldn't help wondering what sort of work he might put his back into once he stripped down to jeans and a T. Or how those hands, slightly callused and so utterly masculine, might feel on her skin.

No, no. She wasn't going to think about that. Men were trouble. Men were scum. Dicks without brains, willing to screw any wet and willing cunt they could sniff out. Speaking of which...her pussy was growing wetter by the minute, throbbing.

Damn it.

Chloe clenched her thighs in a futile attempt to stop the ache that had started to beat in tempo with her heartbeat.

"Rachel mentioned you're working for Harry Tubbs."

"You know Harry?" The surprise was evident in her tone.

He shrugged. "He and Dad go way back. High school days and football stories, that sort of thing."

"Small world," she remarked, grateful for the diversionary topic. "Harry's been great about letting me get in as many hours as possible between classes. And he was so understanding about giving me a couple weeks off just now." She bit the corner off a turkey and wheat triangle. "I didn't realize your folks were from Birmingham. So, you grew up there?"

"Yeah, Tyler and I moved down after college and started the clubs. Spending summer vacations and spring breaks here...The mountains are great, but we both just knew being close to the beach was what we really wanted long-term."

Clubs. Plural. Apparently, they were even more successful than she'd realized. "It is beautiful, if you can take the sand and the perpetual heat. It isn't for everybody."

"Is that why you moved?"

"No...ah, no." She chewed her bottom lip and stared off at the faded vines of ivy climbing up the paper on Gram's walls. The only good thing about dredging up her past was that it quickly doused her arousal. "I married my high school sweetheart almost immediately after graduation. We moved a couple months later when he took a job in Trussville working for his uncle. After we divorced, it was...easier, I suppose, to stay in the same rut, the same job. Finally, though, I decided I'd had enough of the rut and did what I should have done to begin with—college."

"Nursing?"

A hint of a smile curved her lips. "That's right. I'm on the home stretch. You must tend the bar."

The smile was contagious. "Why do you say that?"

"You have a good ear and a better memory. And a way of instantly putting people at ease so that they spill their guts without realizing it." She propped her chin in her hand. "When most people ask questions, they're just making polite conversation. And most either tune out the answers because they think they already know them or they don't really care. Obviously, as you said, Rachel's talked your ear off about me. Harry. Nursing. You've listened, and not just on the pretense of being polite. Harry's that way—knows every detail about a customer, down to the names of their kids, when they leave his bar. He has an amazing memory."

Jackson chuckled. "He and Dad have that in common, too. Suppose I inherited the quality. Tyler's the numbers man. I started out tending the bar when we first opened High Tide, while Ty keeps us floating, financially solvent. Now, well, I stick to management."

"Sorry, excuse me," Chloe said and jumped up when the phone interrupted for what must've been the hundredth time just today

alone. "It's like the food—never ending." She grabbed the handset off the counter, and her brow furrowed at the caller display. "Hello?"

"Rachel?"

"No. This is Chloe."

"Ah, yes, Chloe. How are you, dear? It's Ed, Ed Botter." From the bank and from Gram's church, Chloe recalled. "My condolences, honey."

"Thank you, Mr. Botter."

"Listen, honey, I need for you to come by the bank and take care of a little paperwork. As soon as possible. Can you do that for me, honey?"

What was she, twelve?

If he honey'd her one more time, she'd scream. "Of course, Mr. Botter. How's this afternoon—say, three?"

"Excellent. I'll see you then."

Chloe punched off the phone, but she couldn't shake the odd feeling that something wasn't right. Mr. Botter had sounded rather anxious about her coming in and extremely relieved when she'd agreed. More relieved than one would expect of a banker merely settling the accounts of a deceased client.

Out of habit, Chloe picked up the carafe and moved to the table, refilling Jackson's cup then her own. She looked down and was shocked to see those long, lean fingers braceleting her wrist. As with a burn or a cut when the shock wears off and the pain receptors finally kick in, she suddenly felt the heat, the strength of his firm yet gentle grip.

Her startled gaze flew to his and locked on. This close, this focused on his irises, she noticed the flecks of pale green mixed in with the blue and gray. He really had the most mesmerizing eyes, accentuated by thick brows and lashes longer than the law should allow for a male. They went well with his sensual mouth, balanced out the strong nose and jaw.

"Chloe? I asked if everything was all right."

He'd spoken? His touch, that look...She flinched. Boy, she'd really gotten lost for a minute there. Slippery slope. *Get a grip, girl. Fast.* "I, ah, yes. Yes. Sorry. That was just...business. Settling Gram's accounts, that sort of thing."

"Is there anything I can do? Anything you need?"

The list was long and complicated, she mused. But the apple hadn't fallen far from Gram, Chloe figured. Like her Gram, Chloe was too stubborn to step over her mountainous pride and take an offered hand. No, if she took anything, it would be earned.

Jackson's thumb was lazily rubbing the skin of her wrist, sending little shivers of heat up her arm. Making it awfully hard to form a thought.

What was it about him that turned her brain to mush?

Rachel certainly hadn't exaggerated about his looks. The tanned skin, the toned body, the ruggedly handsome features. The sun-streaked, light brown hair he wore in a shaggy, wind-tousled cut that contrasted with his meticulous appearance. There was humor in his eyes, charm and sensuality in his smile. And an all-too-appealing confidence in his manner.

All in all, Jackson Sawyer made a very attractive package.

She now sympathized wholeheartedly with Rachel's disappointment concerning the Sawyers' no-dating-among-staff policy. Not that she was interested, because she wasn't. Her life was turned upside down enough without throwing a man into the mix. Besides, Rachel was her focus now, after seeing Gram properly put to rest.

Priorities, she hated to have to remind herself.

"I don't want to put you in an awkward situation. Or Rachel," Chloe added. "But, well, maybe you know someone—another club owner or one of the local restaurant managers—that would let me pick up a few shifts while I'm here?"

He released her wrist, and she returned the carafe to the heated, black circle of the maker.

"Let me make a few phone calls." His voice was at her ear. His hands were lightly gripping her upper arms.

She hadn't even heard him move. But she felt the heat radiating off his massive body, pinned as she was between him and the counter. She stared at the cabinet in front of her and nodded. It was all she could do with the frisson of sexual awareness rippling over her body.

He pressed his lips to her hair, and she heard the intake of a deep breath, as if he were breathing her in. A million tiny hummingbird wings suddenly took to fluttering in her stomach.

This strange, startling reaction to Jackson Sawyer was not wise.

Not wise at all.

"I have to get back to the club." His voice sounded oddly strained. "I'll make some calls, and I'll let you know. Chloe?"

She managed to whisper, "Yes?"

"Night or day." He stroked a hand over the hair he'd kissed. "*Anything.*"

Whew!

It took a minute for her system to calm, for her legs to remember how to move so she could turn around. And when she did, he was already shoving through the screen door. She blew out a ragged breath and leaned back against the counter for support.

Jackson Sawyer wasn't just eye candy with brains and charm. He was trouble with a—capital T.

She didn't know what to make of their...encounter? What to even call it? He hadn't been creepy and groping, but he had most definitely been hitting on her. The subtle caresses, his offer of help. Smooth. The man was very, very smooth. And she couldn't even think about the brief, light kiss or the way he'd breathed her in.

Chloe had been hit on enough times in her career as a waitress to recognize the signs of an interested male. Problem was, she was interested right back. Off-the-charts interested. And the timing sucked mud—the red, Alabama clay variety.

Clearing the table, she noted the cream-colored rectangle lying next to his half-empty mug. She picked it up and turned it over. The front was embossed with the club's moniker, High Tide, the address and phone number, and a shiny brass anchor. Flipping it back over, she realized he'd written his cell and home numbers.

Night or day, he'd insisted. Anything.

How could one word hold so much unspoken meaning?

How could a man she'd only just met make her so unbelievably weak?

Unwittingly, Chloe ran her thumb over the bold, dark script and thought of his thumb rubbing her wrist. Her skin tingled in response, and she closed her eyes, trying to block out the sensations he'd stirred.

Sensations she'd long ago buried. Or so she'd thought.

It would've been so much easier if he'd just been blatantly tactless and made some sort of insensitive, inappropriate move on her while they were right here in Gram's kitchen, under Gram's roof. But Jackson Sawyer was the epitome of a Southern gentleman. Sophisticated. Refined. He was well-educated and successful and sexy as hell. He possessed an edge most men would've pressed to their advantage.

To Chloe, the fact that he hadn't done so only made him infinitely more alluring. Keenly aware of the circumstances that had called her home, of her impending responsibilities, she knew getting tangled with a man—any man—would be ill-advised. Besides, in another week, tops, she'd be back in Birmingham, back to waiting tables for Harry and gearing up for her final semester of nursing.

Chloe Rezner wasn't the type for a crazy, fast fling.

And nothing would distract her from achieving her goals, especially not some man, even if he was the most gorgeous man she'd ever met, who also happened to spark a fire in her blood so hot, so intense that it was shocking. It was an intensity she'd never, ever felt before.

But never again, she'd vowed. Marrying Clint Rezner had been the swiftly learned, harsh life lesson of the millennium. Since ditching him like the cheating dead weight he'd proven himself to be, Chloe had worked too hard and come too far.

No man was worth giving up her dreams.

"Damn," she muttered after a glance at the clock. "Gotta get a move on."

She tucked Jackson's business card away in the pocket of her jeans, wishing she could do the same with the troubling sensations he'd churned up, and went to change for her appointment with Mr. Botter.

Chapter 2

At this hour of the day, High Tide was reminiscent of a ghost town. Mickey was manning the bar, and a trio of the club's best waitresses milled about, making preparations for the crowds that would flow in come sundown.

"Hey, Mr. J."

"Afternoon, Mick," Jackson replied. "Has Ty been in?"

Mickey cocked his head toward the stairs at the end of the bar. "Upstairs. If he asks about the case of Jameson, tell him we got it straight."

"Will do."

True to Mickey's word, Jackson found Ty pouring over the books. Thank God the man had inherited their mother's head for numbers. Give Jackson the hands to shake and the customers to schmooze. He'd always been more at ease with people than with the tidy little columns of figures that insisted on being balanced. In that respect, Jackson was just like their dear old dad.

Funny, he mused, how quickly Chloe had assessed his skills, pegging him as a natural for tending bar.

Ty glanced up from his work as Jackson dropped onto the dark brown leather sofa that lined one wall. "How was Rachel?"

"Holding up. She had to rush off and make up an exam, so we didn't talk long." He scooped a hand through his hair. "We could use another set of capable hands, just for a few days, don't you think?"

Looking up again, Ty's dark blue gaze narrowed in on his older brother. "Suppose we could. Why?"

“Chloe, Rachel’s sister. Remember, she’s the one working for Harry and finishing up her degree in nursing? Being here’s obviously a strain, financially speaking as well as emotionally. She asked if we might know someone who’d be willing to let her pick up a couple shifts.”

“Not the best idea, having her here.”

“It’s only a couple shifts,” Jackson repeated, knowing exactly where Ty’s mind was headed.

“Couple shifts, my ass. She favors Rachel?”

Scrubbing a hand over the stubble sprouting on his chin, Jackson thought of how best to describe Chloe Rezner in comparison to her sister. The looks, he supposed, were similar enough. Typical sibling characteristics, thick, dark locks, killer bodies, the same heart-shaped faces, the same affable personality that served them well, considering the jobs they’d chosen.

But Chloe’s hair held a hint of waves and a silky sheen of fiery auburn highlights. Rachel’s did not. She’d smelled as fresh and clean as sunshine. And her arms had been deceptively smaller, more fragile than he’d first thought, beneath his hands.

She was a couple inches taller than Rachel as well. Perfect, Jackson thought, though it wasn’t wise to recall exactly how perfectly she’d fit, with her head just under his chin. It was foolish of him to wonder how those perfectly lush curves would feel pressed up against him. Even more reckless to let his thoughts run wild with ideas of having those long, slender legs and arms vining around him while she cradled his body and welcomed him deep inside her.

Those eyes of hers were like the clearest Caribbean waters, a beautiful, sparkling turquoise wreathed in thick, long, black lashes. A man could drown in those eyes. And her skin was pale as cream with the appearance of smooth, delicate porcelain. He couldn’t imagine such perfection being marred by the sun or the tanning booths Rachel worshipped.

Beauty and the sexy body aside, Jackson also admired what he knew of Chloe's personal history. Losing her parents at a young age. Supporting herself and putting herself through college after what Rachel called a rough divorce. The path she'd had to travel in life had been ratty and harsh. Clearly, she was stronger than she looked.

"Chloe's more...refined, more sure of herself," he decided. "She's had a hell of a hard break, but she wears it well."

One of Ty's dark brows arched in speculation. "Put it out of your mind."

Barely fourteen months apart in age, they'd always been in sync in a way that was reminiscent of twins. They could practically read each other's thoughts. And, obviously, the ideas Jackson was having at the moment were not PG.

"Or at least call Bonnie at the Florabama and see if she'll give her something," Ty suggested. "Jesus, Jack. You know it's just stupid to mix business with pleasure. You wrote the policy, for Christ's sake."

"Don't remind me." With a groan, Jackson shoved up from the sofa and adjusted the crotch of his pants. Those X-rated notions were wreaking havoc with his dick. "Damn it, she's got me tied up. We just met, and already she's under my skin. How is that possible?"

"Abstinence messes with a man's mind."

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Jackson scanned the bank of computer screens that monitored the activity of the floor below. If it were just the sex, just the desire to have her naked and whispering his name while he poured himself into her, Jackson wouldn't have felt so absurdly unbalanced. The need to hold her, to pull her close and protect her, was as sharp as the need to possess her body in the most carnal ways imaginable.

He was usually so steady, so sure of his place. He wasn't crass or unfeeling when he took a woman to bed, but neither was he one to get tangled up emotionally. One look at Chloe and he'd felt...shaken. Her emotions had been in her eyes, and her body language screamed for comfort. There'd been the compulsion to soothe, the need to touch.

Touching her had sliced the ropes on his ship's anchors. Wanting Chloe sexually felt like aimlessly drifting out over the Gulf on a cheap blow-up raft that was being circled by a pack of hungry sand sharks. Dangerous--no way to escape the devastating effects of those razor-sharp teeth on the thinly coated hot air.

Maybe Ty was right. He'd be better off sticking to the policy and calling Bonnie. Chloe would make a few bucks. He wouldn't be tempted to drag her off to some dark corner and ravage her because she was within reach and looking so damned delectable.

And just for good measure, maybe he'd flip through his mental file of available women and see about ending his recent sexual dry spell. A blonde. Or a redhead.

Just not, God help him, a sexy little brunette with sea-siren eyes and a devastatingly sensual mouth. Or a smoking hot body.

* * * *

Chloe walked into the house and dumped her purse on the floor next to the chair where she dumped her numb body. She couldn't feel the shaking of her hand, but holding it out in front of her, she could see it.

It was a miracle she'd driven home without incident.

Surely, this was just a dream, she reasoned. No, this was a horrible freaking nightmare. Soon, she would wake up to find she'd never left Birmingham at all, that perhaps she'd overslept and was late for a shift at Harry's or maybe even missed a class.

That Gram was still alive.

That these revelations hadn't rocked her to the core.

"Oh, Gram." Her head fell back, and she rubbed at her lids.

Forget picking up some tips while she was home—if she didn't come up with something solid, substantial, and fast, Rachel would have no home.

Mr. Botter had been sympathetic to her plight, but it was out of his hands. He'd shown her the paperwork with Gram's signatures.

"I'm sorry, Chloe, honey," he'd told her. "But your grandmother used the house as collateral in order to secure the loan."

Obviously, Chloe was clueless. The news came completely out of left field.

Why had Gram taken a loan? And, most importantly, where had the money gone? Her checking account was as pitiful as Chloe's. The savings account was only marginally better. Thankfully, the house was paid for with only this latest lien tacked on to the deed.

"She invested a small sum from the settlement, years ago, and put everything in your name." Another shock. "But if we remove it now, the penalties and fees won't leave you with enough to sneeze at."

"I don't understand, Mr. Botter. Where could the money have gone?"

"I'm afraid I don't rightly know, honey. You'd have to ask Rachel. Perhaps your grandmother spoke of it to her."

Highly unlikely, Chloe figured. This was the sort of thing Rachel would have mentioned right away—the probability of losing the house if they defaulted on the loan.

She'd let it ride, though, Chloe decided, until after the services tomorrow. No use adding to Rachel's burden with worries of keeping the roof over her head.

Later that evening, after dinner, she received a phone call from Bonnie Carson, manager of the Florabama, a hot spot for locals and tourists alike. The club, which sat smack dab on the state line dividing Florida and Alabama and facing the Gulf, featured nightly local bands and a wide menu of fresh seafood. Since Hurricane Katrina, it was little more than a couple of trailers, connected with tarps and the like, but the crowds kept coming.

Jackson had passed her name along. She was grateful for both the promise kept and the opportunity. But she was afraid she'd need more than minimum wage and tips to save this sinking ship. Still, it was

smarter to take the bucket and start bailing herself out, so she graciously accepted Bonnie's offer.

She debated calling Jackson. She even took out his card and stared at it long and hard, ran her fingers over the embossed letters like a worry stone.

Night or day.

Anything.

Right now, what she wanted more than anything was to be held by Jackson's strong, warm hands. But it wasn't smart to lean on a man or to let him see her weakness. Clint would've exploited it to his advantage. She wanted desperately for Jackson to be different.

And maybe because she sensed deep down in her bones that he was, because the *desperately* part worried her beyond belief, she didn't dare pick up the phone.

* * * *

"You're awfully quiet," Rachel remarked to Chloe the next morning over a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast. Neither of them had done more than pick at the food, moving it around the plate with their forks to convince one another they'd each eaten a morsel or two.

Shoving back from the table, game over, Chloe dumped her leftovers in the trash and took her plate to the sink. "It's going to be a very long day."

Paul shuffled in and kissed the top of Rachel's head. Then he took the seat next to her and finished off her eggs. "Did you want to ride with us over to the church?" He glanced up at Chloe expectantly. "The truck's got an old bench-style seat, so there's plenty of room for the three of us."

"Yes, actually," Chloe replied. "Thanks."

"Isn't he a sweetie?" Rachel crooned. She wrapped an arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't know what I'd do without you. Or Chloe."

Chloe rinsed her mug and turned from the sink. "I'll be ready by nine."

"But that's so early," Rachel protested. "The services don't start 'til ten. And we aren't having a viewing..."

"I want to see her, Rache. You said your goodbyes at the hospital. But I didn't. I need to see her."

A shudder ran over Rachel's spine. Contrary to Chloe's assumption, she hadn't been able to be in the same room with Gram once the doctor pronounced her dead. And she had no desire to lift the lid on the casket and see what Radney's technicians of the afterlife had done to Gram's body. Perhaps it was some childish fear of death reaching beyond the grave or just facing the finality of it all. Either way, Chloe could have her time alone with Gram.

Rachel wanted no part of it.

"Do what you feel you need to. But it just creeps me out."

"Have you seen her pearls?"

"The ones Grandpa gave her for their anniversary?"

Chloe nodded. "They weren't in her jewelry box."

Odd, Rachel mused, it wasn't like Gram to have things out of place. Nor would she have ever gone without the necklace of tiny, graduated beads.

"Wasn't she wearing them?"

"She always did," Chloe remarked wistfully, as if she'd been sharing the same memory. "But they weren't with her effects from the hospital. I meant to ask you before now, but I was certain they would be in her jewelry box. We can't let them bury her without them."

Oh, Jesus. Don't let Miss Neurotic get her panties in a wad. She'd tear the place apart until they found them or she was liable to have them hold off the interment. God, please. "I'll help you look."

Rachel followed Chloe into the bedroom and pulled out the small drawer from the table by the bed. "You look through here while I check the jewelry box again. Could be you overlooked it."

Chloe sat on the edge of the bed and rummaged through the contents of the drawer. Taking down the polished wooden box, Rachel was swamped with emotion. Gram had never owned anything much of real retail value, but she'd tended what she had—especially those pearls—as if every tiny treasure were the most precious of gems.

The black felt lining was faded, the edges frayed. "I don't see them."

"It's not here," Chloe announced and chewed at her lower lip.

Gram never went without that necklace. It worried Rachel to see Chloe so anxious. Chloe was her rock of strength. She couldn't handle another upset to her world just now.

Was that why she'd been clinging to Paul?

She was a love-'em-and-leave-'em kind of gal. Better to send the guy packing before he broke her heart. But Paul was different somehow. He didn't push her for more, and he didn't pull away when she was the one doing the pushing. In fact, he seemed to know what she needed before she did.

The night Gram died, he'd tucked her in bed and into the curve of his body.

She'd never spent the night in a guy's arms and not been naked. Oh, he'd had a boner the size of the Florida panhandle that'd been impossible to mistake snuggled up to the cleft of her ass the next morning. But instead of trying to seduce her out of her PJs and into taking care of it, he'd kissed her slowly, tenderly, before strolling off to take a shower. Most likely a very cold shower.

When she'd asked him to stay, just for a few days, just until she could get over the hurdle of burying Gram, he'd offered to sleep on the couch. She hadn't let him, of course. But still, that he'd offered...

God, she didn't deserve him.

“We’ll find them.” She tried to sound confident for Chloe’s benefit. “They’ve got to be here somewhere, right?”

“Right.” Chloe went to Gram’s closet and started shuffling through the hangers on the metal rods. “Maybe the clasp broke, you know? And what if she tucked it in a pocket, thinking she’d put it away later?”

They searched her closet, only to come up empty. No shirt, no jacket, no purse and its myriad compartments, no article of clothing possessing pockets was left unturned. And still, Gram’s necklace couldn’t be found. So, they started in on her chest of drawers.

“I’ll call Mr. Lenny,” Chloe announced, “and see if he has it.”

“Seems like she would’ve mentioned it,” Rachel pondered aloud. “But it’s worth a shot.”

The number for the local jeweler was in Gram’s black spiral address book by the phone in the den. Chloe sat in Gram’s recliner and dialed it up. Rachel listened with half an ear while sitting on Paul’s lap on the couch.

She couldn’t help feathering her fingers through his hair or leaning in to skim her lips along his jaw. His erection pushed against her bottom, and she wiggled for the sheer pleasure of tormenting him. “I promise to make it better, baby,” she whispered in his ear, adding all the naughty ideas that popped into her head of what and how she was going to make good on the promise.

Maybe it was crass of her to be thinking of sex only hours away from facing death, but maybe that was the precisely the point.

She was alive.

For the last six days, she’d been walking around like a freaking ghost, sleeping next to a great guy who cared enough about her fragile emotional state *not* to fuck her.

Oh, how she needed him to fuck her.

Rachel was suddenly desperate to celebrate being alive. Forgetting their audience, she grabbed Paul’s hand and placed it over her breast.

"I need you to touch me," she murmured while nibbling at his neck. Then she brought her lips back to his. "I want you inside me."

"Soon," he promised. He pressed a chaste kiss to her lips. "Tonight. When we're alone."

"That is the damndest thing," Chloe said as she hung up the phone.

Snapped out of her aroused state as if she'd had a bucket of ice poured over her head, Rachel pivoted around to face her sister. "What's that?"

Please, God, she hoped Chloe wouldn't pick up on the husky sound of her voice.

"Mr. Lenny. Gram didn't bring the string of pearls in to be repaired. She sold it to him. About six months ago," she added.

"You're sure? Damn. I guess I was so used to seeing them on her, I didn't realize she wasn't wearing them. I've been so busy with work and classes...Really, I'm out more than I'm home."

"I wasn't going to bring this up now, but Mr. Botter from the bank—he asked to meet with me. Seems Gram used the house as collateral to secure a loan. Only, there's no record of where the funds went. No deposit, no transfers. She took the amount in cash."

Rubbing her spinning head, Rachel tried to process this outlandish idea. She slipped off Paul's lap and began to pace. "Gram? With money?" She had to snicker at that. "You're sure?"

When the doorbell broke in, Paul offered, "I'll get it."

Chloe assured her, "Mr. Botter was absolutely positive. He even showed me the papers. And it was a significant amount. Rachel, honey, if we don't make good on the loan, we'll lose the house. There's enough in Gram's savings to cover this month's note, but beyond that...it's up to us."

"Hell, Chloe. How are we supposed to do that?" She was already stretched thin forking out tuition. Last month, she'd dropped a boatload of cash on new tires for her car. And although Gram had

refused to let her pay rent, Rachel had insisted on splitting the utilities and groceries.

Now, this freaking loan payment was going to be like the straw that broke the camel's back.

"I'm working on it. Somehow, someday..." Chloe's voice trailed off, and her face went white as a sheet. Her gaze caught and held on a point beyond Rachel's head. "Jackson."

Chloe's tone was oddly breathless, Rachel decided, and the melting look in her eyes was so not a good sign. If Rachel had a dollar for every time she'd witnessed the effects of Jackson or Tyler Sawyer's charm and good looks on the female population, they wouldn't be discussing the need for cash. Because she'd be a freaking millionaire!

Hadn't she warned her sister dear?

Of course she had. But then Rachel was abruptly struck with the reality that since Chloe wasn't an employee, Jackson wasn't off limits.

Ah, the cruelty.

Apparently, given that Jackson crossed the room and took Chloe's hands in his and eased her back down into the chair while he dropped to his haunches in front of her, he'd also clued in on that monumental fact and was now capitalizing on it as well.

Interesting.

"What's happened?" Jackson demanded. "Sweetheart, you're shaking." He rubbed briskly at Chloe's arms.

"I'm fine. Really. I'm not...not cold."

"Gram's pearls," Rachel told him. "We couldn't find them, and then when we called Mr. Lenny's to see if she was having the clasp repaired, it turns out it wasn't broken. She'd sold him the necklace a while back."

"Rachel," Chloe snapped.

But, undeterred, she shrugged a shoulder. "It's just Jackson. There isn't much about us he doesn't know."

As if to smooth out her embarrassment, Jackson added, "Ty and I, we make it our business to get to know the people who work for us, Chloe. Especially those who are hardworking and show the most potential. Rachel's been with High Tide for nearly three years now. And I knew your Gram about as well as I know my own."

Rachel noted the color slowly returning to Chloe's cheeks, and took it as a good sign. "Nothing's adding up. Those pearls? They were from Grandpa for their anniversary. Thirty-five years. Can you imagine what they meant to her? She wore them every day." She took a deep breath and went on. "And then she went to the bank a few months back, asking for money. Remember, Mr. Botter called while you were here?"

Jackson simply nodded.

"Why she took out a loan is beyond me...Look at this place." Her gaze swept the room. "Nothing's been updated in *forever*, Jackson. The kitchen's harvest gold, for goodness' sake. Harvest gold hasn't been on a chromatic chart since the seventies. And it's not like she's been hoarding it in some savings account so it can draw interest. In fact, she took it in cash, and there's no record of a deposit. No paper trail of it anywhere."

Jackson squeezed her knee and stood. "There has to be an explanation. But we aren't going to find it right now. Later, I promise you, we'll figure it all out. You need to get to the church."

Looking down at the baggy T-shirt and men's boxers she'd slept in, Chloe grimaced. "I've got to get dressed."

"I'll wait for you."

"Oh. I was going to ride with Rachel and Paul. You don't have to—"

"I'll wait," he insisted, cutting off any further protest.

Rachel took her sister by the shoulders, turned her toward the hall, and gave her a gentle shove to get her moving. "We won't be long," she told the men.

* * * *

When Rachel shut the door to Chloe's bedroom behind them, Chloe slumped to the mattress and lay back, staring up at the ceiling. Rachel joined her and assumed a mirrored pose.

"Why is he here?" she whispered. He, of course, being Jackson, which went unspoken between the like-minded siblings.

"Hello? Did you not see that protective little gleam in his eyes?" Rachel asked sarcastically. "He was ready to jump on his horse and charge into battle, sword in hand. All for you, sister dearest."

Chloe couldn't help the giggle that floated out. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Okay, then, how about the way *you* were looking at *him*? All dreamy-eyed and melting. What happened yesterday? I leave you with him for a few minutes, and you have him wrapped." She smacked a palm to her forehead. "The great and gorgeous Jackson Sawyer brought to his knees by my big sister."

"Oh, stop," Chloe insisted. But the hummingbird wings were back and fluttering up a storm in her belly. "He stayed and had coffee, a sandwich, that's all. Then he left me his card with his number and told me, *us*, to call—day or night—if we needed anything."

"That's all? You're sure?"

Chloe rolled to her side and propped her head in her hand. "Jesus, Rache. The man's a god, but I did manage to restrain myself when the urge hit to climb Gram's table and rip his clothes off."

"So, you are interested."

"I'm breathing, aren't I? Who could resist all those muscles and those eyes? And, damn it, when he smiles, my insides go up in flames. But he's your boss, and I wouldn't dare jeopardize that for the world. Besides," she said and shoved off the bed to change clothes, "I don't have time to worry about whether or not he's interested in me. Nor do I have the time for even a casual affair."

"Oh, he's interested. And you work too hard."

"I have to."

"When's the last time you got laid?"

Chloe slipped into the modest black dress and presented her back to Rachel for zipping up. "Ah, too long to remember? Thanks, by the way, for bringing it up."

She fluffed her hair then grabbed her earrings off the dresser. She worked on the tiny silver hoops as she stepped into her heels, wishing all the while she could've gone without the thigh highs. They were extremely sheer, but they were black, and in this heat and humidity, any added layer was too much. She was itching and sweating already, just thinking about the graveside portion of the service.

"So, hook up with him."

For a minute, Chloe couldn't talk for laughing. "We're not teenagers, Rache. I'm not hooking up with some semi-stranger and having sex just because he gets me all hot and bothered. And could we not discuss this now? Today of all days?"

"Today's the best day, Chloe. We're alive, and that's the miracle. And Jackson's not a semi-stranger," Rachel defended, ignoring Chloe's request to let it go. "He's...like a brother."

"Please, do not put that sick idea in my head."

"Oh, pooh with you, Chloe. That's not what I meant, and you know it. He's big and strong and gorgeous and protective. I'd hook up with him in a heartbeat."

"And what about Paul? You two looked rather cozy earlier. He's been here every night since I've been home. Haven't you gone well over your one-month rule?"

Rachel studied the carpet as if the seventies-era purple shag had recently been fashioned into fascinating crop circles. "He's...different."

"Oh, Rachel, honey." Chloe's heart melted as she pulled her baby sister close. "You really care for him."

"I do. I really think I do."

“He certainly seems nice. A week’s not the best indicator of that, I suppose. And there’s been so much going on, the stress, all the neighbors flowing in and out of here...We haven’t had much opportunity to talk, just the two of us. But he looks at you as if you put the stars in the sky.”

“You think?”

Chloe gave her a tight squeeze and let her go. “I know. Now, how do I look?”

“So sad. I hate black. Even for evening. But it’s just this one day. At least the heels are sexy.”

They weren’t meant to be. Sexy wasn’t the image she wanted to portray for today’s occasion. And what did she mean by *sad*? Chloe would love to know. They were going to a funeral, for God’s sake, not a cocktail party. What did Rachel expect, a slinky, red, strapless number? Not in this lifetime, Chloe thought. Letting it ride, she decided instead to watch Jackson’s reactions more closely.

She had her suspicions he was interested, but charging in like her white knight?

Clearly, Rachel, sweetheart though she was, was delusional.

Chapter 3

"I appreciate you waiting," Chloe said.

Jackson and Paul had been sitting on the sofa, and they both stood at the sound of her voice. Jackson took her hand and tucked it over his arm as he drew her out to his SUV.

"You look beautiful," he told her and pressed a kiss to her temple.

She swallowed hard and tried to keep her knees from knocking as she slid into the passenger seat. She'd experienced full-on, lip-devouring, sloppy, tongue-thrusting kisses that had made her fight off yawns of boredom, yet the sweet, simple gesture was nearly her undoing. "Thank you."

He drove them the three short miles to the church and parked under the shade of one of the grand old oaks near the side entrance. Then he took her arm again and escorted her into the vestibule.

Pastor Simmons and Mr. Forrester, the director from Radney's Funeral Home, were primed for her arrival.

"Ms. Rezner," Mr. Forrester greeted. "If you'll come with me."

Jackson gave her hand a squeeze as if to let her go, but she suddenly, strangely, needed his strength. With pleading eyes and voice, she asked, "Could you...Would you mind, terribly, coming with me?"

He looked relieved, as if he wasn't thrilled about letting her go it alone. "Yes, of course."

They followed the director to the front of the small church, where the gleaming mahogany casket was waiting. A grand spray of white roses blanketed one end, and larger wreaths and arrangements were mounted on tall, slender, black tripods that lined the pulpit area.

With purposeful movements, Mr. Forrester carefully opened the head end of the casket before stepping back and blending into the woodwork in the way that all people in his profession seemed to have perfected, as if he were a chameleon.

Her first thought was how peaceful Gram looked, like she was sleeping. They'd done a doozy of a job with her hair, teasing it more than she would have liked. At least the makeup wasn't too overdone. Gram was a hardworking, plain-cut sort of woman. She'd never cared for fussing over her appearance. And really, in Chloe's humble opinion, Gram had possessed a timeless sort of beauty that needed no adornment.

"Excuse me," Jackson whispered. "I'll only be a moment."

She nodded and instantly mourned the loss of his hand on her arm, his firm side nestled to hers, the spicy scent of his aftershave, and the starch of his shirt, fresh from the dry cleaner's. Somehow, she took the two steps forward alone and white-knuckled the rim of glossy wood.

The lining was a cloud-like baby blue, the pillow beneath Gram's silver-streaked dark hair a pearly white.

Rachel had helped her choose the flowery print dress, with its muted purples on a creamy background. It buttoned at the neck where the crochet trim met, and Chloe acutely felt the loss of not being able to send her off with Grandpa's gift. But there was the Bible tucked under her crossed hands and the worn golden band on her left hand. Those meant more, she supposed, in the grand scheme of things.

The warmth of Jackson's hand at her elbow had her glancing over at him, and she smiled thinly.

"Good thing she can't see what they've done to her hair."

Oh, God. There was so much affection in his tone. She just might have to kiss him. Not here, of course. But soon.

"You needed these," he said and pressed a small, weighted, black velvet drawstring pouch into her clammy hand.

She loosed the bunched fabric and poured the contents into her palm. She could only blink in stunned amazement. "Gram's pearls." Tears welled in her eyes, and he pulled a linen handkerchief from the inside pocket of his suit. "Oh, God. I was doing so well."

"It's okay." Pressing his lips to her temple, he reminded, "You're entitled."

Chloe swiped at her cheeks. Then, with trembling hands, she laid the beaded chain of tiny, creamy pearls over her Gram's hands and the Bible beneath them as if it were a rosary. "Oh, Jackson...I can't thank you—"

"Shh. None of that. Let's sit for a minute before you collapse."

She let him drape his arm around her shoulders and draw her over to a pew, resisting, just barely, the urge to crawl right on up in his lap. He would've allowed it, she was certain. He would have wrapped his arms around her and rocked her and let her weep and blubber like a baby. He'd even given her his handkerchief.

Honestly, who still carried a real linen handkerchief anymore?

Jackson Sawyer was the epitome of a true Southern gentleman at heart, layered in sinful hunk. Was there any more appealing combination?

* * * *

When the cramped, small church started to fill up and everyone tried to vie for a spot near Chloe, eager for a word or to give a compassionate moment of comfort, Jackson played guard dog—of the pit bull variety. Effortlessly, he kept them at arm's length and made her get off her feet as much as possible. Rachel and Paul slipped in and worked their way up front to sit with the two of them, increasing their united front against the well-meaning yet monopolizing community of friends and neighbors who'd come to pay their respects.

The service dragged on for what seemed like an eternity as Pastor Simmons opened the floor for any who wished to speak. Chloe tried to be gracious. Some of the stories were touching, some were humorous, and each of them proved the mark Gram had made on their little spot of the Alabama map. But her head was pounding, and her throat was dry.

Rachel passed her a mint, and she nearly wept in gratitude.

They moved to the cemetery behind the church and the crater of earth that had been lined in bright green, grassy faux turf. Then finally, after several prayers and placing roses on the casket, they ended up full circle in Gram's house. Chloe and Rachel began pulling platters from the fridge and setting out plates and utensils.

Jackson pulled her aside briefly to introduce his brother Tyler. Tall and equally handsome, Ty Sawyer was a slightly leaner, athletically toned version of Jackson with dark brown hair he kept in a clean-cut style. Not quite military short, she decided. He looked like more of a runner, a quarterback, perhaps, while Jackson could've been a defensive tackle. They shared the same easy smile...

Funny how it did nothing to elevate her pulse or trip her heartbeat.

"Looks like you're holding up well," Tyler commented. "The service was lovely."

"Long-winded, perhaps," Chloe said, smiling thinly. "Thank you for coming. Please promise you'll take home a casserole or twelve?"

He chuckled, grabbed a glass, and poured iced tea. "Single guys," he wagged a finger between himself and Jackson, "never turn down home cooking."

"Right now, I'd kill for a fast food burger. It probably sounds ungrateful and unhealthy, but the neighbors keep funneling in food by the cooler loads. The fridge is packed. The freezer's busting at the seams...Bless you." She accepted a glass from Jackson and took a good, long sip of iced tea. "Speaking of which, what you did, Gram's necklace..."

Jackson took over unwrapping a tray with olives and cheese. "I told you, don't waste the breath. You couldn't very well let her go without it."

"Still," Chloe insisted. "I spoke with Bonnie, by the way. Thanks to you. Again."

"Glad to help."

Jackson carried the tray, and Chloe followed with another. "Not surprisingly, I have another favor. But, um, well, could we talk about it later?"

Their fingers brushed as they placed the trays on Gram's oval dining room table, sending zings of electricity through every fiber of her body. Their gazes met and held, and the implied intimacy of *later* was palpable between them.

Oh, boy.

Chloe cleared her throat and finally tore her eyes from his when he graciously agreed.

* * * *

Later turned out to be much, much later than Chloe had bargained for. Jesus, they'd had to all but shove several stragglers out the door. And then they'd had to clean up. Exhausted, Chloe kicked off her shoes and flopped down on the couch, propping her aching feet up on the coffee table. No longer shocked at Jackson's insistence on lending a hand—no matter if it was to wash dishes or run the vacuum—or hanging out until the bitter end, she simply accepted the glass of wine he offered as he joined her.

"Bless you."

"Shift this way, and give me those feet."

Too stunned to disobey, Chloe wiggled so that her back was reclined against the arm of the couch and her tired little puppies were resting on his muscular thigh. Paul had decided to take Rachel for a drive, get her out of the house for a while. The TV was on one of

those all-news networks with the volume turned down, providing low, ambient noise for the otherwise empty house.

“Oh, dear, sweet Jesus,” she murmured as he began to massage her arches. *Magnificent*...She’d never in her life realized the erogenous potential of her feet. Her *feet*, for Christ’s sake.

He laughed and skimmed a hand up her leg, under the hem of her dress. For a second or two, her heart stopped. Her eyes went round as spotlights.

“Better without them, don’t you think?”

Think? Her brain was working on mush-mode. How the hell did he expect her to think with his fingers brushing along her inner thigh? The pulsing of her mound was in perfect rhythm with her racing heartbeat. She swallowed hard and sat mutely by as he deftly, slowly divested her of one lace-trimmed stocking. Next, he hooked his fingers under the lacy edge of the other and rolled it down and off.

Returning to task, he lightly worked his magic along one heel, near her ankle. “Rachel’s taking tomorrow off, and I know you said Bonnie called, but you should take another day or two to rest. Today had to be grueling.”

“Hmm. God, you have amazing hands.” Her lids drifted shut on disturbing thoughts of how amazing his hands would feel on other parts of her body. Tingles, wonderfully naughty tingles, slithered up her legs to ripple through her pussy. It was truly an effort to concentrate on anything other than those hands on her skin. But needs must...

“Ah, about the other favor...Some things have come up—”

“The business with the bank, your Gram’s loan.”

“Right. It’ll be cutting it close, but I can get a refund on my classes for the upcoming semester as long as I call my advisor first thing in the morning. Thing is, I need something more than waiting tables, and I needed it, like, yesterday. We can hold out for a month or so, but I won’t have Rachel worrying about losing this place.”

"Isn't there something you could do with the nursing experience you have?"

"At this point? Maybe Thomas Hospital would let me work in billing. Records. Or maybe triage for the ER. I'd still make more in tips."

He let out a heavy sigh, eased her feet off his lap, and stood. The abrupt move, the break of contact, startled her back to full awareness. "Jackson?"

"Let me just lend you the money, save you interest." He walked to the TV and shut it off manually. "We'll work out payments you and Rachel can afford."

"Absolutely not."

"Damn it, Chloe."

Where was this anger coming from? His handsome face was contorted into a scowl.

"Forget I asked. I'll start scouting the classifieds. Hell, maybe I'll drive into Perdido and buy a lottery ticket," she tossed out rather dispassionately.

"Look," he said and scooped a hand through his hair. "There's one thing I can offer you. But it isn't for the faint of heart."

Intrigued, she coaxed, "Go on."

"One of the clubs Ty and I own—it's a very exclusive, very secretive sex club. You could pull down a grand a week, easy. Maybe more. But you'd be doing things...Well, let's just say your Gram would not approve."

"You've got to be joking? Have I been living under a rock?" she shook her head at the notion. "Gulf Shores, home of some kind of kinky, underground sex club?"

"Sex On The Beach. Our clients' backgrounds and medical histories are rigorously screened. If they can afford the membership dues and our hourly rates and pass the drug screens, the blood tests, then you know you're getting the crème de le crème of sexual partners as far as safety goes."

Chloe tried to put it into context. “So, these insanely wealthy clients are willing to pay for...what, exactly?”

“Anything. *Everything*. And everything has a price. You can earn as little or as much as you like. I’d say ninety-nine percent of our clientele are men. That rare one percent of women, they’re usually wives of the male clients who get off on watching. Others are looking for threesomes. And, yes, that goes both ways. We offer a safe haven for consenting adults to indulge their fantasies.”

Oh. My. Jesus.

“You’re *trying* to scare me off,” Chloe accused.

“Not at all. Just laying it all out there. Full disclosure. Some men want a woman who’ll take it rough. Others want to be on the receiving end of erotic punishment. Our rooms cater to every imaginable palate. Bondage, toys, you name it, we have it or else we’ll get it.”

“And this is legal?”

He shrugged. “Loopholes. You’d be an employee of the club. The money changes hands, and the club takes a cut then cuts you a check. Or, in your case, I’m perfectly willing to make this a cash-only endeavor.”

She didn’t have the guts to ask why. Besides, she suspected she already knew why. “Does Rachel know about this?”

He grimaced. “She tried to get Ty and me to let her work there at first—the income is a huge temptation. But we discouraged her. At first, she was too young. We don’t allow anyone under twenty-one to become a member or an employee.”

“And now?” Chloe asked, afraid she didn’t really want to know. Was this the cause of Rachel’s dating habits? “Certainly she’s old enough.”

“We’d rather try to steer her toward management at High Tide. And I’d rather you didn’t think of this as a viable option, Chloe. Last ditch resort, maybe.”

Chloe rubbed at her temple. "But that much money...that quickly. I wouldn't have to do it for long, right? A month or two and I'd have enough of a cushion. With Rachel's help, we could share the house and the expenses. I can transfer my credits to South and pick up where I left off with college, and eventually, I'd just get a bland, part-time job."

"This is a monumental decision, sweetheart. It's not like working at Books-A-Million for the summer. We're talking sex. With strangers."

"Oldest profession in the world, right?" she countered, trying for a light laugh, but the tension was palpable. Could she do it? "I promised Rachel, long ago, never to let her down. If that means bending my morality, so be it."

But he suggested, "Sleep on it. If you feel the same way tomorrow, we'll discuss it further."

"What's to discuss? And I don't need to sleep on it. Just tell me where to be and when."

"Fine." He sounded anything but. "Come by High Tide tomorrow, around ten. Dress casually, and I'll give you the grand tour. We'll go over employee policies and club rules. Then...we'll see."

* * * *

"Damn it, Jackson," Ty rubbed the nape of his neck. "I knew this was going to be a problem. It was in your voice the other day. And when you look at her, the sparks going off between the two of you. Damn it to hell. She's a walking wet dream. I get it. But why would you want to torture yourself by putting her off-limits? From the way she was responding to you, I'd say the attraction is mutual."

"Hell, Ty, it isn't what I want at all. Chloe's gotten under my skin. There's no use denying it. I offered her money, interest free. She doesn't want a handout, and I get that. She's determined to earn it. Admirable. Stubborn as hell. But admirable."

“Oh, she’ll damn well earn every penny working at the club. She understands what goes on there? What would be expected of her?”

“Absolutely.” Which only tightened the knot sitting in his stomach. She was willing to shuck her dignity, sell her body, in order to save her sister. He got it—hell, he’d sacrifice his soul were the circumstances reversed. Family was everything to the Sawyers. But his attraction for her made it damn hard to swallow. “She’ll be here any minute for a tour and a rundown of employee policies and procedures.”

Ty narrowed his gaze on his brother. “And what do you have up your sleeve?”

Ah, Ty did know him oh-so well. “A new client. Someone who’ll be gentle with her while breaking her in. One handpicked by yours truly, with very specific tastes for a dark-haired, green-eyed beauty.”

“The less I know, the better I sleep,” Ty said, glancing to the monitors. “You’re on.”

Jackson scanned the screen, watching the sexy female make her way to the bar and exchange words with Mick, watching the turn of heads as Chloe passed, the appreciative smiles. The bartender went to the house phone and dialed the extension for their upstairs office.

“Tell him I’m on my way down,” Jackson said to Ty as he strode to the door.

She was waiting for him by the bar and looking so delectable in jeans and a lilac-colored blouse that hugged her high breasts and tapered over her slim torso that Jackson had to remind himself not to scoop her up and take a bite. He did take her hand and kiss her cheek.

“You look lovely, as always,” he told her.

“Thank you. I’m ridiculously nervous,” she whispered for his ears only, the rush of breath at his temple and the sultry, seductive scent of her perfume waging a war with his libido.

“Let’s take a drive.”

He led her out to his SUV, and they drove farther east, farther along the beachfront road, just past the jetties near the point and Ono Island. Just shy of the Florida state line.

* * * *

Surely, the man knew the location of his own club, for goodness' sake. "Did I miss something?" Chloe asked.

The name on the stucco building read, "Low Tide."

"Sex On The Beach isn't exactly a family-friendly title, sweetheart. Underground literally means underground, in this case."

"Oh. Well. Okay, then." She took his hand as she stepped out of the vehicle, letting him lead her in through a side door.

A tall, voluptuous blonde, dressed in a rather sexy royal blue dress and high heels, greeted them. "Mr. Sawyer."

"Jocelyn. This is Chloe Rezner, Rachel's sister."

Recognition flickered in her blue eyes. "Nice to meet you. I have everything prepared as specified, Mr. Sawyer. The Red Room," she informed and handed him a key card.

"Thank you, Jocelyn. Right this way."

He kept his firm, wide palm pressed to Chloe's lower back as he escorted her to an elevator that opened on cue. The double brass doors swallowed them up, and the car descended to the lowest floor. They exited to the right, and Jackson led her down the narrow hallway. She ignored the other various shaded doors, ignored the embarrassing, unyielding fascination that had her wondering what sinful pleasures they might be hiding. What sinful acts she would ultimately be expected to perform behind those same colorful barriers. She focused instead on Jackson's reassuring presence, the heat and strength radiating from his powerful body.

Like that was any better. *Damn it.* There was no denying the urge to drag him into one of the rooms, lock the door behind them, and

throw away the key. She wanted to do things with him, to him, that she'd never done with any other man—not even her ex.

Which was just stupid, she told herself. Jackson hadn't even kissed her, not on-the-lips really kissed her, and yet her body responded to his nearness as if he owned it. Nipples peaked and tingling, yearning for the heat and the suction of his mouth. Pussy slick and pulsing, desiring to be filled. Her hands itched to feather into the mass of his thick, shaggy, caramel-colored strands. To roam every blessed inch of his hard body. And follow the path with her mouth.

Jackson swiped the card, and the encrypted lock clicked as the light flashed red to green, allowing them entrance to the Red Room. The color scheme carried from the door to the heavy silk drapes framing a set of paneled doors straight ahead. The sleek, black furniture, the red drapes, and the rice paper windows on the sliding doors gave the elegant suite a very Japanese feel.

"I expected more of a..."

"Dungeon," Jackson supplied, shoving aside the drapes and the paneled doors to reveal a large, king-sized bed covered in a red raw silk comforter with fluffy, white pillows banking the glossy black headboard.

"Well, yes, to be completely honest." But it was more like the penthouse suite of a five-star hotel—a more than pleasant surprise.

He grinned. "We do indeed have one. I warned you, remember—all tastes, all desires fulfilled. But this is the room you'll be assigned at first."

Perplexed, her brows furrowed. This was all *sooo* way out of her league it wasn't funny. "At first?"

"Until you prove yourself. Until you're absolutely sure you're prepared to handle the next step up from straight sex with a client. Ever played around with bondage or toys?"

She felt herself blush three distinct, increasing temperatures. Maybe he wouldn't notice, considering the color of the room. He was

asking as her employer, she chided herself. Nothing more. And she'd have to get over her inhibitions on so many levels in order to pull this off.

"N—not really," she lied. Self-servicing with a vibrator was no one's business but her own, Chloe decided.

"Guess that puts a check mark in the "no" box for anal sex as well."

Damn. How many shades of red could a body radiate? How much more heat could her skin withstand before spontaneously combusting?

Chloe whispered, "Bingo."

"Still sure about this?"

Hell, no. "Positive."

The bigger picture—saving Gram's house, saving Rachel—loomed before her, giving her an amazing amount of courage she hadn't believed possible.

Jackson's expression, however, registered blatant doubt. "We'll see. We've recently approved a new client, a plus for you, really. He won't be comparing you or your skills to any of the other girls."

Skills? Chloe nearly howled with laughter. *As if.*

"And," he added, "so far, the gentleman's only request is that you be blindfolded."

She mulled it over, musing aloud, "Actually, a blindfold might make it easier." With her eyes covered, she could imagine her lover to be anyone of her choosing. Three guesses—and the first two didn't count—as to whom she'd be imagining!

"My thoughts exactly. So, twice a week, two-hour sessions each, for the first couple of weeks. Then we'll see how you feel about taking on other clients and other...desires."

"What are my rights? I mean, will I be able to refuse him a request if I'm not completely comfortable with it?"

"Yes, of course. He'll be aware of the rules up front. Straight sex, no toys, no anal penetration without your express consent. You'll

have a predetermined safe word to end the session immediately, no questions asked.”

Moving to the table by the bed, he opened the narrow drawer. “If you change your mind, at any time, feel free to explore. They’ve been sterilized, and the lube is packaged in these individual-use cell-packs.”

Chloe scanned the contents, her eyes going wide at the variety of wares. Some of the *toys* she easily recognized. Others...She simply had no idea what they’d be used for. Maybe that, in and of itself, was a glaring sign of how ill-prepared she was for this scandalous venture.

Was she fooling herself to think she could go through with this?

Did she really have another choice? Her options were slim to none, and none of them paid as well as Sex On The Beach.

When she commented with only a noncommittal sound, Jackson continued, “There’s a panic button here by the bed and one out in the sitting room, connected to the table by the sofa. One of the staff is never more than a few seconds away. Protecting you is our number one concern. And the clients know crossing the line is grounds for immediate removal.”

Chloe shut the drawer and wandered to the adjoining bath. There was a sunken tub, large enough for three or four adults, easy, with jets and a separate shower. The vanity and sink were made of black granite, the fixtures a brushed nickel. Bamboo spears and pure white orchids shot out of a tall, slender, square-cut glass vase. Embroidered, white towels hung on a bar over the side of the tub, and another lay folded near the sink. Sweetly scented soaps carved to look like small swans sat in a dish beside the faucet.

“Any questions?” he asked.

Only about a million. “When do I start?”

“As soon as the medical exam and the blood work come back clean. We’ll go back to High Tide and hammer out the details of your contract.”

* * * *

One question snowballed into what seemed like a hundred more once they were settled into the private office upstairs at High Tide. Ty was nowhere to be found, so Jackson sat at the desk while Chloe chose the sofa along the back wall.

Was she distancing herself from him or from the idea of what she was about to sign on for? He had to wonder.

He couldn't begin to imagine what was going through that lovely head of hers. Her expression was guarded, apprehensive. She chewed her lower lip—a nervous sign. And she kept fidgeting with the screw-on cap of the bottled water he'd had sent up from the bar.

She'd be terrible at poker, Jackson thought with amusement.

"And what should I wear?" she asked.

"Jocelyn will instruct you in everything you need to know once you arrive. Clients usually have very specific requests, and we keep a wardrobe room. Now, let's get down to basics." He pulled a checklist and an employee packet from the filing cabinet to his left. "Have you ever had your pussy waxed?"

She blinked owlishly. Nope, a poker player she was not. "Sure, ah, for a bikini."

"How would you feel about a Brazilian? The full monty. Completely baring your pussy. "

God, she was so sexy when she blushed. Blushed—like a freaking virgin. What sort of screwed-up fuck had she been married to that so beautiful and sexy a woman could actually be embarrassed discussing her sexuality? And why did he feel as if he were personally on a mission to change that?

"Yes, I'm aware what a Brazilian is, thank you, Jackson. And no. I've never gone completely bare...down there."

Trying for his best scolding look, he frowned at her. "Down there? Chloe, sweetheart, our clients will expect you to be a little less

inhibited than the average partner. If you have a problem with the vernacular, you'd better get over it. Now."

"I'll...get into character once it's showtime."

Right. "All our girls use Marlene's, a salon in Perdido. I've already booked an appointment for you for this Thursday—manicure, pedicure, waxing, and a trim. Anything else you'd like that I haven't thought of, just have Marlene add it to the tab. Now, you'll see our club physician right away and get the blood work going at the lab. Condoms are a must, even with our rigorous screening, but we recommend a backup method. You can never be too protected when it comes to birth control."

"I had some trouble when I was younger...and being married...I, ah, stayed on the Pill to regulate my cycles, so that's not a problem."

"Trouble?" The word was out of his mouth before he could snag it back.

She studied her hands. She'd set the water on the table beside the sofa, linked her fingers, and rested them in her lap. "A miscarriage. Not long after Clint and I tied the knot."

"Was that why you married him?"

"No." Her head snapped up, and her chin lifted defiantly. "It wasn't like that."

"You loved him." Why the fuck did it feel like someone was standing on his chest?

"At the time? Yes, I believed I loved him. We were so young. What did we know?" She shoved up off the sofa, walked to the bank of screens. "He wanted the dutiful wife, cleaning house, cooking him dinner, waiting on him hand and foot after a hard day's work. I wanted to be whatever he wanted. But it wasn't enough."

For him or for her? Jackson sensed it wasn't her.

Uncertainty shone in her eyes as she turned to face him. "What if...What if I'm not able to *satisfy* the client?"

Anger boiled in his veins. How could she possibly perceive herself as anything less than perfect? If Jackson ever got his hands on

the bastard she'd married, he'd rip his fucking ball off and feed it to him—half a package for half a man. No way the prick carried a full set.

“How could you not?”

A thin, tremulous smile curved her sensual lips. “Your confidence in me is appreciated. I hope I don't let you down. After all, it's your business, your good name at risk.”

“Put it from your mind. Here's Jocelyn's card with her number at the club and at home. From this point on, I leave you in her capable hands. She'll see to it that you're paid, in cash, immediately following each session, minus the club's cut, of course.” He stood, rounded the desk, and handed her Jocelyn's business card.

She accepted it, tucking it away in her handbag. “Thank you, Jackson.” And she laid her hand on his arm. “Truly, I don't know what else I'd have done.”

“You'd manage,” he insisted.

Chloe Reznor was much tougher than she was willing to give herself credit for.

His resolve? Not so much.

Jackson tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and stroked a thumb over her delicate cheek. Their gazes locked, and the longing he saw reflected there nearly buckled his knees. This hell he was making for himself, accepting Chloe as an employee, which put her off-limits socially, was going to kill him.

Because he found it infinitely harder and harder *not* to pull her lips to his and simply let himself feast, he stepped back. “Take care of yourself, sweetheart.”

Chloe nodded and walked away, turning back when she reached the door. “You won't mention this to Rachel?”

“Not my place,” he said honestly.

“Thank you. Again.”

With that, she walked out of his office and irrevocably out of his reach.

Chapter 4

“I still don’t get why you’re working for Bonnie,” Rachel said, pouting. “If you’d just let me talk to Jackson and Ty—”

“We’ve been over it, Rache. No use beating the poor, dead animal again. I won’t put you or the Sawyers,” Chloe was making a discerned effort to think of them as the Sawyers and not Ty and Jackson, since they were now her employers, “in an awkward position.”

“Okay, fine. Then why hasn’t Jackson called or come by?”

Four days without so much as a “boo.” She was nearly mad with the desire just to lay eyes on him. Crazy. She was going crazy, longing for a glimpse of a man she could never have. Chloe seriously needed to get a handle on her lust. “Why would he?”

“Why wouldn’t he? With the electricity that arcs off the two of you whenever you’re near one another?”

“You know I don’t have time for anything but work.” So, it was a lame argument at best, but it was all she had. The truth would never do. “And neither does Jackson. I’m not sure how late I’ll be...”

Rachel glanced at her watch. “I’m on ’til nine. Then Paul’s picking me up for a late dinner. Guess I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

“Have fun.”

“Don’t work too hard,” Rachel countered.

How hard could it be, lying flat on my back?

* * * *

The parking lot of Low Tide was filled to brimming when Chloe slipped into a spot near the back, one marked reserved for employees only. Jocelyn had sent over a key card and a code for the wardrobe room along with instructions to come at least a half hour early. Her client would be arriving promptly at eight, so that gave her thirty minutes to change and prepare.

A day at Marlene's had been like the adult version of a day at Disneyland. She'd sipped champagne while a staff of remarkably beautiful women pampered her with a facial, a pedicure, and a manicure. She'd had her hair deep-conditioned and trimmed. The Brazilian was the only low spot of the day because it hurt like hell, but she'd survived to tell the tale. Actually, now that she was a day or two out, Chloe had to admit the sensitivity factor might be worth the price of pain.

Just walking around in her silky panties, with the luxurious fabric caressing her exposed flesh like a lover, was enough to keep her on the edge of arousal. *Mercy.*

She'd showered at home, slathered herself in honeysuckle scented lotion and matching body splash—so outrageously mindful of smelling as good as she tried to look. Her worst fear, at the moment, was not being able to see the client. Sight and first impressions were so vitally important to attraction.

Not that she hoped to be attracted to him, just that it might help to allay her fears. At first she'd thought of it as a blessing. Now, her mind played the terribly worrisome game of wondering why any wealthy, handsome man would need to pay for sex.

What was *wrong* with him?

Posing this same question to Jocelyn, the woman assured her, "They're paying for the lack of commitment, honey. A couple hours of unadulterated pleasure. Hot, steamy sex. No strings. No remorse. Who wouldn't want that? Trust me, though, your guy would stop hearts state-wide."

"You know who he is?" That idea never occurred to her.

“Honey, it’s my business to know everything that goes on under this roof. But I’m sworn to secrecy by our confidentiality agreements.”

Oh, yeah. She’d signed one, too. Under penalty of law and fear of prosecution, her lips were irrevocably sealed for eternity. “So, then, do they all demand the blindfolds?”

“Ah, no. However, it’s not an unusual request for a first-timer.”

Okay. That made sense. So, maybe next time—if she pleased him and if there was a *next time*—he’d reveal himself. Trusting Jocelyn’s judgment, Chloe felt a little better about putting aside her apprehension and began sorting through the racks, trying to fulfill her man’s request with a slip of a gown in creamy white satin that came to mid-thigh and a matching bra and panty set with white lace trim. To each his own, she decided, guessing a guy with the inclination for a fantasy woman would’ve wanted something slutty and black. Perhaps even vinyl or leather.

“You look fantastic,” Jocelyn complimented when escorting her to the Red Room.

“Thanks. I’m afraid I might puke. Nerves. Huge, jangling nerves.”

“Deep breaths,” Jocelyn suggested. “Think of this as your own little fantasy fulfilled. Sex with a gorgeous guy. No strings on your end, either. Priceless. Ten minutes ’til go time. Here, I’ll help you with the tie.”

The client’s other request—a silk necktie for her blindfold. Jocelyn secured it around Chloe’s eyes with a knot at the back of her head then gave it a test, asking her to tell how many fingers she was holding up.

Chloe shook her head. “Not a clue. It’s black as pitch in here.”

“Very good.” Chloe felt Jocelyn’s hands on her shoulders, directing her to the sofa in the sitting room. “Easy. Here we go.”

She sat, listening for her next cue.

“Have fun.”

Fun? The poor man was unwittingly lucky she'd been too keyed up to eat since breakfast, or he'd be in for a nasty, so-not-fun surprise. The door clicked shut, tossing the room into deafening silence.

Her mind began to run wild with worries, her heartbeat pounding so loud she could hear it in her ears as the minutes ticked by at turtle speed. She fidgeted with the layers of lacy hems, where the gown and robe skimmed her upper thighs.

The next click of the door signaled her client's arrival.

Showtime!

Chloe took a deep breath. What was she supposed to do? Say? She was as helpless as a soldier in a field of land mines without her sight, so moving on her own was out of the question, as far as options went.

Finally remembering Jocelyn's instructions, she managed to mutter, "Do you have the safe word?"

If he answered incorrectly, the plan was to rip off the freaking tie ASAP and make a mad dash for the panic button. Step two was to lock herself in the bathroom until the cavalry showed up. A team of armed security personnel guarded the underground portion of the club. They might not bat an eye at a scream or an exuberant outburst, but the panic button would set off a building-wide alert.

"Gardenia."

"You may proceed." Following the dialogue she'd rehearsed with Jocelyn eased a small measure of her anxiety. "There's champagne chilling in the bedroom, if you so desire. I hope you approve of the gown." So saying, she dared to stand and was proud when she didn't sway on her feet.

"You look...delectable," the deeply masculine voice replied.

Oh, God. His voice was smooth as prime whiskey. So deep, so purely male she couldn't help but envision the gorgeous Jackson Sawyer and all his smooth, tantalizing perfection. She felt a shiver of anticipation—this time, the anticipation was a good thing.

Which shocked the hell out of her normally prudish sensibilities.

Having sex with a stranger was so far removed from her MO it was laughable. Add in that the stranger was doling out an obscene amount of cash for said—hopefully fantastic, fantasy-fulfilling—sex and that his voice alone had her body sizzling with the expectation of what was to come, and Chloe could only marvel that perhaps she'd stumbled into some unknown universe.

She felt him circle her, felt the heat radiating from him as he stepped close enough for her to catch a whiff of starch and shaving cream and rugged male that assailed her senses, intoxicated her.

"I'm at your mercy," she admitted with a light, forced laugh. "The blindfold makes it impossible to—Oh!"

She was suddenly swept up into sinewy arms and held against a very solid, muscular wall of chest. He was carrying her—she could only guess—to the bedroom. Well, alrighty, then. Guess he was eager to get his money's worth. And the sooner this began, the sooner it was over, she told herself.

Without a word, he put her on her feet and untied the knot on the short, silky, white robe she'd belted over the gown. The garment slithered to the hardwood, a whisper of anticipation.

"So beautiful," he murmured, brushing what felt like a knuckle over the swell of a breast. Beneath the layers of silk and lace, the nipple drew tight in response.

She shuddered and bit her lower lip as heat pooled between her thighs.

Being blindfolded set her other senses on heightened alert. The softest sound echoed in her mind like the crack of a whip. His touch, though brief, was a searing brand that stoked embers in her blood. Because she couldn't see his hands or discern his intent by reading body language or looking into his eyes, the expectation of where he'd touch her or taste her next left her breathless and nearly coming out of her skin.

"What would you like me to call you?" Chloe asked.

“Who do you want me to be?” he asked, trailing his fingertips along her collarbone.

Slippery slope, the truth. “That’s a dangerous game, don’t you think?”

His answer was a low chuckle. “Then let’s play another. You’ll call me Master or Sir. And I’ll address you as my slave.”

Wicked and beyond the bounds of her reality so as to be perfect for playing along. “Very well.”

She heard him chuckle again and realized as the sound traveled that he’d moved to stand behind her. He ran his fingers up her arms and down again, skimming ever so lightly. Up and down. Up and down. “Your skin is smooth as silk. And you smell like summer—sweet as honey.”

Her knees went weak as tidewater, and she let out a low moan of delight when he pressed his cheek just above the knot at the back of her head, inhaling the scents of her shampoo and the honeysuckle-scented lotion she’d all but bathed in. Then he shifted the silky mass of her hair to fall over one shoulder and nipped lightly at the nape of her neck.

Her skin was flush, every cell of her body alive with arousal. When he licked the spot he’d nipped, sharp, jagged bolts of lust shot straight to her clit.

This was going to be an excruciatingly long, hellacious interlude if every move the man made reminded her of Jackson Sawyer.

Wasn’t she supposed to be servicing his needs, not the other way around?

Using her tactile senses, Chloe crossed an arm over her torso and felt for his muscular arm. She turned and placed her palms on his chest for reference. This erotic game of blind man’s bluff required a certain skill...

One by one, she deftly freed the buttons on his shirt, tugging the hem free as she encountered his belt and the waistband of his pants. Then she spread her hands over the warm, firm wall of sculpted

muscles and short, wiry hairs, sliding them up, up until she cupped strong, wide shoulders, effectively shoving the shirt down and off his sinewy arms.

She came back to the thin layer of wiry hairs covering his upper torso and reveled in their texture, feathering her fingers through them and tugging lightly. Searching blindly with her mouth, she found the flat male nipples hidden there and flicked her tongue over them until they peaked. And he groaned. Then, following the feel of washboard abs with her fingertips, she journeyed lower, freed the buckle of his belt.

“May I?” she asked, poised to lower his zipper.

“Good girl,” he said, and she swore she *heard* his smile. “You may.”

With a smile of her own, Chloe boldly pressed her lips to his navel while unzipping his pants and shoving them down his hips. She felt the clench of stomach muscles and the sharp intake of his breath beneath her mouth. His fingers threaded into the strands below the blindfold, and he murmured encouragement. Empowered by his response, she slowly dropped to her knees, tugging down his pants and his briefs.

Letting her fingers be her guide, for they’d yet to steer her wrong, she glided up strong calves, up heavy, corded thighs, and reached for an erection that stole her breath by its sheer weight and steely girth. A sigh of startled delight escaped her.

Was this another trick of being temporarily blinded?

Did his size seem unrealistically large because she had nothing to rely on but her tactile senses? And who the hell cared? His penis felt huge, hot, velvety smooth, and hard as granite. Her pussy clenched in anticipation of having every amazing inch of him sliding inside of her. She licked her lips and initiated an act she’d found repulsive until this moment. Leaning in, she kissed the large tip. Oh, yes! The lips did not lie. Then she swirled her tongue around the rim.

A deep groan erupted in the room.

Tilting her face up to his, Chloe fought off the maddening urge to dispose of the tie. She'd never experienced such a need to be connected with another, to visually affirm she was pleasing him. "May I?"

"Tell me, my slave. What is it you have in mind?"

Damning Jackson Sawyer and his comment on her prudish vernacular, Chloe swallowed down what felt like the last shreds of her decency. "Your cock...It feels so huge, so hot in my hands. I want my mouth on you, on it. I want to suck it."

"Oh, yes. Yes," he murmured when she closed her lips over the length of him and started a careful, precise rhythm of gentle suction.

She used her tongue, running it from base to tip while cupping his balls in her hand and squeezing gently. It seemed impossible, but she could have sworn his cock grew larger, harder from the teasing play. Savoring the salty taste of him that beaded on the tip, she took him in deeper, sucked more urgently.

"Easy, my slave," he coaxed and eased his length from between her lips. "You do that amazingly well. Unless you want me coming in that luscious mouth, however, we'd better slow things down."

The idea of swallowing down his passion was not an unpleasant one, Chloe noted with awe. "Whatever you wish."

He helped her to her feet and maneuvered her closer to the bed. Her thigh brushed what she took for the raw silk comforter. Then his hands pulled on the thin straps of the gown, and it fell from her shoulders to pool at her feet. The rush of cool air over her exposed skin made her shiver.

One quick tug and the front clasp of the skimpy bra liberated her breasts to his eager, greedy palms.

She sighed.

"You fit perfectly in my hands," he told her while caressing and fondling the weight of them.

The rasp of his slightly rough thumbs over her nipples made them pout in response and made her moan low in her throat. He tweaked the taut buds, and she cried out.

Her breasts felt heavy, and her nipples tingled. Each subsequent tug simultaneously caused an answering pulse in her pussy.

When his mouth, moist and hot, closed over a peak and began to suck, her legs nearly buckled. He eased her down to the mattress and resumed the glorious assault. She felt bereft when his mouth left her and the mattress dipped. But then his hands came to rest at her hips, easing the lacy, white panties down her legs and off.

Could he tell how incredibly aroused she was?

Her cream was pouring down along her inner thighs, and there was no disguising the musky smell of her excitement.

Knuckles, she guessed again, brushed over the newly waxed, over-sensitized lips of her swollen pussy, and her hips arched up in response.

“Is this pretty, bare pussy for me?” His tone was pure seduction as his thick fingers parted her slick folds and swirled her flowing juices over her clit. “You’re dripping wet.”

For once, thank God, she did not feel the instantaneous rush of a heated blush.

“Yes. Oh, yes,” she answered, hips writhing and grinding her mound against his palm as he continued to rub broad circles over the hard nub. The pain of enduring the wax job was eclipsed by the bliss of his unfettered touch. “Inside me...please...I need to feel you inside me.”

Was it permissible to beg?

Ah, did she care? *Hell, no.*

He eased down beside her, letting his hand play over her mound, tantalizing with slow, feather-light strokes. Instinctively, she raised a knee, parting for him, inviting him to delve deeper. When two thick fingers slipped inside her, she gasped and arced into the intimate connection, wanting more. Needing more.

“So hot.” The words seared her lips as his own hovered oh-so-close but did not claim them. Those fingers slid in and out. “You’re hot and silky and...”

He couldn’t be...but the sounds...*Was he licking his fingers?*

“Sweet. You taste like ambrosia. Open up.”

Beneath the blindfold, her eyes popped wide. She felt the pads of his fingers on her lips, smelled her own arousal as he slicked her juices along the seam of her mouth. Then she groaned as his fiery tongue licked them off. Hers darted out in reply, and he took the unspoken invitation, finally claiming her mouth.

Their tongues met and danced in an easy waltz, learning each other’s textures and flavors. She slanted her mouth under his and tunneled her hands into his silky hair, urging him to deepen his possession.

He did.

The kiss went on for what seemed like hours, as if neither could get enough of the other. Finally, they broke apart, panting and shaky. Then his lips traveled along her jaw. His teeth nipped at her ear, tugging the lobe. He worked his way down her neck, over the map of her torso, stopping to suck at one breast and then the other before moving lower to flutter wing-like, whispery kisses over her navel, her hips, the flat of her stomach until his head settled between the valley of her thighs.

He seemed as hungry for the taste of her pussy as he had been for her mouth. Licking up the soft folds, sucking lightly on her swollen clit, plunging his tongue as deeply as possible, he brought her to a staggering climax. She’d barely floated back to earth when his fingers came back to her still-quivering pussy, taking her up and over again while he plundered her mouth, swallowing up her cry of release.

She’d never been the recipient of such phenomenal oral sex. Nor had she climaxed twice in such close succession. This stranger had turned her inside out and sideways. Trembling, feeling as if her damp

skin were wonderfully gilded, she all but purred while stroking up and down the slope of his back.

“That. Was. Magnificent.”

She felt his chuckle ripple through him, into her. There was a shift in his weight, then the sound of crinkling foil. Then he came back to her, placing light, unhurried kisses at the corners of her mouth, nibbling at her lower lip. “You want more, my slave?”

“Yes. Please...” she pleaded breathlessly.

Who was this weak, needy woman she’d become?

This stranger may believe her to be playing a part, earning her exorbitant wages, but there wasn’t a scintilla of fabrication to the erratic beat of her heart or to the racing of her pulse. Or to the desire that rode her body with the force of a Category 5 hurricane churning in the balmy, tropical waters of the Gulf, poised to hit land and cause devastation on a massive scale.

“Please what?” he asked and licked the sensitive hollow behind her ear.

Chloe’s skin was tight and flushed. Her center throbbed. She’d never ached so badly for a man. Ever. “I need you...inside me...filling me up.”

“You *need* me to fuck you, slave?”

He sounded smug, yet at the same time, she caught the underlying tone of vulnerability. As if he needed to hear her surrender, to affirm that she was desperate for him. What man—or woman, for that matter—didn’t want to feel wanted?

“Yes. Please, Master. Please, I need you to fuck me.” Boldly, she reached for his magnificently hard penis, wrapping her hand around the thick base. “I need this cock deep inside me.”

Dear God, let me be able to take it. She’d never considered her ex as particularly lacking in the size department, and she’d only been with a couple of other men after the divorce. None of them came close to matching this man.

His fingers tangled with hers, urgently rolling on the latex sheath. Then those fingers laced with hers as he lifted her hands above her head. She instinctively cradled his big body in hers and lifted her hips to the seeking tip of his erection. He began to push into her, rocking back and forth while using her abundant juices to coat the shocking girth and ease his possession.

And possess her he did. No trick of the mind there, either. He stretched her as no one ever had, reached so deeply, filled her so completely, Chloe had to swallow the lump of emotion that rose in her throat and coated her burning lungs. *Oh, God. Oh, God.* She wrapped her legs more tightly around his hips, trying to force him impossibly closer.

He sank to the hilt, setting off a series of tiny explosions in her hips as the engorged head of his cock bumped against the welcoming boundary of her womb.

"Oh, baby," he crooned. "*Holy*...Jesus, you feel so damn good. So responsive. This sweet pussy's so tight. God, that's amazing."

"Yes," she chanted as he began to pump his hips. "Yes. Oh, yes."

Stars, bright and brilliantly intense, burst behind her eyes, and her body bowed and shook with the force of her orgasm. No one—no one had ever made her see stars.

He picked up the pace, and the sound of flesh pounding flesh echoed in the room. His mouth came back to hers, crushing, devouring before plucking at one aching nipple then the other. She arched into the exquisite, torturous sensations, silently begging for more. The scent of desire, his and hers, spicy and sweet, infused the air. The skin beneath her hands was slick and taut as the muscles bunched and splayed.

Unbelievable need began to build in her again, coiling, tightening.

Finally, a deep growl erupted from his chest, and she felt the frantic jerk of his cock deep inside her. With three more long, deep thrusts, he shoved her over another blinding, jagged peak. Heat burst

in her pussy as the coil of her desire, sparked by his release, sprang free, and the contractions of her inner muscles milked him dry.

Slowly, he collapsed over her and buried his face in the hollow of her throat, pressing a kiss to the spot.

In sync with her earlier statement, he told her, “That. Was. Fucking. Amazing.”

Stunned, blissfully sated, Chloe couldn’t have crawled to the door if the room were on fire. She wasn’t totally convinced her breathing would ever return to normal—to say nothing of her racing heart. And she found it vitally reassuring that his was just as labored, just as frantic.

Stroking her fingers through his damp hair, she smiled in spite of the awkwardly absurd situation. Lost to the idea of time or the outside world, Chloe was unaware of how long they lay there, pressed body to body. She could have stayed just this way...forever.

He stamped a kiss on her lips and heaved himself up and off the bed. There was the rustling of clothes then his promise as he came back to run his fingertips along the center of her torso—“I’ll be hard and aching until we meet again, my beautiful slave.”

Chloe waited patiently so as not to break the terms of the arrangement. When the click of the encrypted lock sounded, she shoved the damp necktie up and off her head and blinked at the glare of the bedside lamp’s glowing light.

She sat up slowly, giving her system a few minutes to level out. “Oh, sweet mercy,” she whispered to herself, touching her raw, kiss-swollen lips with still-trembling fingers.

The most amazing sex of her life and she hadn’t a clue what the man looked like. Or his name. But never in her life would she forget the feel of him, the taste of him, or the way he’d so completely filled her, the way they’d been so perfectly in sync, the rhythm of their bodies, their hearts, their raging pulses.

Instead of the shame and disappointment she’d expected, Chloe couldn’t wait for their next encounter. Her pussy clenched, aching to

have his massive cock thrusting into her again. Her creamy juices were practically weeping from her slit, crying out in loss.

Had she no decency?

She showered and changed back into her street clothes before finding Jocelyn.

"Well," the woman remarked, looking Chloe up and down with a narrowed, purposeful glare, "somebody's engine got a hell of a tune-up."

"Purring like a kitten," Chloe admitted.

"Bitch," Jocelyn snapped with no real bite. "Lucky, lucky bitch. For the record, he looked pretty damn pleased himself."

The thought had her insides revving up. She'd never known the power one could feel from the knowledge of pleasing another.

"This is yours."

Chloe took the envelope, counted the bills, and shook her head. "It's too much."

"Minus the thirty-five percent to the house. Plus tip."

"Dear God, Jocelyn. A five-hundred-dollar tip? The man must be loaded. And insane."

"He's...something. And, apparently, you pleased the hell out of him, too. Revel in it, honey. Guys like him come along once in a lifetime."

Once in a lifetime, Chloe mused. Like Prince Charming. A fantasy.

Tonight had been like a fantasy—except for not being allowed to see her prince of a lover. Maybe next time, she could persuade him to let her remove the blindfold.

Chapter 5

Chloe studied the list she'd made, double-checking the items before heading out to the party supply store. Nothing too fancy, the guest list less than twenty of Rachel's closest friends from college or the club, just an informal gathering to commemorate her baby sister's birthday.

Life goes on, she thought, recalling Rachel's words the day of Gram's funeral. A celebration was exactly the lift this house and her spirits needed.

She spotted a stack of mail near the phone, a forgotten, growing paper mountain. Rachel had sorted out the bills days earlier, and they'd tackled those first. Deciding she'd just finish her cup of tea while scanning the rest, Chloe sat. Junk, mostly, sale ads for the local supermarkets, credit card offers in Gram's name, and one she worried might've been passed over too quickly.

The envelope was clearly marked "This Is Not A Bill" but looked too important to ignore. Through the clear plastic window, she read the addressee as Thomas Hospital. She tore it open and read the five-page list of treatments, medications, and the roll call of doctors from the ER, cardiologists, surgical teams—the last hours of Gram's life dictated and neatly arranged by fees and insurance allotments.

It wasn't meant to be callous, Chloe knew. But it hit her as just that—a cold, impersonal account of her grandmother's death.

She couldn't explain it, but the document affected her in a way Gram's death had not. Maybe because she'd forged on, from the instant she'd taken Rachel's call. She'd busied her mind with packing, driving down from Birmingham, hurrying to be at her baby sister's

side. The days that followed had been filled with the funeral, friends and neighbors flittering in and out. Hunting down Gram's pearls. Jackson. Sweet, sweet Jackson. The business with the bank loan, having to worry about losing the house and paying back the money. Taking the job with Jackson's club.

Jackson.

Her mystery lover.

Her sexy boss.

Jackson, Jackson, *Jackson*.

She'd been bottling it up, shoving it aside for weeks. Now, the tide was threatening to drown her. Looking down, she couldn't see her tea for the tears that'd unwittingly slipped free.

"I suppose the birthday girl's already off to her class," Jackson announced as he deposited what seemed to be a vase of flowers on the kitchen counter. To her, it was a blob of colors and sweet smells. "Still...I thought I'd drop these off for now and then to—Chloe? Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

Without waiting for a response, Jackson picked her up and sat in the seat he'd emptied, settling her on his lap. He wrapped her in his arms, pulling her to his firm, warm chest, and held her while she sobbed. Murmuring soothing, indiscernible phrases, he stroked a hand over her hair, down her back in slow, gentle circles.

Minutes later, when the embarrassment factor kicked in and Chloe could finally draw a shaky breath, she tried to wiggle out of his embrace. Jackson was having none of it. "Talk to me, sweetheart. Tell me what happened."

"I—I don't know." He glared at her. "It's silly, really. It's just a stupid piece of paper."

Glancing to the table, Jackson picked up the hospital report, frowning as he read it. He cursed low, under his breath. "It's a goddamn heartless playbill of Gram's pain, is what it is. No wonder it upset you."

That he understood made something inside of her unfurl. “It wasn’t just that, Jackson. I—it was everything. I’d pushed my feelings so far down, trying to do what needed to be done. I guess I never really let myself grieve over losing Gram, you know? I should have been here. For her. For Rachel.”

“You can’t think that way. You’re here now. You’re going above and beyond for Rachel, if you ask me. But I’d do the same for Ty or for my parents or anyone I cared about that deeply.”

“Yes. Yes, you would.” She gave in and feathered her fingers in his hair, sliding her hand to the nape of his neck. “You’re a good man, Jackson Sawyer. One of the best I’ve ever known.”

His eyes went dark with desire, and his gaze fell to her lips.

“Kiss me, Jackson,” she whispered. “Please, just this once.”

“Chloe.”

“I don’t care about your stupid rules. Fire me,” she suggested, and a light, strangled laugh floated up as she nipped at the underside of his jaw. “Fire me and take me to bed.”

“Chloe.” He groaned. “Oh, God, Chloe, there’s nothing I’d like more...”

Her lips skimmed over his, and the screen door slammed, jolting them apart as though a bundle of TNT had exploded underneath their chair.

“Shit,” Jackson murmured, raking a shaky hand through his hair.

Paul strode into the kitchen, took one look at them, and grimaced. Gesturing to the bouquet of balloons attached to one arm and the bottle of champagne in the crook of the other, he stammered out, “Sorry, guys. I took my lunch break to pick these up, and I—sorry. So, so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Chloe soothed. “I was just having a little meltdown.”

One of his brows rose as if to say, “That wasn’t what it looked like to me,” but he didn’t comment as he slid the bottle of bubbly into the fridge. Ignoring it, she grabbed a paper towel and swiped at the mascara smudges under her eyes. “Can I make you a sandwich?”

"No, thanks. I'll grab something on the way back to work." Paul leaned in and brushed a quick kiss on her cheek. "I'll, ah, I'll see you both tonight. Call me if you need me to pick up anything on my way."

Chloe smiled thinly. "I will, Paul. Thanks."

Jackson, still sitting quietly at her table, picked up her cup of cold tea and drained it. "I should get back to the club."

The moment of surrender had passed. Tension filled the room. They'd almost stepped over that invisible line. If not for the untimely interruption...who knows what might've happened. But the spell was broken. Obviously, Jackson had returned to his senses.

Chloe felt the loss all the way to her toes.

"Tell Rachel to enjoy her night off," Jackson said as he rose, "and the party."

"You aren't coming." She knew it sounded like more of an accusation than a question. She meant for it to.

"I don't think that would be wise."

So civilized. How could he always be so goddamn civilized? God, she wanted to show him exactly how uncivilized she was feeling right this moment.

But she'd already thrown herself at him, begged him to toss his rules out the window just this once. He'd been tempted—that he could never deny. It wasn't rejection she'd seen in his eyes, it wasn't a rebuff she'd felt but his granite-hard erection separated from her bottom by several thin layers of fabric. Still, the flash of irrationality had passed, and the cool, collected Jackson Sawyer was once again in charge of his raging hormones.

Would that she could say the same.

Now that she wasn't crying, she realized what a lovely spray of mixed flowers he'd delivered for Rachel. Fingering one of the velvety, white petals, Chloe fought past the emotion clogging her throat. "Thank you, Jackson, for always being here when I seem to need you most."

When he made a move toward her, Chloe held up her hand. “Don’t. Please, just don’t.”

She left him standing in Gram’s kitchen. She was too itchy to want him this badly and not be able to connect with him. Too exhausted from her crying jag to care or suffer through the hypocrisy of going through the motions to show him out solely for the sake of good manners.

He was a big boy, Chloe mused.

He’d let himself in. He could damn well let himself out.

* * * *

Clint Rezner scowled at the wimpy little man with bloodshot eyes and a receding hairline who managed Chloe’s apartment building. “What do you mean, she cleared out?”

Where could she have gone?

“Look. I told you once already. Chloe came and packed up her things. Laurie couldn’t make the rent without her half, so she left to go live with her folks ’til she could find another roomie. Said she didn’t know when that might be. So, I rented the apartment out this morning.”

Clint grumbled all the way back to his truck. He gunned the engine and headed to Roxy’s for a beer. Something to take the edge off his frustration. It wasn’t like Chloe to up and hightail it out of Dodge. They weren’t exactly thick as thieves anymore, but he liked to drop in every once in a while and make sure she was doing okay. And, yeah, maybe he tried to sweet talk her into letting him sleep over—which never happened. She was no longer the meek, eager-to-please-her-man woman he’d fallen for.

One slip and Chloe had kicked him out on his naked ass.

And for what? A so-so piece of tail...or two. She’d screamed and hissed and clawed at him like a woman possessed when she’d walked in and found him with the Nelson twins. Hell, he couldn’t even claim

it had been worth it—banging two women at once. Every guy's wet dream, two on one. Ha, if they only knew, Clint thought. It was nothing like they portrayed it on one of those porn DVDs, no, sir.

Double the trouble, twice the cunt demanding satisfaction was what it was. And he only had the one sorry, limp dick. Drinking hadn't been the smartest move. The alcohol had not only dulled his sense of morality, it had also impeded his ability to keep his prick standing at attention long enough to get the job done.

Truth be told, the whole fucking episode had been a huge disappointment. The twins were a sorry substitution for Chloe. Most women were. He'd had a diamond, and he'd gone and screwed it up big-time, letting a few drinks and his randy dick get the best of him, settling for a couple of cheap cubic zirconias.

Chloe had refused to forgive him. Refused to listen when he'd tried to plead his case. She was always too busy with school, studying, or too tired from rounds to be interested in sex. What was so terrible about being his wife or spitting out his brats that she'd put up a fuss to go back to college and get her degree instead of staying home where she belonged?

She had never known her place.

Her place...That got him thinking. If not Birmingham, she would surely skedaddle on down south to their old home sweet home near Orange Beach. To her Gram and her sister, Rachel. Maybe Grammy had taken ill and Chloe was going to use her newly acquired skills to nurse her back to health.

The idea didn't set well with Clint. What if the old bag got to talking? Maybe like when the meds were making her loopy or the fever was in control of her aging tongue? Things could get dicey.

He flipped out his cell and decided to give his dad a call. Hank Rezner might be retired, but he still had connections. If Chloe had gone home to roost, Clint might just have to pay her a visit. Maybe they could even rekindle the old flames, being so close to where their attraction had first sparked. They'd had some good times, once.

One beer morphed into a second that Clint chased with a couple shots of tequila. The more he drank, the madder he got.

How dare the bitch up and leave him? Throw him, the king, out of his castle? So what if he'd cheated? If she'd had her priorities straight, he wouldn't have needed to look elsewhere for a warm, willing woman. She had some fucking nerve. *Fuck*...not a great word to bring up in relation to his pretty little wife.

His dick swelled just thinking about Chloe's tight little body, her lush curves, her perfectly shaped ass. Why the hell was it he could get it up—despite the liquor sloshing through his bloodstream—when he thought of her, but not when he'd had his chance with the Nelson twins?

Fucking unruly prick.

The woman was his, whether she wanted to admit it or not. No way was he going to let some judge and a stupid piece of paper tell him his marriage was over. They'd stood before God and made a vow.

'Til death do us part...

Well, as long as she was alive, Chloe had best get ready to get it through her stubborn, beautiful head—she belonged to him.

* * * *

In a quaint, cottage-style house near the outskirts of Loxley, Hank Rezner grimaced and rolled over. A curse slithered out under his breath as he reached for the phone by the bed. There was only one person he knew who possessed the audacity to call his house past eleven o'clock—his lazy-ass son.

His second wife had given him a sweet baby girl, the true joy of his life. Karen had the good common sense to marry a doctor from Dothan, one of those kidney surgeons. He kept her in plenty of glitzy jewelry and a fancy house with shiny new cars. While she spent her days volunteering with the Junior League and other charitable causes

or shuttling her boys to school and soccer practice and karate lessons, she was also presently carrying Hank's third grandbaby.

Clint, on the other hand, had ruined his marriage by cheating on that nice wife of his. The best move Clint had ever made was when he put a ring on Chloe's finger, and he'd promptly screwed it up. It would have served the boy right if she'd tarred and feathered him. Divorce was too easy an out.

But then, if he really wanted to teach the boy a lesson, Hank should have pressed charges the summer before, when a drunk-off-his-ass Clint had broken in and trashed his home office, stealing the plasma TV Deloris had given him for Christmas the year before and a fairly old DVD player he'd been considering replacing anyway.

Ever since he and Chloe had ended up in Splitsville, Clint couldn't keep a job. Even Hank's brother, Clint's uncle Phil, had washed his hands to the debacle Clint's life had become.

"What now?" Hank asked by way of answering the offensive shrill.

There was grumbling, cursing, then Clint's unmistakable voice—slurred, no doubt, by alcohol. "Goddamn it, old man. Don't yell at me when my head's about to split in two."

"If you're gonna be surly and hurl profanity in my ear after waking me up at this ungodly hour, then—"

"Just do me a favor, all right? Chloe's not here. She's not where she should be."

This was his son's big news? This warranted waking him from a sound sleep? The boy needed help. He'd tried to get him to agree to counseling. Fat chance, that.

"Look, son, why don't you go home and sleep off the drunk. Call me tomorrow, when your head's clear, and we'll talk."

"I don't need to clear my head," Clint barked. "I need to know where my wife is."

"Ex-wife," Hank reminded him, though he doubted his words, or anything, for that matter, penetrated the boy's thick skull. "And she's

probably at her grandmother's, with that sister of hers. No big mystery, boy, considering Adeline passed on a couple weeks back."

"Passed on...You mean she's dead?"

"As a doorknob. Her ticker gave out." In the silence that seemed to drag on, Hank worried that Clint had either passed out or maybe was having some medical malfunction of his own. "Clint, boy, you still there?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here. I just hadn't heard...I didn't know." Was he crying? Mercy, the boy turned into a pussy when he drank. "I should have been there for Chloe."

No shit, Sherlock.

Hank let out a heavy sigh. "Boy, you should have done a lot where that little gal was concerned. Like keeping your dick in your pants, for starters. But it's too late to cry over spilled milk. Get yourself up and pull it together. And if you know what's good for you," trying to knock some sense into the boy was like trying to train a mule, but as a father, he had to at least make the effort, Hank decided, "you'll stay the hell away from her."

Clint grunted and hung up without uttering another word.

* * * *

July Fourth was commemorated with a spectacular fireworks display set to explode high above the warm Gulf waters promptly at midnight. High Tide opened its doors to the summer night's breezes, beckoning in one and all. The place was alive with the tempo of a live local band, the hum of a lively crowd taking the holiday as an excuse to party.

Chloe had the night free, but Rachel was bussing tables and serving drinks with practiced ease. "Hey! Glad you stopped in!" she had to shout over the roar of the masses.

"You're swamped."

"We always are for the Fourth." Rachel shrugged. "I still can't believe you finagled the night off."

Scanning the crowd kept her from meeting Rachel's eyes, or the lie would have shown. "Bonnie said all the part-time waitresses needed the night's extra tips, and since she's paying me under the table already, I didn't think it was fair to hone in, so..."

"Have Mick get you a drink, and I'll catch up with you soon," Rachel promised before moving on.

Her intent was to do just that when she spotted Jackson watching her from the end of the bar where he and Mick were conversing. He shot her a smile and spoke to Mick without ever taking his eyes off her. That smile caused her stomach to pitch and roll. And his intense glare pulled her close, closer—iron to magnet.

"Good to see you," he said and took her hand, kissed her cheek. "You look beautiful, as always."

She was afraid things would be awkward between them after her meltdown and their close call, but apparently, he'd decided ignoring it was the best course of action. So be it, she decided, going with the flow.

"Thank you." Unable to fight the sensations he stirred, she shivered. "Surprisingly cool this evening. Looks like business is booming."

His look was speculative as she settled in on one of the high stools. "Night like this brings everyone out of the woodwork. How about a drink?"

"Yes, please. A glass of wine?"

Jackson leaned his elbow on the bar and cocked his head to Mick. "A glass of Chardonnay, on the house. No argument," he added as if he sensed her protest.

"Thank you."

"I trust *things* are going well?"

There was no mistaking his meaning. She crossed her legs in a self-conscious gesture when her damned, traitorous cunt chose that

moment to clench and weep. Remembering her phantom lover made her wet. Hot. Bothered. Jackson's nearness only magnified her agonizing, alarming state of arousal. "Yes."

He grinned and arched one dark brow. "That stimulating, huh?"

"Damn it, Jackson," she murmured under her breath while glancing around to be sure no one—mainly Rachel—caught their exchange. "What do you want? A blow by blow report?"

"No, of course not." He fingered a lock of hair that had slipped out of her clip. "Just reassurance you're well and that you still wish to continue the arrangement."

"I'm fine." *Better than fine. Astoundingly satisfied.* But it wasn't nice—or wise, considering the company—to brag. "The arrangement is...surprisingly delightful."

His masculine laugh was hearty, deep, and it resonated within her, causing her pussy to clench again. The V of silk covering her mound was growing damper by the minute. God, she needed relief. The cool, sweet wine went down smooth, and she licked her lips. The innate, innocent gesture brought to mind the pleasure of licking her lover's engorged cock.

Shit.

She'd become some wanton hussy who couldn't wait until the next time her lover's impressive cock was shoved between her presently drenched thighs, driving her straight toward bliss. Four wonderful nights together and still there was so much to be explored.

She wanted to mount her mystery lover and ride him like the stallion of a male she believed him to be. Even her mouth watered at the notion of sucking him off, of swallowing down every salty, savory drop of his thick cream. A tiny bead of sweat trickled down her spine, sliding along the cleft of her ass cheeks. *Don't go there...*

Another gulp of wine did nothing to quell her spiking desire.

The smartest move would be to distance herself from Jackson Sawyer—the purest form of temptation. But he took her hand and pulled her outside to the club's back deck as if reading her thoughts.

She was on the brink of fleeing for her sanity. There was a long, narrow boardwalk leading down to the sand and the Gulf.

He daringly pulled the clip from her hair, spilling the dark waves. "Walk with me in the moonlight."

"What about your rules?"

"Tonight," he insisted while pulling off his socks and stuffing them in his shoes, "you're just a beautiful, sexy woman I want to spend more time with."

Would they ever discuss what had happened before? Would tonight be the night they crossed the line? Chloe was afraid to ask. Too afraid to ruin the mood or squander this precious opportunity.

She followed suit and kicked off her sandals. Her sundress flowed around her bare legs and shifted in the breeze, molding to her body. She wiggled her toes in the warm sand. The sugary grains still held the day's heat.

Jackson made wide cuffs in his khaki pants, exposing his legs to mid-calf, and then placed their shoes just under the end of the walkway for safekeeping.

They strolled along the edge of the water, letting the foam-tipped waves rush up and erase their footprints. Covering their secret, Chloe thought ironically. With their hands laced together and their stride in frighteningly perfect unison, she was once again reminded of how wonderfully they fit.

And she decided, just for a little while, to play this new part. To forget they were breaking his rules. To be with him for however long they could manage without raising suspicions.

She asked about his parents, about growing up in Birmingham. It was odd how they'd traded cities. He knew the neighborhood where she'd been renting an apartment and asked about her classes at the University of Alabama. He mentioned favorite old haunts and high school stomping grounds. Somehow, they shifted to movies and music and a million other inane topics. With so much in common, the conversation flowed as fluidly as the churning surf. At another time,

under different conditions, she might've believed they could have something special. Something real and lasting. More than just one night in his arms.

Odd how swiftly and naturally the idea unfurled.

If he kept looking at her like he wanted to devour her, she just might give in and jump his bones. Or beg him to jump hers—again.

Here.

Now.

A golf-ball-sized lump of emotion bobbed in her throat. "Jackson?"

"What is it, sweetheart?" He leaned in and brushed his lips over her forehead then pressed them to her temple.

Frissons of awareness skated over her spine. She wanted that mouth on hers. She wanted him sucking at her breasts, tugging on the nipples that were magnificently sore from her mystery lover's greedy attentions. It just felt so damned *right*, being in his arms. And it was all too easy to imagine him laying her back in the warm sand and spreading her thighs, eating at her swollen, throbbing pussy. She wanted nothing more than for him to shove his hard cock between her cream-coated folds and take up the rhythm that was as old as time.

"We should get back." Like, before she gave in and ripped his clothes off.

"A few more minutes." Glancing to the skies, he smiled and pulled her closer, pivoted her in his embrace, wrapping his arms around her torso. He nuzzled her neck. "It's midnight."

Was it? She'd lost all sense of time and place in this world of starlight and salty sea air...and Jackson.

Unlike Cinderella at the ball, Chloe stayed in her prince's arms, resting the back of her head against the wonderfully firm wall of his chest, and enjoyed the shower of color and light overhead as the clocked ticked past the magical appointed hour.

* * * *

Any idiot would've had the presence of mind to avoid temptation. But not Jackson. Hell, no. He'd dangled the fucking carrot in front of his own fucking nose. As a result, he hadn't slept a fucking wink in days.

How could he?

He could still smell Chloe's perfume, the alluring scent of honeysuckle, as it had wafted on the humid, salty breeze. Her skin was soft as satin to his touch. His arms ached with the need to hold her again. The way her lush, curving body had been pressed to his, it had taken every ounce of his resolve not to drag her behind one of the tall, sea-oat-studded sand dunes and rip that goddamn sexy sundress off her sexier body, not to taste that beautiful bow of a mouth.

Even knowing full well they were alone and fairly well hidden from the prying eyes of the club and the crowds, he'd resisted the urge to palm her lush tits or tweak her nipples, which should propel him to saintly status when taking into account the fact she clearly hadn't been wearing a bra.

He groaned.

Tossing off the tangled sheet, Jackson padded to the bathroom and stepped under the shower. His damned prick, which had been on *go* since that first day he'd met her, had been so hard, straining in the confines of his briefs and the Dockers, it was a miracle his balls hadn't burst. She had to have felt his erection poking her in the ass while they'd watched the fireworks.

It had been equally hard the day she'd broken down, the day he'd nearly given in. If not for Paul's damned interruption, he might've taken her right there on the table or the floor.

And then where would they be?

Breaking the rules wasn't an option. No way was he going to jeopardize Chloe's job, therefore running the risk she'd hightail it back to Birmingham because she had to sell her Gram's house in

order to pay off the debt. He just had to bide his time, cultivate his patience.

Sooner or later, she'd be free of her dependence on the income from the club, and then he would be free to have her any way he wanted her. Anywhere he wanted her. Like in his bed, spread out like a feast. Or on all fours while he tapped that sweet ass.

"Shit," he muttered and sluiced hot water over his head.

Thinking of her shapely little heart-shaped ass snuggled up in his lap only added to the agony, and his cock twitched.

How easy it would have been to adjust their bodies by miniscule inches, to free his throbbing dick, to lift her dress and rip off her panties. Inches, mere inches, and he could've buried his cock deep in her pussy. He would have fondled those sweet, ripe breasts while she road him until she screamed his name and shuddered through an orgasm. Or three.

He groaned again and took his unruly erection in hand, jacking off, spewing his thick cream over the pale blue tiles of the shower wall. Closing his eyes, he tried not to think of being buried in her tight cunt, of how her slick muscles might've milked him as he filled the deepest recesses of her womb with his passion. Or of how those sea-green eyes would go limpid during her own release, of how her soft, kissable lips might look curving in a purely satiated smile.

"Fuck," he whispered and pounded a frustrated fist on the tile.

The bliss of release was short-lived as his damned prick swelled and throbbed anew.

Miserable didn't come close to describing his foul mood.

Chapter 6

The salacious interludes at Sex On The Beach had gone on for three straight weeks--six blissful nights, twelve unbelievable hours--as did the request for her to be blindfolded, Chloe pondered with a heavy sigh. He had, at least, allowed Jocelyn to trade the cumbersome necktie for one of those Mardi-Gras-like sleeping masks. It was made of black satin, no holes cut through for the eyes, but thicker and more contoured to fit over her nose and curve to her cheeks, thus keeping her in the dark. That was something.

She certainly couldn't complain about the sex. If anything, it had gotten hotter, more erotic, more...*everything* as their sessions progressed.

During one particularly feverish mating, her Master had barely stepped into the suite when he reached for her. He'd ripped one very lovely pink negligee to shreds before bending her over the arm of the sofa in the sitting room and mounting her from behind. He'd shoved his demanding, amazingly hard cock between her thighs and fucked her like a man possessed. She'd begged for every minute of it—*harder, faster*—like a woman equally insane and wild with lust.

Gone were her inhibitions.

Chloe had fully, wholeheartedly embraced her sexuality, her most carnal, basic desires.

She'd even come to trust him enough that she'd initiated a session involving the use of a vibrator. It was a miracle, really, a silvery pocket rocket that hummed over her clit, buzzing and stimulating the bundle of nerve endings until she sobbed in response to the exquisite torture. He'd demanded to watch while she pleased herself, not

allowing her to stop until she'd shuddered and moaned through two mind-numbing climaxes. Then, with the remarkable, powerful stimulation applied yet again to her hypersensitive clit and with his magnificent girth jackhammering into her swollen, dripping pussy, she'd experienced the most intense orgasm of her life.

Second only, he'd informed, to the intensity of having his cock in her ass and a toy, possibly one of the dildos in the drawer, simultaneously fucking her cunt. A fantasy he'd love to explore...if she were willing.

Well. Alrighty, then.

Maybe they'd work up to it, Chloe mused—soon.

Yes, she'd truly morphed into a wicked, wicked fiend. And the hell if she cared. Everything they did felt too marvelous to be believed.

The blindfold, which had, at times, seemed tedious, was also a blessing. That anonymity had given her the power to let go of her reticence, awakening a sensual side of her she'd never realized existed.

On the home front, Rachel was visibly flummoxed, lost as to why Chloe refused to go out with Jackson or why Jackson refused to pursue Chloe since they'd both shown such promise and undeniable attraction. Time and again, she'd grilled Chloe like a tuna sandwich, only to leave more frustrated than when the conversation began.

To make matters worse, the whole thing with Jackson truly was nagging at Chloe's psyche, despite her protests otherwise—just not in the way Rachel imagined. She needed the damn money more than she needed to pursue whatever she and Jackson might or might not have. Or so she kept trying to convince herself. Only this stranger she'd been sleeping with at Sex On The Beach, whoever he was—because he sure as hell wouldn't agree to reveal himself, no matter what pleasures she'd promised, begged, bribed—was complicating matters by monumental proportions.

Everything about him reminded her of Jackson.

She couldn't be with him without envisioning Jackson. She'd all but bit her tongue off to keep from screaming out Jackson's name during her climaxes. The damn thing held a permanent tattoo of her dental impression.

The muscles, the toned skin, the massive size of his body, the impressive strength he emanated, the way he touched her, the way he breathed her in, for God's sake...

The day Jackson had held her while she'd cried, when he'd come within a breath of kissing her. The night on the beach and the fireworks—both overhead and within, due to his embrace—only served to increase her level of frustration exponentially.

Her phantom lover's voice was fathoms deeper, but that was the solitary mark of delineation in her mind. And that was really no mark at all.

He could be infinitely gentle with her one minute and then intent on ravishing her wildly the next. But he never left her without kissing her senseless and whispering words of praise, compliments. And he never left without damn near satisfying her to death with his powerful lovemaking. Promising to do it over and over, again and again, shamelessly admitting how he longed for their hours together. How each night in her arms only made him want her more.

She imagined the words coming from another man who stirred her blood to boiling with just a look or a whispered word.

Like one big freaking circle, it all just kept swirling back around to Chloe's craving for Jackson Sawyer. Desperately wanting him in her bed, naked, possessing every inch of her body in the full, glorious light of day. Ruling his in turn.

Oh, the things she wanted to do to him!

All in all, the stress was wearing on Chloe's thinly stretched nerves. It was taking a toll on every other aspect of her life. She'd had to rush back to Birmingham to handle transferring her credits and, at least temporarily, packing up and moving her meager possessions

back into her old room at Gram's. Although she still hadn't admitted her naughtiest little secret, working for Sex On The Beach.

Really, if her luck held, a couple more wicked rendezvous and she'd have her goal amount tucked away, earning interest. Especially with the outrageous tips her guy dropped. Then she could put her days as a paid sex slave behind her and move on.

Maybe she couldn't move in the direction of Jackson Sawyer. After all, knowing she'd spread her legs for money, for a stranger, why on earth would he ever want her tainted goods? He deserved so much better, so much more than a struggling divorcee with student loans and her Gram's debt and nonexistent dignity.

But facing the reality of ending her trysts with Mr. Master, Chloe realized with dismay that there was an absurdly depraved side of her that had blossomed, thrived, been indulged and enjoyed. Who knew there was a whole other side to her sexuality? And now that it had been uncovered and explored, ignoring her rampant sexuality was akin to closing the barn door after the horse had already gotten loose—a futile effort. It would not be repressed.

No more mild, meek, sexually unfulfilled Chloe Rezner.

She'd learned that her ex's problem was just that—his problem. Not hers. Her phantom lover seemed to crave being with her as much as she craved being with him. He was so focused, so in tune to the nuances of her body, her desires, there were times when it bordered on frightening.

She never left his arms frustrated or dissatisfied.

In these short weeks, he'd learned what pleased her and what didn't and what absolutely drove her wild. He'd capitalized on those personal weaknesses, exploiting them in order to bring her the most pleasure humanly possible. Right before taking his own.

Big warning bells were going off in her brain. She was falling, and falling hard, for a stranger with no name and no face. Worse, she was projecting those surreal, implausible feelings on a man who hadn't so much as kissed her. Jackson's chaste, searing kisses to her

temple, the crown of her head, nuzzling her neck—those caressing, brief sparks of contact might've melted her clear to her toes, but they did not count, she told herself. Not the way they might've if he'd actually brought that sexy mouth to hers and slipped her some tongue.

But, damn it, she'd fallen for Jackson Sawyer on sight.

Chloe didn't believe in love at first sight.

Lust, maybe.

Love? Definitely not.

So, these feelings, then, that her scrambled brain was fighting to process? Hell if she had a name for them except *love*.

Hell if she could explain why that troubling idea *didn't* make her throat close up or her feet run as fast and as far away as they could carry her.

On the heels of that shocking tumble, she'd layered on tons of respect for Jackson due to his constant showing of sheer, unwavering compassion and support without the expectation of anything in return. First, when he'd all but single-handedly supported her during the funeral. And delivered Gram's pearls—he really was the sweetest man. Then after, when he'd stayed until the bitter end to help her clean up the kitchen, and his fabulous massage for her poor, tired feet. To top it off, he'd given her the answer to her problems with one cushy job—if one overlooked the whole selling one's soul to the devil for profit aspect.

And she was.

She had to if she wanted to stay sane.

The click of the door drew her to her feet and shoved her musing aside.

He was here.

Now that he was, her resolve slipped. Another evening, just this one more time, she told herself, and then she'd end it.

God help her, she'd end it. But not tonight.

“Mmm, my beautiful slave.” His long, sinewy arms snaked around her torso, and his lips grazed her earlobe, sucked on the soft flesh until she purred. “So many things I want to do to you.”

Yes. Yes! Her pulse instantly accelerated, as did the beat of her heart. Her nipples pebbled, and her juices poured from her, blotted up by the silky V of her panties.

How had he gained such utter and complete control of her body using only that sexy, seductive voice and a few simple caresses?

He loosed the knot from her robe, tugged it from her shoulders. She wore nothing else beneath it but a matching bra and panty of bright coral silk trimmed in creamy lace. “Did you think of me, miss me?”

The silk whispered its way to the floor.

“Yes.” *More than you’d ever imagine.*

“I can smell your arousal.” One hand drifted down her torso to trace the scalloped edge of her panties. Just the tips of his fingers brushed the upper curve of her thigh then dipped underneath that V of lace and silk to stroke her slick folds. “So wet for me. So ready.”

She whimpered.

She whimpered again when his hand fell away, and she felt him pull back. Without his warmth, she shivered.

She heard the rustle of him shedding his clothes and unwittingly held her breath, the interminable seconds ticking by in her mind as loudly as a drum.

“Feel like playing tonight, my slave?” he asked, breaking the silence.

Something extremely luxurious—possibly fabric of some sort—brushed the upper swell of her breast. “That depends on what you have in mind.”

He laughed low and throaty. Suddenly, her arms were seized and pulled behind her, thrusting her chest up and out. “A little light bondage,” he suggested as casually as one might suggest a stroll in the

park, an afternoon of careless fun. "Nothing painful, my slave, you have my word."

"And we have the safe word."

"Absolutely. Use it and I'll untie you in a heartbeat."

Curiosity got the better of her. "What will you use?"

"This is the belt off your robe," he explained, once again running the luxurious strip of silk over flesh that instinctively flushed. "Nothing rough, nothing too tight to mar your creamy skin."

"I've never been bound." The idea did thrill her. Like the mask, she imagined it would add the element of helplessness, giving him complete control, only heightening the pleasure.

And if she was wrong, then one word would call it. Game over.

She took a deep breath. "Tie me."

A growl of approval rumbled in the room, and he began to weave the strip around her wrists and partway up her arm. He tested the series of knots with a few gentle tugs and pronounced it good enough. "Not too tight?"

She wiggled her hands. Circulation was good. "No. It doesn't hurt. Any chance of losing the blindfold?" When he laughed, she said, "I thought not."

"Now, don't pout. Don't you enjoy the mystery?" He was in front of her now, on his knees as he tongued her navel. "I can be anyone you want me to be. Imagine whoever you choose tasting you. Touching you." Strong, wide hands circled her waist and squeezed before gliding lower to her hips. "Teasing you," he said. He nipped at the damp scrap of silk covering her mound.

The rasp of wet fabric and demanding lips made her quiver. Her legs trembled as he brought her to orgasm just that way—without ever removing her panties. *Damn, he's good.*

He slowly dragged the soaked, musky-scented silk down her hips, her legs. His mouth retraced the journey upward, paying special attention to the insides of her knees, her thighs. With one last lick up

the length of her swollen pussy, he began an assault that led to the valley of her breasts.

There was the snick of the front clasp opening and the rush of cool air over her skin. Her nipples drew impossibly tighter, so hard they could have been used to drive nails. The points throbbed for the moist heat of his mouth.

As if sensing her desires—or perhaps they simply matched his own—his lips found her, latched onto one aching peak. Back and forth he laved and plucked, sucking all too briefly at one nipple before darting back to the other. He plumped her breasts in his palms and nuzzled his face between them, scraping the skin with his stubble.

The added sensation was exquisite.

And all too soon, it was over.

“W—what—why?” she was grappling for words. “More...Please, I need...” She went to reach for him and struggled like a fish wriggling on a hook because of her bindings. *Forgot about those.*

“Let’s turn you around,” he said and took her by the shoulders, guiding her where he wanted. “Now, bend forward. That’s it.”

His hand splayed across her lower back, easing her down until her face met soft, cushy material. The sofa? Chloe turned her head, pressing her cheek to the fabric. Yes, definitely the sofa.

“I’m going to rearrange the bindings,” he informed.

He rid her of the bra and allowed her the chance to rest her arms a minute. Then he tied them again, this time wrapping the length from elbow to elbow and stretching across her lower back so that they were bound at her sides with her hands free.

“Now.” His voice was smug. “This time you aren’t going to come until I give you permission. Understood?”

She had only to utter the word “gardenia,” and he would release her. Plus, she’d come to trust him. He’d had plenty of opportunities to hurt her before now, and there’d been nothing but immeasurable bliss. “Yes, Master.”

He knelt behind her, his breath hot and tantalizing on her exposed folds. "Spread your legs a little wider. Perfect."

His idea of "perfect" "put her face down in the sofa, elbows tied to her torso, legs spread wide, ass up. Oh, yeah, just—*holy mother of...perfect*—his greedy mouth started eating at her swollen flesh again.

His fingers gripped her thighs, keeping them where he wanted them, spread wide, while he brought her to the brink once more. Everything in her world centered on the tight, building sensation in her clit. She was so, so close.

"No coming until I tell you, slave."

"But I'm so close. Oh! Oh, God, yes."

"Patience," he murmured. "Do you know the punishment for disobeying your Master?"

Behind her mask, her eyes went wide. "P—punishment?"

Now, why didn't that shock her or at the least disgust her? Instead, it turned her on even more. She wanted to defy him just to incur his wrath. Jesus, she'd gone completely loopy.

"Five licks—and I don't mean to your pussy—if you come before I give you permission."

"You would spank me?" She couldn't help it—her ass wiggled of its own accord.

He laughed and ran a hand down the seam of her aforementioned wiggling ass. "Admit it, the idea excites you."

She gnawed at her lower lip. Though he didn't give her a slap, his none-too-gentle caress still sent tingles of fire racing up her spine. She moaned, "Yes, yes, it excites me. So much so, I'm dying to defy you."

"Precious little treasure. You are one in a million. Maybe I'll reward your obedience with double the lashes."

"Please, Master. Yes. I'll be so good. I promise not to come until you say." *Anything*.

"We'll see," he said, doubt evident in his tone. "We'll just see."

Instead of setting his mouth on her, he used his thick, slightly callused thumb to stroke her clit. The friction had her poised on that razor-sharp edge of release before she could catch her breath. Holding off her climax proved more difficult than she'd thought. But she so wanted to please him.

Those ten licks were like the rabbit used at a racetrack. They loomed before her, the temptation luring her to the finish line.

"I can't...can't control it."

"Yes, you can," he snapped. "You will if you want those licks."

"Either way, I'll get at least five," she countered. "I'm dying here."

His palm met her ass cheek, the thrilling zing and subsequent burn coming out of nowhere. Okay, yet another perk to the blindfold, Chloe thought. "Yes! More, Master, please."

He gave her two more, just hard enough and scattered about to thoroughly warm her bottom. "That's three. A taste of the pleasure you crave."

Marginally satisfied, Chloe murmured her thanks.

Master chuckled and rubbed her burning flesh. Then his cock, hard and pulsing, slid up and down the heated cleft. He'd never dared come this close to the ultimate prize before suiting up, and the sensation of his velvety, hot flesh on hers was almost too much. She was dangerously close to letting go, letting the orgasm take her.

As if that weren't enough to drive her wild, he changed the angle slightly, teasing her further by pressing that same hard, heated length to her slit. He rocked against her, and the engorged, petal-soft tip nudged her clit. She cried out and wiggled her hips, trying desperately to assuage the ache. For one infinitesimal second, that magnificent tip centered on her moist entrance. Her breath hitched. Her heart stopped.

"Fuck," he whispered at her ear. "I want to claim you, slave. Skin-to-skin, I want to fuck you and fill this pussy with my cum until it overflows."

Chloe bit her lip and groaned. God, yes, she wanted that, too.

Rules, she fought to remember. For her safety and his.

Thank God he also managed to hold on to one final thread of logic. He eased back with a curse, and she heard the telltale rip of foil.

"I'm going to slide my cock in that dripping pussy now, my slave."

She braced for his penetration, fearing it would sever the last ties of her control. His hands caressed her hips, and the now-sheathed tip once again nudged her moist center. He surged into her, chanting, "Come for me, baby. Now, now, now."

The orgasm exploded in her pussy, and she screamed. He pumped his hips, pounding and pounding and pounding away. The aftershock of the first orgasm blended into the next, and he just kept hammering away.

Their bodies were slick and trembling. She felt the drops of his sweat pepper her spine, felt the rivulets crisscrossing her damp skin. His pace became measured, and her reward came with each slow, deep, long thrust. By the time he reached seven slaps—the remainder—she was whimpering and shaking and urging him for more.

But he only caressed her stinging backside and pressed kisses to her shoulder as he finally found his own release. She felt every jerk and pulse of his cock as he emptied. "Such a treasure, my slave. Such a treasure."

* * * *

Chloe met her reflection and revved up the pep talk while considering whether to add more gloss to her lips. The speech was nothing new. She'd said it all before, but then *he* showed up and touched her, put his mouth on her, and there was just no way to fight what her body wanted, no matter how great an argument her mind made. He'd tied her up and had his way with her. He'd controlled her.

He could and probably would try to do so again.

And although she would love it, she would do better to fight it this time around.

She would. She must.

It was past time to make a clean break where Mr. Master and the Sawyers' club was concerned. Her sanity, after all, was in peril. And she'd socked the substantial earnings away in a savings account that she hoped would carry her and Rachel through while she really, truly waited tables for Bonnie—no lies this time.

This last night, tonight, Chloe firmly decided, would be the end. So long, super-hot sex with her stranger. Farewell to the unrequited fantasies starring the gorgeous, hard-bodied Jackson Sawyer.

She'd call a moratorium on sex—even in her dreams—until she got a grip on the rest of her life and got over these ridiculous feelings for Jackson Sawyer.

She wasn't going to try to tell herself it would be easy, because deep down she knew it would be the hardest thing she'd ever done. Harder than admitting her marriage was a failed mess and filing for divorce. Harder than screwing up the courage to fill out a college application.

But she'd survived those.

She would survive this.

Even though it felt like all the breath was being squeezed from her lungs.

* * * *

"Please tell me you're joking. You have to be joking," Jocelyn added, more to herself, Chloe thought, than to her. "Why in the world would you call it quits? Did you not say this was the best sex of your life? Ever?"

"And the money is insanely fabulous. Yes, yes, I said it all. But sex isn't everything." *Though, with her mystery man, it came darn*

close. “And money’s a necessary evil I now have under control. Or moderately under control.”

“Maybe you have a fever.” Jocelyn put a hand to Chloe’s forehead. “You don’t feel feverish. And you don’t look sick. When you come out of that room, after Mr. Honey’s had his way with you, you look ready to leap tall buildings and conquer the world.”

No denying it, she felt just that way—invincible. Phenomenal sex was a buzz unlike any other. She’d never done drugs, but she drank on occasion, and she still couldn’t imagine either vice ever coming close to delivering the same happy vibes of toe-curling, mind-bending orgasms. Okay, yeah, the plural part probably had a great deal to do with that happiness.

Hell, she’d never been so turned on in her life as when they’d had the little bondage session. She’d never have guessed how erotically wicked and satisfied she could feel by having him spank her. The idea of him dominating her again had her pussy clenching and dripping where she stood. And was she complaining?

Ab-so-freaking-lutely not!

Still...

How to make Jocelyn appreciate the depths of this well she’d stumbled into?

“This was always a temporary solution, Jocelyn. I’m just thankful I’ve been fortunate enough to have the same client for all these weeks. I’m not exactly sure I could have lived with myself if I’d screwed half of Orange Beach.”

“All good things...”

Chloe smiled wistfully and supplied, “Must come to an end.”

“Have you mentioned this to Mr. Sawyer?”

“No. Not yet. First thing tomorrow’s the plan, but it’s only delaying the inevitable.”

“Hmm. Suppose so.” Jocelyn gave her a quick, abrupt hug. “It’s been nice working with you, for what it’s worth.”

“Same here.”

“Word of advice? From one woman to another?”

“Sure,” Chloe encouraged, intrigued by the impromptu hug and the female bonding, as it were.

“Mr. Sawyer—*Jackson*,” she emphasized, “the day he brought you in? I’ve never seen him look at any woman the way he looks at you.”

Chloe’s heart leapt in her chest, slamming into her ribs. “Oh, Jocelyn, honey. I’ve been over it a million times in my mind. After this...after working for him and having him know what I’ve done, he’d never be able to look at me and not think of how I’d lowered myself to taking money for sex—with a stranger.”

This caused the sassy blonde to park a hand on her shapely hip. “Honey,” she snapped, “who do you think owns this place? When the house gets their cut, *he* is the house, or half of it, at least. The man knows what you’ve done because you’ve done it under his nose. Hell, he’s reaped the benefits right along with you. If you let something like this stand in your way...well, then you really don’t know the kind of man he is. And you really don’t deserve him.”

Jocelyn was partly to blame, Chloe decided, looking back on it.

If not for those challenging words, she would’ve gone into what was to be her final sensual session with a marginally clear head. But she hadn’t. She’d been totally wrapped up in thoughts of Jackson Sawyer. Could he really ever accept her, want her, after what she’d done—what she was, yet again, about to do?

And, okay, yes...backpedaling here because, hey, she was only human—the blame was no one’s but her own. Her thoughts had been tangled up in Jackson Sawyer from the day he’d walked into Gram’s kitchen.

So, here she was, sprawled beneath the sumptuous weight of a physically sculpted god of a man who was bringing her to her third climax in less than an hour. Tonight’s rendezvous had not included bondage or spankings, and still, he had her panting and begging for more, for everything.

He was whispering sexy, erotic suggestions in her ear—the things he wanted to do to her, all he wanted her to do to him—and telling her how beautiful she was and how perfectly delectable every inch of her body was. Raining kisses over her face, claiming her mouth in tongue-tangling kisses that mimicked the moves of their hips and promised the same unyielding fulfillment.

And Jackson was the only man on her mind.

His face loomed in the dark void created by the mask. It was his curving, sensual mouth she envisioned, hot and hungry, roaming over her body, followed by his strong, tanned fingers, intent on claiming her, pleasuring her. His mesmerizing hazel eyes she imagined shaded and glazed with passion as he surged into her. His magnificent body shuddering and roaring through his release while she held him and caressed him.

It was Jackson she wanted, him she silently begged not just to fuck her, but to make love to her as no man ever had.

Was it any wonder, then, when her phantom lover made her body soar and shatter through another devastating climax, that she lost all capacity for rational thought, for control, and whimpered the name of her secret obsession?

“Jackson.”

Oh, God. Oh, holy hell. No...no...no!

Mortified, speechless due to the air backing up in her lungs, Chloe could only lie mute and spent as her bones melted into the mattress and turmoil raged war in her belly.

Had he even heard her?

Had it even registered through the fog of his own climax, his primal growl during release?

His identity might be a mystery, but she could pick out her alpha male's voice in the dark as he was no shy, quiet lover. Also, there was the way her body sang at the deep timbre of his voice. She was blindfolded, turned upside down and inside out, and still, she instinctively knew her Master.

Thinking the storm might've passed, she felt a sliver of relief when he collapsed over her and kissed the hollow of her throat—a gesture she'd come to expect, to yearn for. A silent compliment to the chef, as it were, as if she were the most exquisite meal upon which he'd ever had the pleasure to feast.

She could've said the same if her big mouth weren't already stuffed with her size-seven foot.

Another minute or two of plastering his sweaty body to hers and then he'd roll off of her and...Well, okay, *this* was new. His lips journeyed to her ear. His teeth nipped, tugging lightly on the lobe and spiking the arousal that simmered just under her skin whenever he was within reach. His palm covered her breast and kneaded oh-so softly.

And his words, stunning and low, stopped her heart.

"I love you."

Though the storm kicked to life in her belly, her body went rigid. Clearly, he'd allowed himself to become as delusional about their situation as she.

"Chloe? Sweetheart?"

What the fuck?

She tore off the stifling blindfold and blinked in awe at the man who lay over her, who was still intimately joined with her.

"Jackson?"

Shaking her head as if she might be able to clear it, like an Etch A Sketch, and start over with a clean slate, Chloe pressed a trembling hand to his chest. Was he real?

Maybe she was dreaming.

He felt real. In fact, he felt like the best thing she'd ever had her hands on. Ever. The heart under her hand matched her own, beat for erratic beat. That glazed, sated look was in eyes. But his beautiful lips were drawn thin, unsmiling. All hint of amusement erased from his features.

It started to roll in, like high tide. Chloe felt the fear of drowning.

Jocelyn's words came back to her. *Hell, he's been reaping the benefits right along with you.*

Jackson had set her up.

Jackson was paying her. For sex.

Jackson had been having his way with her, making damn sure she took his money because she'd damn sure insisted on earning it.

Oh, but she had, hadn't she?

On her back. On her knees. Legs spread wide. With her mouth. Bound and at his mercy. She'd been the ardent slave to his fervent Master, enthusiastically giving and receiving the most astounding pleasures humanly conceivable. And he'd been exploiting her the whole time, using her, maneuvering her as if she were his puppet. She, on the other hand, had been ignorant of his true identity and slowly, diabolically losing her mind, envisioning Jackson as her lover, craving a man she'd thought beyond her reach.

How fucked up was that?

"What in the hell is going on?" The pitch of her voice rose with each word. "Let. Me. Up."

"Chloe, baby. Let me explain."

She wiggled out from under him—no small feat, considering he probably outweighed her by a solid eighty pounds of pure, magnificent muscle—snatched up her robe, and was outrageously grateful when her legs didn't buckle.

"Why? That's all I need to know, Jackson. Why was it necessary to humiliate me this way?"

He sat up in all his naked splendor and scrubbed a hand over his face. God, even her wildest imagination hadn't done him justice. The man was gorgeous. Finely sculpted, lightly tanned. And, dear sweet heaven, marvelously endowed. Her breasts tingled when his long, lean fingers lingered over the stubble of his chin, recalling how he'd chafed the sensitive skin by rubbing all over her like a kitten—and how she'd loved it.

“It wasn’t about humiliating you, Chloe. Can’t you see? There was no other way to be with you.” Snagging his pants from the pile of clothes near the end of the bed, he tugged them on.

“You wouldn’t let me loan you the money. And I couldn’t let you...” His eyes closed, and drew in a ragged breath before opening them again and centering them on her. “I couldn’t let you sell yourself to another man. Not when I’ve wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Her mind was swimming. Okay, so she’d known, hoped, secretly prayed deep down that he wanted her. Hearing it from his lips was still no less amazing. He’d gone to an awful lot of trouble to be with her. But she’d savor the truth when she could make some sense of this mess...*if* that was possible.

Crossing to her, Jackson took her by the shoulders. “Tell me you feel something for me. Affection. Hatred. *Anything*. I’m hanging on by a thread here, sweetheart. I’ve never said those words to another woman—family notwithstanding. I’ve never wanted—no, I’ve never needed to because I’ve never felt this way about anyone. But with you...There’s no rhyme or reason to how you stir me up. That day we met, in your Gram’s kitchen, I wanted to hold you. Just hold you. And the thought of another man’s hands on you made me furious. Jealousy is also an emotion I’ve never experienced until you.”

“But I wouldn’t take a handout,” she mused aloud, feeling a bit like her brain was working on autopilot. “And you couldn’t break your own rules about dating staff.”

“Two for two.”

“So, this charade, with the blindfold and you altering your voice, using the anonymous role-play of Master and slave, paying me for each encounter...This was your answer?”

“What would you have done?” he countered. “This was the only way for us to be together and for you to earn the money you needed.”

"The tips," she said when it hit her. "Yet another way of speeding up the process. When were you going to let me in on the secret?" His shrug. The sheepish look. "Ah, I see. You weren't."

"I never expected to fall in love with you, Chloe. I thought you'd get the money you needed, pay back the loan, and then you'd go back to your life in Birmingham. Or maybe we'd pick up where we left off when we almost crossed the line those times before, and then we'd see where it went. If you weren't interested in the long haul, I'd have the memory of you, of our nights together, and that would have to hold me."

"But that theory's blown to hell. I love you, and I want you sleeping in my bed, waking in my arms. I want to be able to walk down the beach with you and hold your hand or kiss you whenever I damn well feel like it instead of hiding away from the world and my own damn rules."

So, he believed himself in love with her, and he wanted her at his beck and call. Hadn't she told him she'd been there, done that before? She had the divorce papers to prove it, and she wasn't going back.

That wasn't the smothering sort of love she needed.

"I'm sorry, Jackson. I can't do this. Not now. Maybe not ever." Leaving the rest of her lingerie scattered over the bedroom floor, Chloe grabbed her robe and walked out.

Out of the Red Room. Out of the club, after changing into her street clothes, of course. And out from under Jackson Sawyer's controlling thumb.

Chapter 7

Chloe had no choice left but to spill her guts to Rachel. Poor thing, she walked around for the majority of the next week looking as downright shell-shocked and lost as Chloe.

“So, he planned this whole elaborate way for you two to be together since you wouldn’t just take the money and he didn’t want to break his rules about dating the staff?”

Chloe nodded. Was it absolutely necessary to rehash it, yet again?

Rachel’s voice went all melty. “That’s...It’s just...so romantic.”

“*Romantic? Romantic!* Are you kidding me? Rache, honey, he had me dying inside. Tied up in knots and sick with myself because I believed I was screwing some stranger for money. To top it off, all I could think of was how badly I wished it was him.”

“I know you’re upset, but think about the lengths he must’ve gone to to make sure you didn’t put it together. You’ve been more than close enough for you to recognize the scent of his shampoo or his shaving cream. Certainly you’d have recognized his voice. So, he must’ve lowered it, right? Tried to change it, maybe lose some of the drawl.” She sent her a pointed look. “And you got your wish.”

“Yes, but that isn’t the issue.”

“Then what is?”

“Damn it, Rachel.” The volcano of her patience finally blew. She stood up and paced the short length of the kitchen. “He said it. The *it* it. And now he thinks I’ll just curl up in his bed and do whatever the hell he gets it in his head for me to do, when he wants it done. Snap, snap. He’s no better than Clint.”

Rachel set her mug in the sink and turned, her brow knitted in confusion. “Wait. He said it. Like the big it? The ‘I Love You’ *it*? Jackson Sawyer said he loves you, and you’re standing here pacing like a caged tiger and wringing your hands over it, debating it with me? He’s nothing like Clint, and we both damn well know it.”

“Still...I’m not doing it again, Rachel. I’m not setting aside my goals to make some man happy.”

“Did he ask you to?”

“Well...no.” She tried to recall his exact words, and they came back to her in a hazy ribbon. “Not exactly.”

“Then what did he do that has you so upset? Besides the whole charade thing where you still got to have the best sex of your life with the man you’ve been dreaming of. And the declaring his love part. Oh, and let’s not forget the saving us from the pit of debt. Personally, that’s my favorite, but then, I wasn’t the one who got to have sex with him, so...”

Chloe’s mouth opened, but nothing came out. She shut it again.

Rachel just stood there, arms crossed over her chest, one brow arched, and waiting for common sense to literally smack Chloe upside the head.

Finally, Chloe realized the flaws in her fury. All he’d asked of her was to be with him. More than once, he’d gone out of his way to help her. His method was skewed, granted, but he’d given them a way to be together—even if she’d suffered as a sideline. He hadn’t demanded anything, really.

Not yet, the snarky, jaded side of Chloe’s conscious reminded.

Okay, so it was glaringly obvious. Her ex and Jackson Sawyer were both males, but that was where the similarities ended.

Clint was a prick.

Jackson was a gentleman. A gentleman with the sexual appetites of an animal, but he was, after all, a raw, rugged male.

She wouldn’t have him any other way.

So, pondering Rachel’s question, why *was* she troubled?

Maybe it had something to do with all the things he *hadn't* said. Those variables as yet to be defined, like after she'd sealed her wedding vows and Clint's true nature had surfaced. He'd waited until he had her trapped, a moth in his matrimonial web, before making his ludicrous, selfish demands.

"Chloe, honey, how *do* you feel about Jackson?" Rachel prodded. "You love him, too. Right?"

Well, of course she did. But could this time really be different?

Unquestionably, she was a different person now because of the harsh lessons she'd learned during her trial by fire with Clint and their failed marriage. And the episodes of uninhibited sex with her phantom lover had opened up her world on a grand scale.

Enlightened, empowered, the new Chloe Rezner was a mature, independent, sexually responsive woman, as opposed to the doe-eyed, virginal innocent who'd run off with her high school sweetheart. She, too, had demands when it came to what she desired in a relationship. This time around, she refused to settle for anything less than equality, a voice, a true partnership. If Jackson could get on board with that, then...

Yes, she wanted a relationship with Jackson.

Yes, she loved him.

Did he still want her? Would he be able to accept her on her terms?

Only one way to find out.

Grabbing her keys, Chloe took off for the club.

* * * *

Mick called up to the office and asked him to come down to the bar after unsuccessfully staving off a confrontation with a guest. So unlike the big guy, Jackson mused. There were few people the former bouncer and ex-Navy SEAL couldn't handle with either a quick quip

or a surly snarl and the flex of his brawny biceps. This guy must really be a piece of work.

Too bad Jackson was in no mood to play Mr. Nice Club Owner. Not with the headache brewing in his skull, the pity party going on in his pants, and the lousy state of his wounded heart.

Chloe refused to see him. Refused to return his phone calls. Hell, she'd even embarrassed the stew out of him by refusing an obscenely expensive delivery of flowers. The expense was pittance. His pride? Priceless. The florist had been sympathetic and compassionate, and he fucking hated it.

Hate-ed-it!

But he didn't blame Chloe. Unfortunately, he was the designated asshole. He'd recognized an opportunity and seized it with no other thought than how it would benefit him. Not that she hadn't benefited as well, he mused. She was the most sexually responsive woman he'd ever been with. Her night of submission had blown him away. They'd happily screwed each other six ways from Sunday, and he'd give his proverbial left nut to do it again.

But she'd been the one deceived. Big time. And that made it wrong on so many levels.

When had he lost his morals?

Ah, yes, that's right, the day he'd looked at her lovely face, looked into those compelling eyes and been drawn in by the emotions they'd held had done it. She'd touched off something in him he'd had no name for. Or at least not right then and there. Now, he could say that it had been like flipping on a switch. He simply came alive when they were together.

The passion between them was equally consuming.

And he'd wondered—so many nights, he'd wondered—if she thought of him. If she imagined his touch, his kisses while her phantom Master made love to her. When she'd whimpered his name during the onslaught of that last momentous orgasm, he'd barely believed his ears.

There had been no holding back after that. He'd desperately needed to unburden his heart and tell her how he felt. Like a fool, he'd dreamed of her shouting that love in return. Instead, she'd reacted as if he'd sucker punched her in the gut. Then she'd just walked out on him—on them.

God, he could use a stiff drink.

A night away from this place might do him good, too. A night away from asshole customers intent on causing trouble, like the one Mick needed help booting out of the double doors.

The high-and-tight haircut, burly, leaning toward a beer belly paunch—Jackson pegged the guy as no older than his late twenties. Thirty, tops. His attire screamed good old boy, with the ink-blue Wranglers, the scuffed Timberlands, and the requisite camo T-shirt. Really, the only missing piece of the redneck puzzle was the John Deere gimme cap complete with the gold “get-er-done” fishhook clipped to the bill.

Jackson glanced from the rouser to Mick and back. “What seems to be the problem?”

Mick hooked a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the angry customer. “Guy here’s threatening to tear the place up, looking for Rachel.”

“I’m sorry, but she’s serving one of our private parties,” Jackson lied through his pearly whites. He wasn’t about to give this asshole the rundown on any employee’s whereabouts. “The bar’s open, and we have plenty of other waitresses. Why don’t we—”

“Clint?” All three males turned at the sound of Chloe’s startled voice. “What the hell are you doing here?”

This was the POS she’d married?

Jackson’s hands itched, recalling his vow to feed the guy his lone, miniature testicle. Ignoring the vicious endeavor, he focused instead on Chloe. She looked good enough to eat in a pair of khaki capris, a silky, sheer yellow top layered over a matching tank, and a pair of sexy, slinky, short-heeled sandals that did wonderful things to the

muscles of her beautifully toned legs—but that was nothing new. Having tasted her, having been inside her, he knew he'd crave this woman and only this woman for the rest of his days.

Shame, really, that he'd screwed up the best thing to ever happen to him.

Clint's hand snaked out, but Chloe's reaction was faster. She sidestepped before he could grab her arm. "Hey, sugar. Just the woman I was looking for. I went by Gram's, but no one was home."

Her hands were perched on her shapely hips, and her nostrils flared while those turquoise eyes blazed fire. She was full of piss and vinegar and was poised to wipe the floor with this cretin's ass. God, she was exquisite. Jackson had never been more aroused, never wanted her more.

And he had never been more grateful that this time, at least, the poison-tipped arrows of her temper weren't aimed at him.

Small favors.

"Don't sugar me, you swine," Chloe demanded, her tone dripping disdain. "If you're here, you're up to no good. And I'm in no mood for your games. So, what do you want?"

The man's face turned beet red, and the veins in his wide neck stood taut. Mr. POS was, obviously, also pissed. "Now, honey, that's no way for a woman to talk to her hubby."

Chloe tersely reminded, "*Ex*-husband. And the reasons should be glaringly obvious to everyone currently glued to this little display why that is. You're making a spectacle of yourself, and you're too dense to care."

This time, when his hand snaked out, his beefy fist met Jackson's palm. The smack crackled in the room of slack-jawed, gawking patrons.

There was a very pregnant pause. Every breath in the room seemed to be suspended as the men faced off.

"It would be wise for you to leave now, Mr. Rezner."

A flash of understanding glittered in Clint's eyes. "You fucking piece of shit. You've had your hands on her." He snarled. Then those eyes glared daggers at Chloe. "And you...you whore." The crude slur came out on a hiss of sheer, undeniable hatred.

Jackson's reaction was so spontaneous, so deeply primal, it shocked even him. Before anyone could blink, Jackson's fist connected with the man's chin, effectively knocking him to his knees. Mick and one of the club's bouncers appeared, each taking an arm and wrestling the guy back to his feet. They practically dragged him out back and dumped him in the parking lot near the dumpster.

"If you ever step foot in here again, I'll call the cops. Got it?"

Cursing, holding his chin, Clint managed a snapped, "Fuck you."

Proving himself the bigger man, Jackson refused to comment on the crude, unappealing offer and simply closed then bolted the door shut in the man's bruised, hopefully aching face.

Upstairs, holed up in the club's private office, Chloe clucked and held a quickly thrown-together ice pack to Jackson's throbbing knuckles. "You hit him. I can't believe you really hit him."

"I have the feeling no one's ever stood up to him."

"Hell, no. Prime reason he's a bully."

Shrugging out of his lightweight linen suit jacket, Jackson murmured his thanks when she took it from him and hung it over the back of his chair. He was half sitting, half leaning a hip against the edge of his desk. "Did you know he was here?"

"At the club? No. I wasn't even aware he'd come into town."

"Then why *did* you come here tonight, Chloe?" Icy fingers of dread gripped the organ in his chest, holding hope hostage.

She took a deep breath, exhaled a shaky sigh. "To see you, Jackson. To talk to you, if you'd let me."

"Let you? I've been trying to get you to return my calls for days."

"And I needed time," she explained and splayed a hand over his heart. "When you...when you said how you felt—"

"When I told you I love you."

“Yes. You also started telling me all the things *you* wanted from me. That bully down there? He demanded things from me, Jackson, telling me what and how I was to do things. Without ever bothering to ask me what it was *I* wanted.”

He tipped her chin up with a finger so that their gazes locked. “I never demanded anything from you, sweetheart.”

She smiled thinly. “No, you really didn’t. My fault—my mind started running wild, looking five miles down the road.”

Cupping her face in his hands, he lightly kissed her lips. God, how he’d dreamed of having her in his arms and doing just this—such a simple kiss, a brief connection—in the full light of day. Dreamed of having the right. “I want you five miles down the road. And ten, and however many more you’re willing to give me. If this is about money or you finishing college, I would never deny you a single blessed thing. I want a partner, Chloe, not a slave. Well, outside of the bedroom, that is,” he added with a devilish smirk. “All I’ve ever wanted was to give you your heart’s desire.”

Tears slipped free, glistening like tiny diamonds on her cheeks, as she brushed her lips over his. “I won’t drag you into the middle of whatever this is with Clint. You’ve already hurt yourself. I couldn’t stand it if anything else happened to you.”

“Who says I’m giving you a choice? This is non-negotiable.”

Her mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. Her chin lifted defiantly, and still, she held her tongue.

Speechless. He’d truly rendered her speechless.

Write.

It.

Down.

“Clint won’t slink off to lick his wounds for long,” she finally protested. “He’ll be back. And more pissed off than before he showed up. He sensed our intimacy and feels cheated. Ironically arrogant son of a bitch, considering he’s the one who cheated on me when we were married.”

Jackson swiped his thumbs under her eyes, taking note of the faint bruise-like circles she'd tried to hide with cosmetics. Misery did love company—despite loving her and not wishing her sorrow, he felt mildly appeased that she'd suffered these last few days just as restless as he.

She'd said nothing of loving him in return, but she was here. She wasn't pushing him away, and she was worried about his welfare. That said enough, for now.

"We'll give Rachel a heads-up in case he's headed to your Gram's." Going to the phone on his desk, he set it to speaker mode and punched in her cell number. By now, he had hers, Chloe's, and their Gram's home number ingrained in his brain for eternity.

When the voice mail kicked in, Chloe left a brief message. "Damn it, I wish I had Paul's cell number. At least they should be together. They were going to a movie."

The solution to easing her mind was simple. Jackson insisted on driving her home and waiting with her until Rachel and Paul showed up or they could get her on her cell.

While he drove, Chloe kept trying the numbers.

By the time they pulled in the drive, Jackson could've repeated Rachel's voice mail greeting word for word. The house was dark but for a couple of lamps in the living room, and the carport was empty. Rachel's compact car was parked near the side of the driveway. They must've taken Paul's truck.

"I'm not letting you sleep here tonight. Or at least not alone." Shifting to face her, he added, "Either you come home with me, or I sleep here. Even if it's on the couch."

"So much for you *not* bossing me around."

The relief that washed over her features overshadowed her flippant tone. "Get used to it," he quipped. "When your safety is threatened, I don't play."

Conceding to his possessive nature, for now, at least, she unlocked the side door, entering the house through the kitchen. She checked the

answering machine, but the only messages were the dozen or so she'd left in the last half hour. "You'll have to stay. I won't leave Rachel to deal with this alone. Our parents, now Gram. She's all the family I have left, and I will not abandon her."

"I never imagined you would. You want coffee or something stronger while we wait?"

"My frazzled nerves could use a glass of wine."

She got down crystal stems while he scouted out a corkscrew and the dwindling bottle of white zinfandel from the fridge.

They carried the drinks into the den, and Jackson sat in a corner of the sofa, pulling her down to sit between his thighs with her back to his chest. He thought of Chloe's comment, thought of himself and the bond he had with Tyler and their parents. It wasn't intentional, but it was human nature, he supposed, that he took it for granted they'd always be around for him. And he for them. What must it be like, knowing that she and Rachel were all that was left? He admired her strength. He wanted to share the burden, to ease it in some way, if possible.

"Tell me what happened, sweetheart. How did you lose your parents?"

* * * *

After a few silent minutes and a deep drink of wine, Chloe began to open up. "They'd been out, celebrating Dad's new promotion. I don't remember all the details so much as I can recall Gram's voice, her expressions, when she told it to me much later. See, I was only six at the time. Rachel was just a baby. Gram was watching us for the night. There was a terrible storm, and the roads were slick. Visibility was nil to none. Someone ran a red light and plowed into their car. Daddy was killed instantly, but Momma made it to the emergency room. She'd lost a lot of blood, though.

“The doctors let us in to see her when they knew there was nothing else to be done. Gram took us in...to see her...” She shivered, and he tightened his arms around her. “I remember how pale and scared Momma looked, lying there in the hospital bed with the tubes and the machines. And how she tried to squeeze my hand. She was weak as a wet noodle. She made me promise that I’d always look after my baby sister. No matter what.”

“A huge burden for a child.”

“But,” she reminded, “Gram shouldered the bulk of it until recently. Our grandfather died when I was still fairly young, before Rachel was born. I don’t remember much about him, either. Maybe...maybe I gravitated to Clint because he was so willing to take care of me, and I’d never really had a steady man in my life. But his idea of caring for me ended up smothering me. He had to be the man of the house, the breadwinner. And his antiquated mind couldn’t wrap itself around the modern notion of a wife who wanted a life outside of making a home and spitting out babies.”

Talk of children brought to mind the miscarriage she’d mentioned. He wanted children. With her. If she didn’t want to try again or couldn’t for whatever reason, then they’d cross that bridge later.

“I don’t get it,” she told him, shoving a hand through her hair. “Clint showing up like this, the way he acted like I was still his possession and scolded me as if I were a child when I didn’t fall to the ground and kiss his feet. And the jealousy. Him calling me a whore. He’s always had a bit of a tempter, but he’s never been this nasty.”

“Did he ever hurt you?”

“N-no, not really. His...*lovmaking*...was brutish at best and, again, all about what he wanted or needed. But he never hit me, if that’s what you mean. Of course, he could be cold and demeaning. Emotional, verbal abuse is as damaging to the psyche as physical abuse.”

Jackson had a weird feeling hovering in the pit of his stomach. One that had nothing to do with the wave of nausea he experienced

when faced with the idea of that prick having his hands—and everything else—on Chloe's body. Of course she'd been with other men. Of course she'd been intimate with her husband. He'd had other lovers as well. But he'd never felt for them a tenth of what he felt for her. She was his, damn it. And he planned to keep it that way.

Jealousy and protection stemmed from this new, amazing wealth of love. He would never treat her the way Clint had and did, but she would have to decide to trust him on that in her own good time.

Jackson didn't believe in coincidence. The timing of her ex's appearance smelled fishy. "What if this has something to do with your Gram selling her necklace and taking out the loan? Money, the root of all evil. What else would motivate him to come looking for you?"

"Gram wouldn't give him money. Trust me. She smelled the rat lurking behind his charms long ago. And yes, he used to have them. He was also in great shape, once upon a lifetime ago. And in possession of a decent sense of humor, unbelievable as that may seem. Gram tried to talk me out of marrying him, but I wouldn't listen."

The beam of headlights sliced through the front window, drawing their attention.

"Rachel." Chloe shot up off the couch and rushed to the door.

But it wasn't Paul's truck.

It was Clint's two-ton, one-ball-compensating, big-ass Chevy, complete with a wide, gleaming, silver front grill that reminded Jackson of a sick, sadistic grin. *Fitting*.

There was a towing wench centered on the grill, and clearly he'd installed a lift kit. The body of the vehicle perched high over massive tires with wide, deep treads that looked perfectly capable of devouring any and all rugged terrain they came in contact with. Apparently, those surfaces had included a great deal of mud recently, judging by the dried red clay streaking over the denim blue paint job.

And Clint resembled a snorting bull, ready to charge, as he climbed down from the extended cab and made his way toward the house.

* * * *

This wasn't going to be pretty. Chloe could feel it down to her marrow. No big, shocking news flash. Clint was spoiling for a fight. Probably drunker than Cooter Brown, too. She recognized the angry flare of his nostrils, the glare of revenge in his eyes. His ego was bruised as well as his chops, and the humiliation he'd suffered at the club had only added fuel to his fiery temper. Now, he looked like a freaking steam-powered bulldozer on a mission to take out everything in his path.

Or everyone.

Oh, joy. Where was a freaking grenade when you needed one?

Jackson pulled her back from the doorway, putting his body between her and her raging ex, urging, "Call the cops."

Since she had the ominous feeling this was going to escalate at warp speed, she didn't waste time arguing over his tone or the hard look that dared her to disobey. Oddly, Jackson's demand didn't crawl over her skin in the same way Clint's always did, possibly because she knew that while one man meant to intimidate, the other was only after protecting the woman he'd recently professed to love.

She grabbed her cell and started dialing.

"Get out of my way, pretty boy," Clint warned, showing his teeth. "I'm gonna have a word with my wife, and I'll be damned if I'm going through you to get it."

"I'm not your wife!" Chloe shouted over Jackson's protective, outstretched arm, which was wrapped around her side, holding her firmly behind him. "I want you off my property! If you know what's good for you, Clint Rezner, you'll be gone before the law gets here."

"Damn it, woman!" Sneering at the two of them, he accused, "You're no better than your momma. I knew the two of you would be here, all cozied up. Fucking whore!"

"Goddamn you." Jackson's fist clipped Clint's bruised chin, sending him back three feet in a spiraling motion. And causing Jackson to curse and cradle his hand for the second time in less than two hours. "Shit. I think I might've broken something that time."

Chloe shrieked and cupped her hands around his. "You need more ice."

"Later." He locked and bolted the front door. "That guy is fucking deranged. If he calls you a whore one more time, I'm going to feed him his teeth."

"Funny," she remarked without a trace of humor. "I thought you'd already done that. Twice."

The door shook from the force of Clint's pounding fists.

"The police are on their way," she affirmed.

"Chloe, sugar." Clint's voice, muffled by the slab of solid oak, had gone sweet and tempting as warm molasses in summertime. *Jerk*. It was so like him to turn it off or on whenever it suited him. But Chloe was wise to his tricks. "Please, honey, we need to talk."

She refused to be swayed. "There's nothing you could possibly say that I care to hear."

"Clint?" This voice was Rachel's. "What the—Damn, Clint, what happened to your face?"

Chloe grabbed at Jackson's arm. "The cavalry's arrived. I see the lights."

Jackson opened the door to let in Rachel and Paul.

Flashing blue and red lights split the darkness, illuminating the scene. Two uniformed Baldwin County officers stepped out of the marked cruiser that'd parked near the curb. Each kept one hand poised over the weapons holstered at their respective right hips.

An assertive male voice called out, "Somebody here report an intruder?"

“Officers.” Chloe inched to the edge of the porch, careful to keep a wide berth between herself and her ex. “This man here—he’s repeatedly been asked to leave my property.”

“Rezner?”

“Fuck off, Walt.”

Great. Just great. *La-di-freaking-da*. Of course they would know each other. Probably drinking buddies from high school, though she didn’t recognize him as anyone from their class.

Speaking under his breath, the officer warned, “Don’t make me cuff you, Clint. Come on, now. Just get on back in the truck and go cool off for a while.”

Jackson spoke up, “We’d like to have a restraining order put out against Mr. Rezner. I don’t want him within five hundred miles of this place or Chloe and Rachel.”

The officer sighed heavily. “I’ll get my laptop from the cruiser, and we’ll get started on the paperwork.”

“Shit, Walt. Are you fucking kidding me?” Clint spat. “A man’s got a right to come see his woman.”

When would he ever get it through his thick skull?

“I’m not your woman, Clint. You can’t come here and start shoving your weight around and expect me to run to you with open arms. Take Officer Walt’s advice and go wherever it is you’re staying for the night and cool off. Then go home. To Birmingham. And don’t bother me again.”

Defeated, at least for now, Clint marched back to the truck.

The door slammed, and the engine roared to life. Then he was gone in a spray of gravel and red dirt and big-ass, muddy tires.

Good riddance.

* * * *

Understandably, Rachel appeared as shaken as Chloe. After spending nearly an hour with the officers, giving statements and

submitting the request for the restraining order, they'd all filed into the kitchen and finished off the bottle of wine. Paul opened another while Chloe and Jackson related the evening's events as they'd unfolded. Starting with her appearance at the club just after Clint's refusal to leave and Jackson's sucker punch that had brought the dumb SOB to his knees.

Then, exhausted and a bit tipsy, Jackson had carried her to bed. Paul had done the same for Rachel after double-checking the locks on all the doors and windows.

Chloe stood by the bed, bathed only in the gold of the lamplight, as he undressed her, down to her lacy, pink bra and panty set. He flicked the front opening of the bra and tossed it off. Then he filled his palms with the heavy, pale flesh of her breasts.

"God, you're beautiful. I can never get enough of you."

She sighed and gave over to his caressing hands, letting the tension melt from her body.

With one swift jerk, he ripped the side strips of elastic at her hips, and the tiny triangle of pink silk pooled at her feet.

Her hands fisted in his hair as he dropped to his knees and laved each pouting nipple with his hot tongue until she swayed on her feet and bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. Holding her by the hips, his mouth journeyed lower. He dipped his tongue in the tiny indentation of her navel.

She shuddered.

He pressed his lips to her pussy and began to eat away at the swollen flesh. Sucking her clit, licking up her slit. All the while, his hands caressed and molded her ass. "Oh, God, Jackson."

When her knees buckled, he caught her up, laid her on the bed, and crawled up beside her.

His mouth came down to hers, drugging her with a slow, lingering kiss that was in total contrast to the fingers that plunged into her heated pussy and took up a frantic rhythm. Her lids drifted shut on a wave of unbearable ecstasy, but he pleaded, "Let me look at you,

sweetheart. I've dreamed of the way your eyes would look with my hands on you, in you."

In and out, those thick, long fingers stroked her slick vaginal walls. The erotic sucking sound of him pounding her drenched pussy echoed in the room. His thumb played perfectly over her clit, driving her swiftly, madly insane with need. Her head thrashed about, and she fisted the sheet as her hips writhed, as her body burned.

The second orgasm slammed into her, stealing her breath and leaving her saturated in pleasure, quivering.

The wine, the magnificent climaxes, the stress of dealing with her ex and the cops—Chloe felt the avalanche rolling her way, pulling her down the mountainside and into the dark void.

Jackson kissed her forehead and tucked them both under the covers, tucking her into his side with her head resting on his chest.

She yawned and slid her leg over a corded thigh. His erection was hot and hard against her softer flesh. "You didn't—"

"You're exhausted," he cut her off. "Sleep, sweetheart."

"Yes, Master," she murmured through a lazy smirk.

And she fell dead to the world in the safety of his strong arms.

Chapter 8

Chloe rolled over, slid her hand over the cool, cotton sheet, and was instantly aware that she was alone. She had been for some time since his warmth had evaporated from the fabric, she deduced sadly. Opening her eyes only confirmed what she'd already guessed.

Jackson was gone.

Only his scent, caught in the cool fabric, attested to his having spent the night in her bed. Well, that and the deliciously used feeling in her muscles and her most intimate spots.

He had insisted that she sleep, rather than getting himself off between the thighs of a woman teetering near exhaustion. His conscience was to be admired. It was one of the characteristics she loved most about him. She distinctly remembered, however, his wonderfully seductive wake-up call, sometime during the night.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing, like being coaxed out of the fog of sleep by the very man you were dreaming of, waking with his head exactly where it had been in her fantasy, nuzzled between her aching breasts. He'd licked and nipped and sucked until she'd come dangerously close to climaxing from the stimulation. But then he'd slithered lower and driven her over the brink with his clever tongue and a thrilling, sharp tug at her clit. And she'd been fully awake, fully aroused—hell, begging—when he'd flipped her over, pulled her to her knees, gripped her ass, and shoved his hard cock into her shockingly wet pussy.

He'd ridden her hard and fast, and they'd both come and come and come like never before. It was hot and raunchy, and every time he touched her, it just seemed to get better and better. Jesus, just having

the man's hands on her, just the thought of him fucking her, literally had her juices flowing. Too bad he wasn't here now, Chloe thought with regret. She could go for yet another amazing round.

The house was relatively silent but for the hum of the AC, the chirp of a bird in a nearby tree, and her own shaky, unsatisfied sigh. Sunlight streamed in through the window. It had to be getting late.

A glance at the bedside clock had her rubbing her eyes and checking it again.

9:23 a.m.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept past seven.

The message tone on her cell phone chimed in, letting her know her inbox had just gotten a hit, and she felt giddy with excitement. Wait, when had she ever been giddy? Like, maybe high school? She shrugged. Who cared? She was damn giddy—like millions of tiny champagne bubbles were fizzing in her blood—at the prospect of Jackson sending her a text.

Her cell was on the nightstand, and she snatched it up, flipped it open. Hit a few buttons, and...*voila!*

Her heart plummeted to her stomach.

Those fizzy bubbles evaporated.

The text was not from Jackson.

In fact, it wasn't a number she recognized. But there was no mistaking the sender.

Willy's. One hour. Come alone or I tell Rachel the truth about your whore of a mother.

What could Clint possibly know that she didn't? How dare he call her momma a whore? Since he'd shown up, he'd been tossing that word out like Mardi Gras trinkets.

Holding a hand to her stomach, Chloe rocked through the pain and nausea that assailed her. Was this a trick to lure her into seeing him?

Of course it is. But what choice did she have?

Ah, none.

Her mind was clicking away. If he really did know something, had he used it to blackmail Gram? Apparently, Jackson was right. Money was the root of all evil, and Clint was evil to the roots. With Gram gone, Chloe became the obvious prey. Clint was fully aware of the lengths Gram would go to in order to protect her precious granddaughters from whatever information he was holding over her head. And because of their history, he also knew the depths Chloe would go to to save Rachel from heartache.

No doubt he derived some perverse gratification from having her writhe like a worm on his hook. *Bastard.*

Jackson was going to strangle her if he ever found out she'd met with Clint without his being there to protect her. And really? She was okay with that. He was right, her safety was the one area she'd didn't begrudge his lording over her, besides the other obvious place—in bed.

She tugged on a pair of white shorts and a dark purple T, slipped into a pair of colorful flip-flops, and ran a brush through her tangled hair. A light dusting of cosmetics and her shades should do it for today, she decided. The last thing she cared about was impressing Clint, the sorry-ass, blackmailing son of a bitch.

In the kitchen, she poured a cup of cold coffee and popped it in the microwave to reheat it. Then she dropped a slice of bread in the toaster and peeled a banana. When her cell rang, she almost jumped out of her skin. Her hand flew up to her racing heart, and she forced herself to take a deep breath before answering. Thankfully, she'd had the forethought to assign Jackson a specific ring tone.

If she sounded breathy, she hoped he'd pass it off for excitement. Or desire.

“Hey, handsome.”

“Hello, yourself, sexy lady.” She could hear his smile, projected in his tone. “Sleep well?”

“Thanks to this wonderful guy I know. Too bad you weren’t here when I woke up. I’d been dreaming of you, and I was primed for another wild ride.”

He groaned. “Damn. I had an appointment. Couldn’t be helped. So, did you fly solo, or are you still hot and bothered?”

Fly solo? Oh, Jesus. She swallowed. Hard. “Ah, no. I’m still...ah, ready for takeoff,” she told him, biting back a giggle.

“Are you dressed?”

“Y–yes. I’m fixing a slice of toast and warming up a cup of coffee.”

He insisted, “Then go back to your room, lock the door, and lie on the bed.”

“Jackson. I can’t.” Tempted as she was, she was on a timetable here. But she couldn’t very well tell him that. And she’d never done anything like this—phone sex, for Christ’s sake—before.

“Yes, you can. Do it, Chloe. Do it now while I unzip my pants and take out my hard, throbbing dick.”

Okay, her turn to groan. She rushed to the bedroom to do as he’d suggested. “Okay, okay. Door locked. I’m on the bed.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Shorts and a T. Nothing fancy.”

“Slide off the shorts and tell me about the panties. Are they lacy? You like lace, and the more feminine, the skimpier, the better. And I love them on you almost as much as I love ripping them off.”

Oh, Jesus. This was hotter than she’d have thought. Getting into it now, she confirmed, “They’re pale, pale blue and trimmed in off-white lace. And now, they’re damp from just thinking about you.”

“My dick’s hard as stone. Slide your hand inside your panties and run your fingers over that pretty, pink mound.” She moaned, and he coaxed, “That’s it, baby. Now, push two of those pale, delicate fingers inside you and imagine it’s my cock.”

"Yes. Oh, yes. But it's not enough," she told him as her hips lifted and writhed. "Nothing compares to you. You're so big, the way you stretch me and fill me up."

"Shove your hand under your T and pinch one of those pert little raspberry nipples. I want my mouth on you, baby. Imagine me sucking at your breasts. Imagine me licking my way down over the smooth, pale skin of your torso, your belly. I want to lick at your sweet pussy and eat you up."

"Oh, God. I'm...oh...I'm so close...I need you, Jackson. I need that hot, hard cock sliding in and out of this wet pussy. Harder, faster..." Her voice trailed off as the orgasm lapped at her hips. "Oh, God."

Breathily, still panting, she asked, "Jackson? Did you finish?"

"Almost, baby."

"How do you want to come? Do you want me to suck it, or would you rather have it in this wet, quivering pussy?"

"Your pussy. Those tight inner muscles, milking me. Your honey, coating my cock while you ride me."

"Wrap your hand around the base and stroke yourself," she urged. "Do you know how sexy it is for me to envision your hand pumping up and down your hard cock? Those long, tanned fingers, the wide, strong palm, gripping that massive length? Work your way toward the tip and pump faster. Think of my tongue swirling around and under the rim, licking up the underside and sucking off those salty pearls that weep from the slit. Then imagine me straddling your hips and mounting you. I'd surround you in my heat, pull you in deep, and glide up and down..."

She heard his deep growl of completion and smiled as if she were the cat that had eaten the plump canary. "Was it good, baby?"

"Not as good as coming inside of you. I miss you."

It surprised her how much her feelings mirrored his. "I miss you, too."

"Good. Have lunch with me?"

“Love to. But can it be a little later? I have an errand or two to run. How about I come by the club, say, one?”

Chuckling, he warned, “If you come by the club, I’ll be forced to drag you upstairs and have my way with you. We may never get to lunch.”

“Not a problem. I’ll grab some take-out and bring it with me,” she offered. “Maybe I’ll bring dessert—a slice of creamy key lime pie or something with whipped cream—and you can lick it off of me.”

“Jesus, my dick’s hard again. Only you do that to me, Chloe. Only you.”

Still breathless with release and her own mounting anticipation, Chloe laughed. “Poor baby. I’ll see you soon.”

* * * *

Jackson washed up and changed into a crisp, light blue button-down over his faded jeans, rolling the cuffs twice and not bothering to tuck it in, making the look casual for his late lunch with Chloe. He grinned at the thought of her freeing the tiny, white buttons he’d just taken the time to slide through the slits. Thinking of her delicate hands rubbing all over his naked chest, those neatly trimmed nails scraping over his flesh to tease and tantalize. Dipping low to tug open his jeans and slide down his zipper.

Jesus. His cock swelled and throbbed, straining against said zipper, so he tried hard to compartmentalize his lust for later and focus his unspent energy, for now, on work.

How could he be so horny and wired when he’d just gotten off? How could one little firecracker of a woman tie him in knots? And who the hell was he to complain?

Hell, he was thrilled to his toes with the way things had turned out, falling for the sassy Chloe Rezner. If only he could find a way to permanently rid them both of her ass-wipe of an ex-husband that didn’t involve jail time for himself. It was a stretch of his faith to

believe that Clint would let something like a restraining order hamper his determination.

With half his mind on Chloe and the other half on business, Jackson returned a few phone calls, took care of ironing out a misunderstanding over a screwed-up order. When one-fifteen rolled around and Chloe hadn't shown up or called, he shrugged it off. Traffic, her errands, whatever she'd decided to pick up for lunch—no telling what tiny detail could have delayed her.

By one-thirty, he was mildly annoyed. Why hadn't she bothered to call? She wasn't answering her cell or the phone at her Gram's.

By two o'clock on the dot, he'd run the gamut from annoyed to flat-out pissed, and now he was so worried he was literally shaking in his Sperry deck shoes. If he hadn't already realized the depths of his feelings for her, this would have done it. He hated not knowing where she was, a million worst-case scenarios screaming through his mind.

It was time, past time, Jackson decided, for action.

* * * *

The parking lot at Willy's was packed by the time Chloe arrived. She circled twice before snagging a spot just as a pickup was pulling out. The bar smelled of stale beer, staler pretzels, and roasted nuts. She spied her ex, a man whose nuts she wouldn't mind roasting, taking up most of a booth near one of the dimly lit corners.

Chloe might've been thankful for the audience, in case Clint got rowdy or decided to try anything funny, but she doubted the customers currently perched along the Willy's scuffed, ring-dappled bar would bother to lift a brow, much less a hand. Clearly, she was on her own here.

From the looks of it, Clint had already sucked down two bottles of beer and was working on draining the third. He tipped a longneck in her direction by way of greeting as she slid onto the cushion facing him. "Want a drink?"

“No.”

“Suit yourself.” He waved the now-empty bottle at a passing waitress. The scantily clad woman sent him a wink and made her way back toward the bar to put in his request.

“What do you want?” Chloe saw no reason to drag this out. The sooner he got to the meat of it, the sooner she could be on her way to Jackson.

Clint sneered at her. “Can’t a guy have a goddamn drink with his wife?”

“Are we really going to go through this again?” She blew out an exasperated breath. “You’re just making it worse, embarrassing yourself and me.”

“Tell me about this Sawyer fella. Bet he likes tapping that pretty little ass of yours.” Disgusted, she started to leave, but his words stalled her progress. “Sit down, you high and mighty bitch. I’ll tell you when we’re done.”

The name-calling was akin to a feral cat crawling up her spine. “So, I’m a bitch now? How lovely. You want me to sit here while you throw out your best? Go ahead. The thing is, you can’t hurt me anymore. Not with words. Not with the parade of other women. I. Don’t. Care. Get it? I have a wonderful man who cares about me, about what I want and not—”

“Fuck Sawyer.” Clint’s beefy fist slammed down on the table, making it shake and rock due to an uneven leg. “That pretty boy’s loaded, and I bet he wouldn’t blink if you asked for a couple grand. Especially if you promised to work it out in trade.”

She wished to hell he’d been drinking whatever crappy beer the bar kept on tap just so she could have the satisfaction of tossing it in his face. He couldn’t possibly know how deeply his words cut her when she thought of just exactly how she and Jackson had been trading sex for much-needed funds. But cut her they did. “You make me sick, you know that? What is this fascination you have with touting me as a whore?”

"Just like your momma. Did your Gram ever tell you the truth about that night? No, I didn't think so."

Chloe had a sinking feeling, like she'd just swallowed a handful of rocks and Clint was about to toss her into the Gulf.

"She wouldn't want you to know what a hussy her daughter had become," Clint went on. "Or what it did to your daddy, making him turn to the bottle."

She literally felt the color drain from her face, and her tongue refused to move. Chloe closed her eyes the way she wished she could've closed her ears, but Clint was obviously enjoying himself. The pitch of his voice rose, and the amusement clung to each and every word.

"Word was, she could've put a revolving door on her bedroom. Daddy tried to cover it up after the accident and spare your grandparents the humiliation. Lucky for me, I stumbled over his stash of old files in his office at home, some he'd taken with him when he retired. The official report from that night was a far cry from his personal notes on the scene."

He took his time, going into great detail over what had transpired, blatantly reveling in her anguish and humiliation.

"Stop it! I don't want to hear any more. What does it matter now? You want money, right? That's what this is about. You bilked Gram, but now she's gone, so instead, you'll use Rachel as leverage to wheedle more cash out of me. And you think I'll beg Jackson for the money because I'm as broke as it gets and we happen to be sleeping together."

"Fucking," Clint insisted. "I doubt he lets you sleep much."

"You really are a prick. If it weren't a slur to your daddy, who I believe to be a good and decent man, I'd call you a bastard." This time she did wiggle out of the booth. "Go to hell."

She shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun as she exited the bar. Before she could take two steps, Clint had her by the arm and was dragging her over to his truck. "You listen to me, you sassy bitch.

You'll get me twenty grand from Sawyer if you have to give him head twenty-four-seven."

"Disgusting prick," she amended.

Undaunted, Clint gripped her harder. She swore she could feel the bruises forming beneath the skin.

"Twenty grand," he repeated. "Or I'll see to it that a copy of Daddy's notes just happens to sail into Rachel's hands."

He let her go. Did he really think she'd cower off and do his bidding? Arrogant, disgusting prick, she mused.

And dumb as dirt. Without another word—let him think whatever he needed to—she made a beeline for her car.

* * * *

Chloe's car was in the drive when Jackson pulled in. Taking stock, at first glance, nothing seemed out of order. He rang the front doorbell. No answer. Rounding to the side of the house, he flipped the lock on the gate of the wooden privacy fence, and it gave way. Three steps into the backyard, he finally spotted her.

She was sitting in the old wood swing under a large, sprawling oak, immobile as a statue, with her knees raised to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Her chin was resting in the groove they created. She seemed to be staring off across the yard as if the world had slipped out of focus around her. Not a flinch, not a flicker of her eyelids showed that it registered when he softly called out to her.

Then he said her name again, a little louder this time.

Finally, she turned her head to look up at him. Emotionless. Her face was a beautiful yet expressionless slate. The oceans of her eyes were blank, empty, fathoms deep. She did blink once, twice, before turning and looking away.

His anger instantly fell away to be replaced by the heavy burden of concern and love. "Chloe? Sweetheart?" He sat beside her in the swing but was careful to keep from touching her. She seemed so

fragile, as if even a whisper over her skin might shatter her into millions of pale shards.

"I was so worried. I waited for you at the club. And I tried to call several times. Did I misunderstand, sweetheart?" Best to keep talking, he decided. Sooner or later, perhaps she'd respond. *Go to hell. Hold me.* Hell if he cared what she said or did or asked of him. Jackson would have tried to rope the moon for her at this point if she'd just damn well say something. *Anything.*

Finally she let out a heavy sigh. "I went to see Clint."

The only visible sign of the fury that sprang instantly back to life and zipped through his veins was his clenched fists. It took everything he had not to yell at her or grab her by her shoulders and shake some sense into her. "Now, darlin', why would you go and do a thing like that?"

Her voice was flat, as emotionless as her face. "Because he threatened me, and he threatened to tell Rachel the awful truth about Momma."

Okay, so now he was pissed on a whole new level. Jackson felt betrayed. Not because he didn't trust her, but because she hadn't trusted him. Didn't she know that she could have come to him, asked him to go with her to face off with whatever threats her ex was using as leverage to scare her?

He loved her, and yet, clearly, she still hadn't even decided that she could count on him, share her troubles.

He couldn't fathom a world without Chloe's love.

But he'd never truly have her until she took that most important leap of faith and believed in the depths of his love for her. Trust, faith, Devotion, these had to be solidly built, two-way streets, or *forever* would crumble away beneath their feet.

"What could be so awful as to—"

"It's ironic really," she interrupted. Her sardonic laugh didn't set well in his gut. Its sharp edge plunged and twisted with sickening

results. “Seems I’ve followed right along in her footsteps, whoring myself and spreading my legs for a man and his money.”

That did it. Shifting, he took her by the shoulders and shook her—a bit roughly, maybe too rough, but it got her attention, which was his goal. “Damn it, Chloe. I’ve heard that word enough for a lifetime. You did what you felt you needed to do for Rachel, for yourself. If anything, I’m the bastard who took advantage of your weakness and manipulated the situation. And I don’t give a damn about any of that. All I care about is you. I love you, Chloe. But I deserve to know how you feel about me.”

“Don’t you see? Oh, Jackson.” Diamond-like teardrops spilled from the corners of her eyes and rolled over her cheeks. “My mother wasn’t with my father the night she died. But my father found out about her affairs. Multiple affairs. Which drove him to the bottle. He was drunk and angry and humiliated, and it seems he followed her that night when she went to meet one of her lovers. He rammed the guy’s truck from behind, and it was raining—that was about the only truth to the story Gram always told.

“The truck slid out of control and hit a telephone pole. Killed the man on impact. Then Daddy ran the old Plymouth right off the causeway and into Mobile Bay, drowning himself. Clint’s father was the chief of police, and in those days, it was even more of a good old boy network than today. Because of Granddaddy’s standing in the community and the scandal that would have hit the fans, Mr. Rezner used his clout to sweep it under the rug and cover his tracks with the story Gram told me all those years ago.”

Jackson was getting the picture all too clearly now. “Clint somehow found out the truth and used it to blackmail your Gram. She needed fast cash, so she sold her pearls. Then she took out the loan because he came back for more. Clint’s a greedy son of a bitch, and he wasn’t content to let it die with her. Naturally, he was banking on exactly how far you’d go to keep the horrible truth from Rachel.”

"And he was banking on you as my new backer, especially after he realized we were intimate and that you owned the clubs." She swiped at her damp cheeks. "He asked for an obscene amount of money, but it doesn't matter anymore. I told him to go to hell."

"Damn straight."

"Rachel's not a little girl anymore. I love her, and I want to see her happy and taken care of, but I can't baby her forever."

"No, sweetheart, you really can't," he agreed.

"I couldn't let him try to maneuver you like a pawn in his sick, sadistic game just because of your feelings for me."

"Try being the operative word."

At that, Chloe laughed a soft, genuine laugh. "If only he had an idea who he was dealing with."

"Oh, I think we gave him a pretty good taste last night. Calling the cops. Slapping a restraining order on his ass. Jesus, Chloe, I could toss you over my knee for going to see him after that."

"What the hell was I supposed to do, Jackson? I had to talk to him after the text he sent. I had to know what it was he was holding over my head before I could figure out how to deal with it."

He couldn't help it. His words exploded out. "Did it ever occur to you that I would have gone with you? What if he'd lured you there just to hurt you? Do you realize what I would have to do to him if he'd harmed one single hair on your gorgeous head? Damn it, Chloe."

"My white knight," she said in awe, cupping his face in her hands.

Jackson chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I am. Though I never thought of it that way. But I would try to protect you to the death."

"Rachel said that the day you showed up determined to drive me to Gram's funeral. That gleam of protectiveness in your eyes. I don't think I wanted to see it for what it was. I was too afraid to really believe it. To believe that you...that anyone might love me that much."

He pulled her over so that she had no choice but to straddle his lap. "But I do. I will. Forever."

Chloe rested her forehead on his and whispered, “I’m so scared, Jackson. I’ve never felt so afraid and so happy and so...*alive*, all at once.” Raining soft, light kisses over his lids, his temple, his cheeks, she worked her way to capturing his lips with hers.

He felt as if she were trying to pour her heart and soul into the kiss, as if that might be enough. But it wasn’t. He needed to hear it from those same sweet lips that were devouring his. “I love you, baby.”

“Oh, Jackson. I love you so much more than I ever thought possible.” Leaning back, she looked deep into his eyes and echoed the words that made his world complete. “But I do. I will. Forever.”

“Hallelujah, woman! Took you damn long enough to admit it, and I’m gonna enjoy spending the rest of our lives reminding you just who said it first.”

“I don’t doubt that you will,” she said on a laugh and then threw her arms around him, burying her face in his neck. “Oh, Jackson. I love you. I don’t deserve you, but I love you.”

“We deserve each other. We were made for each other.”

“Make love to me,” she pleaded, running her tongue along the curve of his ear. “Light of day, let me see you.”

Jackson swept her up and carried her into the house, stopping only when they were locked away behind her bedroom door. He set her on the mattress and inched back to shed his clothes while she watched.

His fucking hand trembled—*trembled!*—working the buttons of his shirt. This was like first-time-ever, losing-his-virginity sex, the way his hormones were raging and his body was shaking to discover the hidden treasures of a woman’s body.

No, not just any woman. *His* woman.

What they’d done at the club had no bearing on this moment. He’d cheated her, and, ultimately, cheated them both. Rewriting the past was out of his hands. He could only control the forward momentum and hope for a better future.

“Chloe, baby, I’m so sorry. Can you forgive me for the whole stupid charade at the club?”

“That whole stupid charade was for my benefit. And look what it got me.” She reached out, flicked open the front of his jeans, and drew down his zipper. “Show me how much you love me, Jackson. Let me show you how much you mean to me.”

Their mouths instantly fused, tongues mating, devouring as they rolled over the mattress, tearing away clothes and exposing flesh until she lay beneath him, cradling his hips with those smooth, silky thighs. The pert tips of her pink nipples were too tempting to ignore, and he took time to lave them each, sucking one then the other and nuzzling his nose in the creamy, honeysuckle-scented valley of skin between the lush mounds.

“You always smell good enough to eat.” As if to prove it, he nipped at the column of her throat then licked the spot, making her gasp.

Chloe raked her nails over his abs and rubbed her slick mound against the tip of his burgeoning cock, spreading her hot moisture and beckoning him in. “Please, Jackson. I need you...God, how I need you.”

“Let me get a condom from the drawer.”

“No. Don’t.” He knew she was on the Pill—backup required for her stint at the club. But even during the night, he’d been sure to suit up. In fact, he’d never, ever taken the chance and gone bare during sex—that one brief, ball-busting instance aside, when he’d almost given in at the club.

Yet this was Chloe.

Sooner or later—sooner if he had his way—she would be his in every way possible, and the proof of their love would be swelling in her belly. Once he got a ring on her finger and got her down the aisle and once she had her degree—whatever she wanted—he’d get busy working on what he wanted, starting a family. Their family.

“Please,” she murmured. “Let me feel you.”

He laced his fingers through hers, and their eyes locked, never wavering as he pressed the tip of his cock to her weeping, welcoming pussy and sank deep, claiming her. Every sweet, glorious inch of her. Being skin-to-skin with the woman he loved and who loved him in return was amazingly, almost painfully arousing. Gathering every ounce of control he possessed, he measured his thrusts and strained to hold off his climax until she shattered around him. He let go of one of her hands and reached between them to where their bodies were joined and lightly pinched her clit.

“Yes!” She cried out, and her head fell back as her body bowed beneath his. “Oh, God, Jackson!”

The strength of her inner muscles convulsing around his cock as she climaxed was swiftly pulling him closer to the edge of his own release. “You feel so good. That sweet, hot pussy. Jesus, Chloe, baby. The way it’s milking my cock. I can’t...hold on...much longer.”

His balls drew tight, and fire shot straight down his spine to spread in his loins. His cock felt like it was about to explode.

Finally letting go, he pushed her knees to her chest and pounded into her, gritting his teeth and growling as he came. God, he’d never come so hard or so much in his life. Damn, he’d never dreamed it would feel this good, this right, to come inside her.

Her honey, his seed—the erotic mixture coated his cock, filled her pussy. He felt it overflow, binding them in a sticky, hot web of passion. He thought of it as marking her, branding some part of his essence within the most precious, deepest part of her. That part that held the power to create new life. A new life that would be nurtured by their love.

Soothing her with murmured words of love as she clung to him and wept, Jackson was awe-struck to realize she’d experienced that same intrinsic, binding connection.

“Every time,” she told him, “when you’re inside me...I’ve never felt so complete, so perfectly, wonderfully whole with anyone else.”

He kissed the tears from her silky skin, kissed her lips, tenderly, and rolled to his back, pulling her in to nestle at his side. "Sweetheart, neither have I." Covering her hand where it lay on his chest, he asked, "About children? When you said you'd had trouble."

"I had a miscarriage, late in the first trimester. Not uncommon. The doctor said everything was fine. I was young and healthy. No reason to worry I wouldn't be able to carry another baby to term."

Short of startling her by jumping up and pumping his fist in the air, Jackson settled for the party going on in his mind. "You've worked so hard, and you're so close to graduating, but I hope you won't make me wait too long. You have no idea how arousing it is for me to think of you carrying *our* baby."

* * * *

Chloe's heart suddenly filled her throat. She swallowed it down and shifted so that she could look at him, look into his eyes. "You've thought of us having a baby?"

"A couple, at least. And about selling the condo in favor of a big, sprawling house so we can christen each and every room. Now that I've got you in the light of day, I'm never letting you go."

"What if I wanted to move back to Birmingham and finish my rotations where I started?"

He paused, a slight hesitation, as he seemed to be mulling it over. Then he shrugged. "Mom and Dad would be ecstatic, having us both so close. Ty and I'll work something out with the clubs. Maybe we could open a third in our old stomping ground."

"You'd do that? Give up what you've made here with your brother? For me?"

His brow furrowed as he studied her. "I told you, baby. I love you. I want a future and children with you. I'd go anywhere, do anything that makes you happy."

“You make me happy, Jackson.” She initiated a tender kiss but was quickly intoxicated when he took it deeper, coaxed her tongue to mate with his in a more urgent rhythm. His hands cupped her ass and tugged her over so that she was straddling his big, hard body.

His big, hard, aroused cock impaled her sensitized, swollen pussy so suddenly she tore her mouth from his and nearly screamed. Her pussy instantly convulsed and locked around him with the force of a cataclysmic orgasm.

The way her body responded to his was mind-boggling. “Dear God, Jackson,” she murmured when she could breathe. “What you do to me.”

He took her hand and placed it over his heart. “It’s exactly what you do to me.”

The organ beating beneath her palm was racing as frantically as her own. And his cock was still hard as stone, buried deep in her pussy. Sitting up, she arched her back and began to ride him with slow, steady undulations of her hips that teased her aching clit while stroking his magnificent length.

He wrapped a hand around her back and arched up, taking the nipple that swayed in front of his lips and sucking at her breast. She tunneled her hand into his hair and held him there. Imagining. Wishing. “Think our sons will be as greedy as their father?”

Jackson just smiled and licked a path to her other breast.

“Oh, God, Jackson, I can’t believe how close I am to coming again.” She couldn’t believe how the tug of his mouth on her nipples was tugging her closer and closer to reaching that peak. Chloe wanted him to reach it with her. Reaching behind her, she cupped his sac and squeezed ever so gently.

His hips jerked in response, and he cursed under his breath.

“You like that, baby?” She gave another light squeeze.

“Fuck, yeah. My balls are about to explode.”

Her laughter rang out as she worked her hips and squeezed again.

“Two can play at this game, baby doll,” he said in a teasing, warning tone. His finger traced the cleft of her ass and dipped in to rim her puckered hole. “Come with me, Chloe. Now.”

She felt the startling, not unpleasant intrusion of one thick, blunt fingertip, pushing past the tight ring of muscles and matching the rhythm of his hips. He thrust his cock up into her pussy with such powerful force she could only hold on to his shoulders and let him have his way.

They came together in a rush of blinding white heat. Chloe felt his cum, spurting out of him in jets of scalding heat, coating her womb. Oh, yes, making babies with this man was going to be oh-so-wonderful. She collapsed over him, damp, panting breathlessly, and feeling like the most decadently sated feline. And, surely, the most loved.

“I’ll be right there with you,” he offered while stroking a firm, comforting hand over her back as she lay in his arms, “when you talk to Rachel. If that’s what you want.”

“No. It’s something I have to do, can do, on my own. Sister to sister, we’ll handle it together.” She kissed the tip of his nose. “But I love you for offering. For letting me know I can count on you for anything.”

“Anything,” he seconded and kissed her deeply.

Epilogue

Eight months later

As it turned out, Chloe had only been testing him. Jackson, not surprisingly, came through with flying colors. Quite unabashedly, he had offered to pluck the stars from the sky if she so desired. What she *so* desired was Jackson Sawyer. Lock, stock, and barrel. There was nothing for her in Birmingham, not anymore. Everything she ever wanted began and ended with Jackson.

His parents, whom she'd finally met and fallen in love with, visited often or vice versa. Jackson predicted they'd make a permanent move south whenever he and Chloe got around to making those grandbabies his mother could hardly wait for.

Maybe after she graduated next month or after she settled into her shifts and after they moved into the perfect house. She had it all planned out, with his complete blessing. For once, she was in charge of her destiny. Jackson loved her, but he was giving her the space, the time to fulfill her dreams.

Funny, Chloe had to think, how finding the right man had altered those dreams. And she didn't regret one single moment of it. Or of what was to come.

"Jackson, honey," she called out from the bathroom. They were sharing his condo while the house they'd purchased was being painted to her specifications and the hardwood floors refinished. Rachel and Paul had been thrilled to have Gram's house all to themselves. Especially once the loans were paid in full and the deed signed over to Rachel.

God, Chloe loved Jackson's generous spirit almost as much as the rest of him.

He'd given her an obscenely gorgeous engagement ring, nearly two carats, princess cut, and set in platinum. The man had impeccable taste, if she did say so herself.

And, apparently, he possessed some sort of uber, overtly masculine sperm that laughed in the face of contraception.

"What is it, babe? I thought you were just brushing your teeth. How long could it take to..." His voice trailed off as he stuck his head in the door and caught sight of the slender, white, wand-like contraption in her hand. His eyes grew round as dinner plates. "Is that what I think it is?"

She met his startled expression and blew out a breath. "Yes. And three minutes is the usual reaction time, according to the box, but the results popped up in the first thirty seconds. Two bright pink plus signs."

"Oh, sweetheart." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her until her head swam. "I'm thrilled. But I'm so sorry. This changes everything for you."

"No," she insisted. How could she ever feel remorse for such a precious gift? "I'll graduate, and then I'll take it easy. I'm not losing this baby."

She pulled his hand down to rest over her still-flat stomach. How she longed for the proof, the mound that would show the world how much they loved each other. "I'm not losing our baby, Jackson. When I'm ready, maybe when the baby's weaned, I'll take a few shifts. I bet your mom would be more than willing to help babysit."

"Willing? She'll be over the moon. God, wait 'til we tell them. You're sure? No regrets?"

No longer was she surprised to find that their thoughts ran along identical directions—they often mirrored one another's in an eerily perfect sort of way that only further strengthened her belief that he was the one and only man created for her.

“Positive. What we have, what we’ve made together, this baby and our lives—our future means more to me than anything.”

Stripping off the short wisp of a gown she’d been wearing, he asked, “Enough to move up the wedding?”

“Worried the hormones will make me crazy and change my mind?” she teased. Her breath hitched when he scraped a thumb over her nipple. “Or that I’ll have to waddle down the aisle?”

He grinned and trailed his hands down to her belly. “There is that. But I don’t want to wait any longer. I want the world to know you’re mine.”

“I am yours.” Arching into his wicked hands as they shoved her panties over her hips, she hooked an arm around his neck and met his lips in a searing kiss that tasted of ripe, ultimate possession.

His hands slid up her torso and cupped her breasts, molding the swells that now felt slightly heavier and far more sensitive with all those pregnancy hormones she’d joked about. “They ache, Jackson. I need your mouth on me.”

“Soon,” he promised and continued to lightly tweak one nipple while his free hand journeyed lower to cup her damp mound.

She felt his erection rubbing against her ass and lifted one knee up to rest on the marble countertop in front of her. His velvety-hard length speared up between her swollen nether lips and coated them both in the juices that poured from her ready, throbbing cunt.

“You’re pussy is always dripping wet for me, baby,” he crooned and nibbled on the nape of her neck. “Do you know how hard it makes me to know how much you want me to fuck you?”

“Jackson, please...”

“Please, what, baby? You like it when we talk dirty. You like it when I tell you how good this sweet pussy feels, all velvety-soft and moist and hot, surrounding my hard dick.” He slapped her ass, lightly, then rubbed the sting with his strong, wide palm. She did so love his domination—in moderation, of course. “You want me to fuck you, Chloe? You want me to be gentle, or do you want it hard?”

“Hard, God, I want it hard. And fast. And now!”

Just the tip of his cock entered her, and she tried desperately to wiggle back and take more, but he held her hips. Their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror, and concern furrowed his brow. “It won’t hurt the baby?”

She had to laugh. “No, but you’re killing *me*.” His cock pushed an inch higher, stretching her. More, damn it—she needed more.

“You’ll move up the wedding?”

Bastard. “Yes!” He pulled out before entering her again on a short, swift stroke that went just another inch deeper. And no farther.

“Can we put ‘obey’ back in the vows?”

She’d only been teasing him when she’d mentioned she was toying with the idea of rewording her vows. But it never hurt to make him sweat it a little. “Don’t push it, Sawyer.”

At that, he roared with laughter and sank balls deep before holding her hips and giving it to her exactly as she demanded, hard and fast. She shattered through a climax, and he held her until she floated back to earth. Then he swept her up and carried her to bed, where he made love to her so slowly, so tenderly she wept, telling her with words and showing her with his wicked hands and his beautiful mouth and his impressive cock just exactly how much she and the amazing new life they’d created together meant to him.

When his seed emptied into her womb, bathing that new life in the most glorious warmth, Chloe held on tight and promised to love, to cherish. And to obey... “But only in the bedroom.”

“I can live with that.”

Jackson tucked her into his side, right where she belonged, and held her while they both drifted off to dream of the future—their upcoming marriage, the baby they’d made, and the others they hoped might follow to fill their new home and overflow their already brimming hearts.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the Deep South, Raven Fyre now lives in Florida with her wonderfully supportive husband, their three beautiful children, and exactly six fish. When she isn't fleshing out new stories on her laptop or whipping up something new in the kitchen she can be found devouring the writings of her favorite authors.

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