

SPECIAL FORCES

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Dedication

Many people have encouraged me in my journey. Family, friends, and the readers at The Valent-Chamber. You are the best support an aspiring writer could ask for. A special shout out to Linda, my tutor and friend, thanks for your help and support. Jacqueline, I appreciate the time you took working with me on this one, you're the best. Tristin, Ayesha, Christian, David and the home team, thanks for your strong-armed support.

Chapter 1

Desperation dogged Major Tyson Bradford's footsteps as he paced the floor of his new home waiting for his sister, Anne, to answer the phone. In eight days, he'd be in Afghanistan. Too many things still needed to be done.

"Hello Tyson, this is a pleasant surprise."

"Hi Anne, I know it's late but I need a favor." His shoulders were tense. He hated disturbing her but he was completely out of options. The situation with his aunt haunted him. His sister worked as a security expert for a sector of the government and if anyone could find reliable help, she could.

"It's not late, it's only three o'clock." Her voice was cheerful with a hint of wariness.

"Yeah, it is late. I head to Afghanistan next week and I need someone to move in and watch Aunt Lilly. You know anybody who could house-sit and be a live-in companion for her?"

"Damn big brother, you are late. What happened?"

"Got some quick orders and I gotta leave. Aunt Lilly was supposed to be moving in after I bought this place. She's been putting me off and now claims that she doesn't want to be alone while I'm gone." He understood his aunt's reluctance. She preferred to stay home where she was familiar with everything.

"She has a point Ty. Wouldn't it be better for her to be around her own things and friends?" Anne was saying the same thing that his aunt had argued.

"Maybe under different circumstances. Promise you won't tell her what I'm about to tell you."

"Oh Lord, what did you do?"

"Her doctors keep me updated with her checkups. They have advised her against living alone. She's prone to falling and has dizzy spells. I can't tell her I know, she'll kick my ass. But, I can't leave her out there on the farm by herself either." Frustration laced his voice. His hand plowed through his close-cropped curls before his palm slapped against his thigh. One week. He was down to a week and running out of time. Damn. He loved his job, but the constant deployments left him little time to get his personal affairs in order.

"Have you tried some local agencies? They do long term care," his sister asked interrupting his thoughts.

"Yeah, I met with a few companies and Aunt Lilly turned down every one. She refuses to live with someone she calls a nurse. For some reason she's being more obstinate than normal." He paused. "I'm really worried about leaving her alone, Anne." A knot of fear tightened his throat. He couldn't place his finger on it, but his gut warned him not to leave his aunt without help at her old home in Henderson. Something bad would happen.

"I know. I'm fond of her myself. I know she's your dad's sister, but I still see her as my aunt. She's good people. Let me see what I can come up with and I'll call you back. Try not to worry, everything will work out."

"I hope so. I won't be able to focus on my mission unless this is resolved. Afghanistan is no place for divided attention." As the commanding Officer on his team, their unique hunting talents assured them of frequent deployments. Although he craved the adventure and challenges of his Special Forces unit, he recognized the inherent dangers of front line warfare.

"No, you're right. You need to stay focused so you can return home to meet your new niece. She's due within the next eight weeks. It's bad enough you'll miss the big event," she teased.

"I know. Who would've thought my tomboy of a sister would fall for a crazy tough guy, get married and have a baby." He sobered. "I can't wait to see her and I wish I could be there when she's born. I promise a long visit when I return."

"That'll have to do then. I'll see what I can come up with. I know you think so, but I'm no miracle worker."

"I never said you were a miracle worker," he argued.

"You must think that or you would've called me as soon as you got your orders. Got to go, talk to you soon big bro," she said, laughing as he sputtered a response to her last dig.

"Brat," he said affectionately to the dial tone before hanging up. Anne was right. He should've called her immediately. But she was pregnant and he hadn't wanted to bother her. His mom had left him and his dad at an early age. Aunt Lilly had dried his tears and stepped in; placing her life on hold to nurture the love starved child that he'd been. Now, at age 80, she had problems walking around the rambling house she lived in. Her immediate future needed to be secured. He'd vowed to watch out for her and his love and respect for her wouldn't allow him to abandon his promise.

No, he needed a solution, fast.

Chapter 2

Lynay Grant jerked upright, gripped her chest, threw over the threadbare blanket and sprinted across the hall. She'd heard right. Seth, her four-year-old son was struggling to breathe.

"Heeeee, heeeee," he wheezed.

With the efficiency and speed of an emergency room nurse, she sprung into action. Grabbing the inhaler off the dresser with one hand, while lifting and pulling him close with the other; she administered the medication.

"Here baby," she crooned, encouraging him to open his mouth to receive the treatment. Feeling his body shudder in relief, she gingerly wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Mommy," he whispered.

"Yeah baby, I'm here."

"My throat hurts." His slim fingers rubbed his small throat.

"Alright Tiger, I'm gonna get you some water in a minute. How're you feeling?" The doctor explained she shouldn't panic. Be calm. What they hadn't revealed to her was that her heart would attempt to jump out her chest.

"Okay." He turned in her arms and looked up. His cinnamon gaze locked with hers. She prayed he couldn't see the moisture in her eyes. The attacks were becoming more frequent.

"You're my little soldier. You know that?" Battling back tears, she bent slightly, kissed his forehead, and inhaled the essence of innocence. His tiny hand stroked her face gently, comforting her.

In that moment, it was just the two of them against the world. Her head pounded as she glanced around the sparsely furnished room, noting the industrial beige color on the walls, the formica covered chipped dresser, and the earth toned faded rug. Flashbacks of similar sights from her childhood threatened to overwhelm her.

Barren rooms with broken pieces of furniture, in vacant neglected houses where crack-heads congregated in bristling cold rooms. She shivered. After all these years, the frigid temperatures in those houses still slammed into her memory at the oddest times.

A quick tug on Seth's blanket to make sure he was warm helped dispel her disquiet. His bedroom appeared as cold and dreary as she felt. Her son deserved better, even if she didn't.

His hands fell to the side as he drifted back asleep. After kissing his forehead, she returned to her lackluster room wishing the sandman would claim her. He didn't. Weary eyes glanced at the rent increase notice that she'd read before drifting asleep earlier. Another letter graced her bedcovers from Seth's doctor regarding a new procedure she couldn't afford and Medicaid wouldn't pay for. A horn blew in the distance.

The duplexes' windows danced and jumped in concert with the rumble of transfer trucks passing on their way to the interstate. She sat slumped before the thin curtains, and gazed into the darkness beyond. The view appeared bleak with the occasional flicker of an angry streetlamp breaking the unified appearance. Tears ran unchecked down her cheek. Calloused hands pushed the braids from her face.

"Okay, I made some mistakes. I'm sorry and I've tried to make up for that. I don't lie, or cheat or steal and I help as many people as I can. But that little boy in there, he's all the family I have left and he didn't ask for any of this. He's a gift to this world. Punish me, but not him. Please, I'll do anything, just help him." Lynay sobbed as her body shook with the weight of failing her child.

Three o'clock in the afternoon, the phone rang. Lynay sprang to answer, not wanting to wake Seth from his late nap. He had problems sleeping earlier and this was the first break she had in a while.

"Lynay...Lynay, there's static on the line. Call me right back on the house phone." Her best friend, Anne spoke softly into the receiver and hung up. She walked into her bedroom, sat on the bed and returned the call. God must be smiling, because a pep talk from her girl was just what she needed.

"Hey Anne, how's the pregnant lady doing today?"

"I'm all that and more, how about you? Everything alright?" Her voice sounded hushed and excited.

"Tired. Seth had a bad time last night; he couldn't sleep, so you know I didn't get much." A loud yawn slipped out before she could stop it. "Sorry about that."

"No problem. You are such a sweetheart and trooper. I wish we lived closer, I could help with Seth."

"Well, Abilene, Texas is a good l'il distance. No matter. I'll be coming for a couple of weeks after you have the baby. The change of scenery will be good for him. He misses you."

She stretched out on the bed, a smile slipped through as she thought of how close Seth and Anne had become before she moved away. He adored her.

"Aww...give my godson a kiss for me and try to get some rest. Okay?"

She snorted. "Sure, as soon as I find a new place to live. Yes, yes my understanding landlords just went up on the rent again." She went on without giving Anne an opportunity to comment. "And I should have more time to rest since they cut my hours at work. I hate whining women, but sometimes it seems like I miss all the breaks. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, wasn't too long ago I was right there with you."

"I know, I was there remember. Then you met Raul, took him on a merry chase. Stopped so he could catch you and now you gonna have a baby, a pretty, pretty baby." They laughed at the silliness, a respite from the weight pressing her down. God, she missed her friend. They'd been so close. Somehow, when Anne was around, things seemed a little better. Problems shared and all that.

"I sure as hell miss you guys. After I drop this load, we have to see what we can do about moving closer to each other. I gotta have my partner in crime nearby."

Lynay chuckled. "I know you right. Sounds like a plan."

"But that's not why I called. I really need to talk to you about something okay?"

"Oh shoot Anne. What have you done now?" Experience had taught her to be cautious when her adventurous friend started a sentence in that manner. No telling what window they'd be hanging out of later. Despite her protests, she loved Anne's boldness, and daring. Sometimes she lived vicariously through her escapades.

"Nothing." She paused. "Why'd you ask that?"

"Cause when you start out like that, it's usually some wild scheme you want to do or have already done....so which is it?"

Alone in the city, she'd met Anne at the main library and they hit it off. Over the years, they'd held hands during her labor with Seth, celebrated Anne's latest job and buried her aunt as well as Seth's father.

"Unh Uhh , now see that's just wrong on so many levels, I'm not going to dignify it with a response."

"Yeah, well. I know you and all your crazies. So, if I'm wrong, what *did* you want?"

"You remember my brother, right?"

"I met him briefly at some event you dragged me to. And another time, I remember you telling me he got married. Is he still in the service? Down at Ft. Bragg?"

"Well yeah. But he's not married anymore. Thank goodness. She screwed around on him and he got rid of her ass. You wouldn't believe the shit-"

"Uh, Anne...Anne. You know you go off on tangents, so stay focused please."

"Sorry Nay. You know how I am."

"Yeah, that's why I stopped you." Something big had to be going down for her friend to get so worked up before she confessed. With trepidation, Lynay settled the phone between her ear and shoulder, so she could open her bedroom door wider. This sounded like it may take a while.

"So what's up?"

Anne inhaled.

Not a good sign. Lynay exhaled in preparation for the drop. "Well my brother is getting deployed again, Afghanistan this time. He'd just bought a new house in a serious area and wanted to have his aunt come live with him."

"Okay, so far so good." Lynay chuckled. "I forgot you guys have different what? Moms'? Dads'?"

"Dads. Aunt Lilly's his dad's only sister. It was just the two of them."

"I think that's nice he wants to look out for her like that." Lynay thought of her Aunt, who passed three years ago. The woman had raised her and her cousin.

"Yeah, he's a really good guy. Straight up, no funny business, and real about his family; you hear me?"

"Got it," she said quickly.

"Well, I told him that I had this friend who lived in Durham that might be able to help out."

"Anne...I really appreciate you thinking of me, but with all I have on my plate I can't travel back and forth from here to there."

"You know what? You could stay at Tyson's house. There's plenty of room."

"I don't know about that," Lynay hedged. The moment she said it she knew it was the wrong thing to say. Her friend was like a roller coaster on two legs. She should have said hell no and

nipped it in the bud. Now she'd have to make up a lame excuse without insulting her friend or her brother.

"This would be perfect," Anne enthused, "you could get medical help for Seth, a nice place to stay-"

"Whoa...hold up, hold up. Back that up. What do you mean I could get medical help for Seth?"

"Oh, so you heard that huh?" Her voice was a tinge smug.

"Talk woman."

"Military, dummy. You'd qualify for free medical for both you and Seth."

"Annie," she started. "You do know that the only way for Seth to get medical help is if he's a dependent, right?" She said it slow, enunciating each word.

"Um hmm. I know."

"Well, damn. What are you up to?" Confused, yet somehow hopeful her girlfriend could pull something out of the proverbial hat, she waited to hear the details. Usually, the details made weird sense, even logical at times. She prayed this would be one of those times, because she'd do about anything to help her son get better.

"It just seems to me, that the two of you could come to an agreement, and help one another. That's all."

Okay, she'd done it. After all their escapades through the years, the trips to the hair braiding salon where Anne insisted her reddish blond locks get the works, the mad drive-by rides to catch a cheating ex, and standing in long lines at the electronics store before sunrise for a \$75 dollar gadget, Anne had finally rendered her mute.

"He needs someone to watch his house and stay there with Aunt Lilly. You need a safe place to live and good medical care for Seth." The witch sounded giddy proposing the plan.

Lynay's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth in shock. No. No, she couldn't possibly be suggesting marriage. Marriage to her divorced older white brother, who was in the military, and an Officer at that. No, somehow she must have misunderstood.

"C'mon Lynay, let's at least talk about it." The wheedling tone pierced her protective bubble and reality flushed in.

"Marriage to a stranger, for health benefits?" Her voice was deadpan. "Is that what you're saying?"

"You make it sound mercenary, like some gold-digger mess and it's not. Straight up, both of you need help. The military will provide Seth with the best medical care, help you with school and you get a nice place to live. In exchange, you'd take care of his house, including his precious weapons collection and help him with Aunt Lilly. That may not sound big to you, but it's major to him. She raised him, like your aunt raised you, and he wouldn't feel right leaving her alone in Henderson while he's in Afghanistan. Besides, it's not like it'd be a real marriage; he'll be leaving in seven days. Think about it at least."

"I'm thinking... that's a lot you're throwing out." For one moment, she allowed the idea of marriage to settle and shivered in rejection. The closest she'd come to walking down the aisle had been with a man who'd been married at the same time he proposed. Men and their lies. Promises of love and affection didn't mean anything to her. But a business contract might be a different matter.

A sound from across the hall drew her attention. She rose to check on her son. He lay with his hand pillowing the side of his face, a grimace and then a smile crossed his face. Didn't she ask the Man above for help the other night? Didn't she owe it to her son to at least think about her friend's outlandish proposal? Yeah, she did.

"Hey, you still there?"

"Yeah, I just checked on Seth." Her tone and demeanor changed, as she considered, and weighed the possibilities.

Anne's voice altered immediately. "Is he okay?"

"Probably a bad dream, which is what this idea of yours could turn into. Marriage? Couldn't I just help him out? Why do we have to tie knots?" The idea filled her with dread, even knowing Anne gave him high marks. The respect she had for her girl's opinion was the only reason she'd even consider the deal.

Her son's father wrote the journal on playing with her emotions. She'd never allow anyone to get close enough for that type of control again. God had sent her a strong friend and ally in Anne. She shivered in remembrance of those dark times when she desperately needed him.

"No medical bennies for live-ins, gotta be married to get Seth the help he needs. From where I'm standing, it seems like a win-win. Also, you'd get help to finish college through the military. You're almost finished right?"

"Yeah, I just need another 18 credits." College had been a dream of hers and a promise to her aunt. Anne was pulling out all the stops. That happened when your best friend knew your hot buttons.

"And you said you have to move right...Right?"

"What I said was they went up on my rent. But... how would this work? We've only met that one time and I couldn't pick him out of a lineup."

She bit her tongue on that lie. Only a blind, deaf and frostbitten woman would forget that badass fine creature. She had total recall of his wide chest, muscular arms, and long legs. His brownish-black hair was cut in close waves on top, she hadn't been close enough to see his eye color, but his angular face was imprinted on her frontal lobe or wherever must-have memories for posterity were stored. He'd laughed at something that night and she melted at the dark, deep cadence. Pick him out of a line-up? No, but she'd lick him up in a heartbeat. Crap. She was actually considering this wild deal.

"I could set that up, he lives at Sanders Creek in Spring Lake not far from the base. Plus the base is only a couple of hours from you at the most."

Lynay mentally weighed the pros and cons. "I don't know Anne...this would be temporary right?"

"Just until he gets back and can take over with Aunt Lilly."

"When...when do you need an answer?" This was crazy, so crazy it might work. Of course, he'd have to pass Seth's test. Then the aunt would need to approve of her. Remember, she admonished herself; this was a simple business deal. Supply and demand, she learned that in college.

"Tonight or in the morning at the latest."

"What? You done lost your--"

"Now hear me out. First off, he's leaving within a week. So that means the two of you need to meet again, come to terms and then get married. Then you have to get your ID's, medical records, get moved into the house, it's a gated community by the way."

Lynay rubbed her eyes and wondered why this woman was her best friend. She allowed her to push her in ways no one else had ever been able to do. To demand a life altering decision within 24 hours was absurd, unheard of, and sooo Anne. She sighed listening.

"Aunt Lilly lives in Henderson, so you guys will have to go get her. There's a lot to do and a little time to do it."

"All that sounds impossible. How in the world can it all be done in less than a week?" She rubbed her hand over her face, tired just from hearing the list of things needing completion.

Her laugh sounded suspiciously like a victory hooray. "That's the least of our problems. Welcome to the Army, they do more before the sun rises than you do all day!"

Another thought ran through her mind. "I've heard stories about guys in the military doing contract marriages to get extra money. That isn't what this is, is it?" As much as she wanted help, she'd promised her aunt she'd raise her son to be a man of integrity and wanted no part of scams.

Anne quickly assured her. "No, Tyson is an Officer and does pretty well. Please do not bring that up when you guys talk, it'll offend him. He's not like that. In fact the two of you are a lot alike in the honor department."

"That's good. I appreciate you looking out. Anything else?"

"He's a big guy, but he's good. He may come across as gruff and aloof but trust me he notices everything. Of course, I am biased, but I think he's good looking as well. And that never hurts." She laughed.

Lynay kept her mouth shut. She'd never told Anne she thought her brother was hot and had no intentions of doing so now. "Tell you what Anne, set up a meeting with your brother and we'll take it from there."

Chapter 3

"You did what?" Tyson bellowed into the phone.

"Calm your ass down. You asked for my help and I'm giving it. This is the perfect solution," Anne snapped.

"Perfect for whom?" he mocked. "I've been married and have no intention of doing it again, ever." Standing, he bolted over to the bar and poured a drink. Picking it up he paced while trying to make sense of his sister's wild idea. He'd asked for help with his aunt, not for her to meddle and try to rearrange his life.

"Okay. Well that's all I had. Lynay lives right there in Durham and could relocate in time for your departure. She'd help with Aunt Lilly and watch the house."

"Why can't I just pay her for those services?" He took a sip, appreciating the burn of the liquor to his gut.

"Because her son, my godson by the way, is sick and needs good medical care. She also needs a few more hours to finish her college degree. How do you propose to take care of all that? Besides, you'll be gone for a while and you can undo it when you get back."

"What's wrong with her son?" He ignored the last part of her explanation as he placed the drink down. Looking out the window to his yard, he sighed anew, so many plans. Now they'd be placed on hold, again.

"He has severe asthma. We hope he'll grow out of it. But until then he's having a tough time."

Growing up as he did with only his father and aunt, he could only imagine the challenges of single parenting. He rubbed and then squeezed his neck, twisted it quickly to the left until it made a popping sound.

"Where's his father?" He wasn't interested in any family drama and needed to make sure that wasn't on the horizon.

"He died in Iraq last year."

Her bland voice said a lot about how she felt about the deceased. She hadn't liked him. *Interesting.* She didn't want to talk about it either. *Too bad.*

"Why can't she get help from that?" He couldn't believe he was considering this crazy plan.

"He wasn't military. He was on a contract. She found out he was married when he died."

"How'd she take it?"

"If you're asking if she had a mental breakdown and is now unstable behind that foolishness, the answer is no. She grew stronger. Adversity will do that to you."

He recognized the dig from her life with their mom. For some reason, no one could fathom, his mom had kept Anne and his sister paid dearly behind that decision.

"I'm glad he's permanently out of her life. Whether she agrees with me is something you'll have to ask her."

"Did he abuse her?"

She gave a long drawn out sigh. "There's abuse and there's abuse. He never hit her, at least to my knowledge. He was big on emotional games. He abused her plenty in that department."

Neither spoke into the immediate silence following that announcement. His mind briefly replayed the horrid saga between his moms multiple affairs and his dad's hopeless attachment. He shook his head to dispel the dismal thoughts.

"Where's her people?"

"Her mom died before she turned ten. The woman who raised her was her last living blood relative; she died a few of years ago from Sickle Cell. She has a god-brother in Denver who she grew up with and I'm her sister by choice. Is that good enough?"

He ignored her jibe. This was his life, his name and his future. "Has she ever been married? Gone to jail, or prison or do drugs?" Desperation changed his perspective. In less than seven days, he'd be halfway around the world. He needed help quick, so he shifted into Commander mode where he made quick decisions and took risks.

"No, no, no and hell no."

"How old is she?"

"Same as me, 26."

"Hmmm..."

"Don't give me that attitude. You know I wouldn't suggest you allow someone in your home who wasn't cool. But the only incentive she has to move as fast as you need is the benefits for her son. If she can't get that then there's no deal."

He heard the finality in her voice. He pulled a chair from the table, and slumped into it. He tilted his head upward, allowing it to rest on closed knuckles. The entire idea left him cold.

"Damn, damn...marriage? Are you fucking kidding me? A contract marriage?"

Pulling his hand through his short waves, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I can't do a contract marriage, Anne. I just can't. It's wrong on so many levels." Defeat punched him in the gut. Despair settled on his shoulders. His sister had been his last hope. If this was the best she could do, then he was FUBAR.

"Then don't." She surprised him.

Sitting up, he stared at the phone. "What do you mean don't? I thought you were trying to help?"

"Just what I said, if you don't want a contract marriage, don't have a contract marriage. Although all legal marriages are contracts by the way, but I know what you mean," she said quickly, obviously not wanting to get off the subject. "You and Lynay can set up whatever parameters you want. Just as long as it has medical care for Seth and college completion for her, it'll work."

Her comments eased his tension somewhat, gave him a little working room. He knew some enlisted men who married for the extra money and set up deals in exchange for benefits. That whole idea soured his stomach. He understood the appeal of military benefits, especially in this economy, but he didn't want to barter them. He cursed his lack of time. After all the reports he'd heard regarding abuse to the elderly, he knew he had to tread carefully. Aunt Lilly might stay with family, but never with hired help. Pity it took him months to discover that fact. He clicked off after telling Anne he needed to think about it.

"Lynay...That's a different name, pretty... feminine." He tasted her name on his lips and wondered about the person his sister spoke of so highly. His sister was one of the few people he trusted completely, outside the military. And, she trusted very few people. Her vouching for this unknown woman carried a lot of weight with him.

Hell, he should've listened to her regarding Allison, his ex. Anne had read her correctly right off the back, and didn't hesitate to let him know. He'd been distracted with his career back then. Marrying Allison had been a mistake, compounded by his staying married two additional years. During that time, she proved to be a sleazy barracuda, sleeping around and wasting his money partying while he worked overseas.

Anne had never offered to introduce him to anyone before. It wouldn't hurt to talk to the woman; necessity demanded he leave no possibility unchecked. He picked up the paper that he'd written her information and called.

"Hello...this is Tyson Bradford. Is this Lynay?" He sat on the edge of his sofa. He loved and trusted his sister, but this was his life, his home and his aunt he would hand over to this person. They needed to talk unfiltered.

"Yes, this is Lynay. Who's this?"

Nice voice, he thought. Warm, soft, and easy on the ears. "Tyson, Tyson Bradford. I believe you spoke to my sister Anne earlier." He picked up his drink and took a sip as he waited for her response.

"Oh yes. How are you?"

His brow rose at the sincerity of her greeting. He looked at his cell, and then placed it back to his ear. "I'm fine. What about you?"

"Okay, a little tired, but overall I'm good, thanks."

"Glad to hear it. Listen, Anne tells me she thinks we should get married so your son could get better medical care, you can finish college, I can have someone to watch my home and stay with my aunt. Is that what she told you?" He intended to get them on the same page as soon as possible. Time had dwindled too far to play around the situation.

"Yeah." She laughed. A nice warm sound. "That about covers it. Sounds wild doesn't it?"

"Well, in reality it sounds like Anne. However, the truth of the matter is I am in an actual bind. I have orders to leave and I haven't had any success finding someone to help with my aunt." Or anyone she'll stay with. "My sister seems to think you wouldn't be interested in being a caretaker for my home and aunt without the dependent benefits. Is that right?"

He reclined in the sofa to see if he could negotiate a deal. So far, he liked what he heard. She hadn't been rattled with his direct approach, sending his opinion of her sky high. On the other hand, she and Anne were close. And very little rattled his sister.

"Yeah, the medical benefits are the pivotal point. Is there another way my son could get better medical treatments without the dependent benefits?" Her voice sounded hopeful.

He relaxed. Knowing she wanted other options as well made the deal more palatable. "Not that I'm aware of. Everywhere I checked his pre-existing conditions would lock him out for a while." He made decent money as an Officer, but he didn't intend to bankroll a sick child. Who

knew how expensive that would become? He'd checked every angle online, and through his contacts on base. The medical care from the military would definitely be the best deal for her son.

"Well, I'm settled here, it's not the best, but his doctor is familiar with his case and there aren't any delays. Medicaid only does so much," she said.

"I hear you. Anne said your son has severe asthma is that right?" He wanted to hear her talk. Her voice had a melodic quality that slid over him, calming while making him hunger for more. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Yeah, he has bad attacks. I'm praying that the doctors are right and he out grows it. But in the meanwhile it's probably harder on me than him, if that's possible." Her voice grew softer, and he strained to hear the tail end.

"How old is he?" He placed his foot on the coffee table. He didn't think he would, but he found himself enjoying this talk with her, a first for him. Usually, he said a few necessary words and ended most conversations posthaste.

He's four and kinda small, but growing stronger every day." Her pride was evident.

As far as he was concerned, the little boy sealed the deal. He knew his aunt would move from the farm to be around the child.

Selfish? Yes.

But the two of them would be entering into this without blinders. She'd get what she wanted and so would he. "Lynay, I have to be honest. I can't do a straight-up contract marriage. It's offensive to me on principle. If we do this thing, it has to be a real marriage until we dissolve it."

"What do you mean a real marriage?"

He liked that. No hysteria, straight forward, just wanting clarity. "First off, you'd have my name. That means you'd represent me. So there would be no dating other men or outside sexual activity. If that is a problem, we can end the conversation here. And I'll apologize for wasting your time." His tone was adamant. There was no give on this.

His father had suffered mentally and emotionally through his mom's many affairs. He'd been burned before with his first wife's cheating and would never willingly go through that again. He had seen enough and experienced the trauma of infidelity plenty. He had no interest in additional exposure.

"I take it that goes both ways?" she asked drily. "You'll be gone a long time. How'll I know you're not getting any while I'm here?"

"Because I'll give you my word," he said solemnly. For him that was the bottom line. A man was only as good as his word. If she didn't understand that, then she'd learn or leave.

Silence.

"So what you're saying is as long as we're married, I can't have sex with anyone?"

"No, that's not what I said."

"School me then."

"I said outside sexual relations."

"You expect us to have a sexual relationship?"

"It's a part of marriage. However, I'd be willing to wait until we're both more comfortable with one another or we terminate the marriage." He couldn't believe the direction the conversation had taken. When they began talking, he merely wanted someone to care for his aunt and home. The longer they talked; he recognized and appreciated the camaraderie they shared. He wanted this with her.

"Just how long do you expect this marriage to last?" She sounded confused.

"It depends." He hadn't thought that far, he needed time to think, iron out the wrinkles. He should be horrified at the notion of another marriage, and to a stranger at that. Either Anne had done a superb job on selling him the idea or his common sense had taken a vacation, because this solution now had a certain appeal. Or rather, she appealed to him.

"On what?" she questioned. "Enlighten me."

He smiled at her sarcastic comeback. Oh yeah, he thought as he sat up, he liked her. "Well I don't know. I just know I can't do a contract with an end date. I guess we'll both know and come to a mutual conclusion." He paused as he closed his eyes, start date, end date, conjugal visits; they had a lot to work out in a little bit of time. Things could get complicated. "All I can say is that we'll have to play that one by ear. Is that okay?"

"I don't know. Do you remember me? How do you know if you'll be attracted to me? I don't think we should agree to anything that stringent until we do a face to face."

Hell, had they met before? No, he didn't remember her. It never occurred to him to question Anne about that. This wasn't the time to admit his gaffe, so he focused on the rest of her

comments. She had a point. Although he recognized the code for I am not about to commit to someone I'm not sure I can stand looking at.

"Sounds fair, what's your schedule like tomorrow? Can we get together?" He looked around for a piece of paper and a pen.

"Sure. Morning or afternoon?"

"Mid morning. Around 10:30 - 11:00. Will that work?"

"Yeah, where do you want to meet?"

"If you come down here and we agree this is something we can both live with, we can start the paperwork." His mind had shifted to all the paperwork that needed completing. He'd send some emails tonight to get things started.

"And on the other hand if we decide it's not, I would have driven a couple of hours for nothing. So let's meet half way."

"okay, where? Raleigh. What about the Cheesecake Factory in Raleigh?" He liked the food and atmosphere in the place, which would make the trip even more pleasurable.

"Alright, but you do realize that's more than halfway for you right?"

"Sure, but I love their food." He enjoyed the easy banter between them. Bonus points for her.

"I'll see you then. Is this your cell that's on my caller ID?"

"Yeah."

"You just called mine as well. I'll call you when I'm at the mall and we can coordinate the meet and greet then, alright?"

"Sounds like a winner. See you tomorrow."

"G'night, see you then."

Lynay turned when she heard a sound. She clicked off and watched Seth mosey toward her with his blanket pulled close to his cheek. Her heart melted at the sight of him. Slight of frame, with a head full of dark curls, he'd be a heartbreaker one day.

Julio Chavez had been a lying, cheating ass; but he'd produced a perfect son. Picking him up, she held him close to her chest, loving the way he smelled as he wrapped his tiny arms around her neck.

"Are you hungry baby?" Returning him to the floor, she watched as he pulled his pants up.

"Yeah mommy." He smiled up at her as he went to wash his hands.

"Okay, come on, dinner's ready. Can we leave Mr. Blanky on your bed so he won't get dirty?" She knew he would refuse.

"No mommy. I keep him clean." He offered a small smile as he walked out dragging his blanket.

Nodding she walked after him turning off lights. Mac and cheese alongside chicken nuggets graced the plate she placed in front of him. He waited until she sat with her plate and they blessed their food together.

From the corner of her eye, she observed him eat, and wondered for the hundredth time if she could go through with Anne's wicked idea. A part of her said she should put Seth's needs first, get the better medical care, better accommodations. The other part screamed to run in the opposite direction lest she get hurt.

She was already physically attracted to him, and didn't fail to notice the staccato beat of her heart when he asked, no demanded monogamy. She didn't know anyone who wouldn't agree to that. And to have it reciprocated? Whew. He could be dangerous to her hard won peace. She'd place her heart in its' own chastity box and lock it down as insurance against getting hurt. Once was enough.

She'd talked herself into the meet and greet tomorrow. She could still hear the bass in Tyson's voice; a slight shiver ran through her. Do the right thing for Seth. *Yeah, some sacrifice, her libido sneered.* His directness was sexy as hell. She loved take-charge men. Love? No, no and hell no, this was not about romance, no illusions there. After all the lies and perversions she had gone through with Chavez, she preferred the straight up. Let's do this for this reason, mentality. No hidden agendas.

Neither love nor her heart was a factor in this equation. The real marriage bit had thrown her, but in reality, he'd be gone for most of the time, so that wasn't an immediate concern.

Nor was her having another man. After the last episode with her baby's daddy, her confidence in her bullshit meter died. She hadn't trusted a man since, nor had she dated. Since he wanted a monogamous relationship, she needed to make sure the attraction was at least halfway mutual. She knew he fired her burners, but would she fire his? A man like him had a lot to offer and she was sure quite a few women were interested. He needed to be sure he'd remain faithful to her.

Chapter 4

"I'm standing in the front foyer area facing the street. I have on a beige short sleeve shirt, jeans and sunglasses," Tyson told Lynay while she parked her car. He wondered why she didn't let the valet park it, but didn't ask.

"I'm going to step outside near the curb, so you'll see me." He opened the door, and looked around. "Where are you now?" He searched the parking lot.

"Right here, I see you."

He turned toward a nearby voice, and grinned. His eyes feasted on a creamy brown complexioned woman with a bright smile walking toward him.

No way! Thank you Anne! He'd convinced himself that how she looked didn't matter since he'd be gone most of the time. He lied. He damn near salivated looking her over.

The woman walking toward him was stunning. He shut his phone, returning her smile as he started a slow perusal of her from the top. She stood about five feet, five inches in flats. Sensible he liked that. Her breasts appeared to be large and high, something he could definitely appreciate. As she walked closer, he noticed her jeans hugged her hips, emphasizing a smaller waistline. Her hair was in what appeared to be long fuzzy spirals. On closer inspection, he realized they were tiny braids. A long braid grazed her face near her mouth drawing his attention. He stopped himself from reaching out to touch the silky tresses. Her lush lips moved. He stared without hearing a word.

She licked her bottom lip. Looking up he realized he'd been caught staring. Snapping out of his daze, he walked forward. She met him halfway. Since they both wore sunglasses, he imagined she gave him the same look over.

"Hi, I'm Lynay. Lynay Grant." She smiled as she put her hand forward.

Her smile captivated him. She had a deep dimple in one of her cheeks, and straight white teeth. The wind pulled her hair, he watched, as it broke free. "I'm Tyson. Glad you made it. Any problems?"

He took her arm and steered her toward the restaurant. The softness of her skin reminded him of the rose petals in Aunt Lilly's garden. Her vanilla spice light fragrance drifted toward him, catching him unaware with images of home and hearth.

He watched the gentle sway of her hips. Her rear cheeks were round and high. His tongue swept over his lips, moistening them as his eyes pillaged her stacked frame. The curves were where they needed to be, just the right amount to cushion a man, him. Afraid his body would announce the direction of his thoughts, he looked away. Briefly.

Her complexion was gorgeous. She was African American for sure, but there were different hues in her skin; reds and yellow, which gave it this creamy, almost peanut butter color. He was fascinated. In college, he'd dated black women, so race wasn't an issue. His requirements were the same with any women he dated seriously. Fidelity. Monogamy, he had to be the only one.

"No, it's right off I-40, pretty straight shot."

Lynay surprised herself. She'd answered a question. Her mind went mush as she saw him standing on the sidewalk. He still looked like sex on two legs. Head straight, she watched them in the mirrors on the restaurant walls. With his sunglasses, and forthright strut, he looked like a man with a secret. She knew every woman in the room, herself included, wanted to know what it was.

Determined to keep her thoughts personal, she moved forward. He stood at least six feet, and his short sleeve polo molded a wide chest, tight abs, thick arms. He was muscular, but not body builder overkill. His angular face screamed strength and integrity. Her hands itched to pay homage to his hair, a peculiar mix of browns and blacks, both light and dark. Lordy the man was fine, and he wanted a sexual one on one relationship with her? Her breath caught at the possibilities.

There was an aura of strength or maybe danger about him; she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Anyone with sense could tell this man could handle himself and they'd best back the hell up. People glanced in their direction as they neared their table.

A wiggle of doubt slid through her mind, like a storm cloud on a sunny day. Chavez looks and sex appeal were the lures that started her down the path to becoming his doormat. It didn't take long for his lies to hook her into a lifestyle she hated. While she thanked God daily for the gift of her son, she hated the journey that brought him into her life

"Thank you," Lynay said to the host as she slid into the booth. Heat pooled in her gut. This was it. She'd have to make a commitment that would change the fabric of her life within a few days. Pushing away the rising panic, she picked up her menu as he nodded his thanks as he sat in the opposite seat. They locked gazes.

"So, since you love the food here, what would you recommend?" She averted her eyes. What was wrong with her? He'd taken off his sunglasses. Her hands trembled as she tried to catch her breath. Pretending to look over her menu, she glanced back at him to be sure. Yep, he had silver or gray eyes. One minute they were polished silver, and now a turbulent grey. They reminded her of winter, yet the look he sent promised summer heat, challenging the woman in her to come out and play. And play hard. Shaking her head and the fanciful thoughts away, she tried to follow the conversation. Safe path, find a safe path.

"Everything is good. But I really like the Miso Salmon." His gaze never wavered.

"Really?" She looked at him. "Why? What's miso?" Who cares, stay focused! He's dangerous.

"I don't know, but it's on a bed of buttery rice and they put this sweet sauce on the salmon, probably the miso." He chuckled. "And garnish it with snap peas. It's really good."

"Is that what you're going to order? You haven't opened your menu." She pointed out. What happened to her sharp wit? It seemed her mental faculties flat lined, her words sounded bland, uninteresting to her ears. This is a business arrangement she reminded her revived libido. Yeah, but with sex, her core vibrated.

"Yeah. I always order that."

"Not open to trying new and different things, huh?" she teased and returned to her menu.

"Always, just not on sure bets." He grinned, and then winked.

Was he flirting? Did that mean he found her attractive enough to go through with everything? She smiled in relief. She hadn't realized how badly she wanted what he offered. The waiter returned with drinks, bread and took their orders. Once he left, she looked at him and smiled.

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Tell me what you think. Can you be faithful in marriage to me?" he asked, getting to the important aspect of this meeting.

She knew military bases were filled with horny men and women for that matter, looking to get laid. "I could've married you without the meet and greet. The purpose of this today is the conditions of the marriage. I have to be honest, no way I'd commit to a monogamous long-term relationship if there was no...What's the word I'm looking for?" She frowned, looking at him for help.

"Fire, chemistry, heat, take your pick. Any of those will do right?" He spoke low with a wicked smile.

She took a quick sip of her drink, spilling drops on the table. He was flirting! Celibacy had been shadowing her for years, and in the course of an hour, this man had her body on fire. Hungry. Needy.

"Pretty much." She was glad that he understood and didn't take offense. Sipping more of her water, she felt his eyes on her. Afraid he'd see her need; she looked at the table and jumped when he spoke.

"Well? Is there something here?" His grey eyes shifted over her face. She felt trapped, afraid he'd ferret out her secrets. The sparkle in his eyes told the tale. He knew he affected her. The scorch of their chemistry wafted between them.

Words failed her. coherent thought left as mists in the morning sun. "Umm... I,I,I...well, there could," she stuttered and stopped. Horrified that her childhood speech problems would overtake her, she took a deep breath and looked up at him.

"Do you find me attractive in any way? Is there any fire or chemistry?"

That directness, she had to give it to him. He was definitely to the point and she discovered she liked that. "Yeah I do," she whispered. She appreciated him helping to move the conversation along.

"Good, because I think you're sexy and beautiful. I can't wait to get to know you better."

She noticed his eyes were now in between, like a pewter gray that held her captive. "Alright then." She smiled, feeling more at ease.

They paused in conversation while the waiter placed their food on the table. He seemed surprised as she blessed her food and dug in.

"Tell me about you," she asked. She listened as he talked about his dad, mom and her fourth husband, his aunt and his relationship with Anne. She noticed he said very little about what he did in the military. When she asked, he said, "Special Forces" and appeared surprised when she didn't know anything about it.

He waved her questions away. "We'll get into it later." He signaled for the bill, handing the server his card at the same time.

"Are you ready?" He asked as she put her fork down.

"Ready for...?"

"Get married, get the dependent paperwork done, pickup my aunt, and get moved. That stuff."

"Hold up, slow down this train, you haven't met Seth, my son. We can't get married until I make sure you two get along." Ignoring his frown, she stood.

"I thought you said he was four."

"So what? You still need to meet him first. You're getting a package deal. We come together. We both have to approve." Her eyes locked on his as her hand settled on her hip.

"Well, why didn't you bring him with you?" His voice held frustration.

She made a mental note, her future husband liked to have his way. Pity, so did she. "I didn't know you. I never take chances when it comes to him. You need to know that up front. If we decide to go through with this, then and only then would I allow him into the equation. Now, that's a deal breaker for me. If you have any problems with that, let me know and as you said last night, I'll apologize for wasting your time."

"I understand. So let's go. Where's he at?" Standing and moving from the table, he threw a tip down as he waited for her.

She took her time. "He's at daycare. You can follow me. I'll pick him up and we can go to a park and talk." She knew he might not have been keen on the park idea, but tough. She needed to see Seth's reaction to him. Even as an infant, Seth refused his biological father and cried the few times Chavez held him. She trusted Anne, but she trusted Seth more.

Everything moved so fast! After they'd picked up Seth, went for ice cream and a run in the park, Tyson had insisted they stop at Wal-Mart to buy some boxes to pack her things. They packed her tiny kitchen and most of the boxes were loaded in his SUV. The furnished duplex took little time to pack and clean.

All she needed to do was take the keys over to the office and leave. Tyson had already written them and the daycare checks for the last month since there was no notice. Seth and Tyson were talking outside waiting for her. Her baby had demanded to have his car seat placed in the SUV rather than her car.

Looking around for the last time at the small place that had been her small haven for the last year and a half, she felt a sense of excitement tempered with uncertainty. She decided to take this leap of faith based almost on the word of her best friend. Tyson's solidness sealed the deal.

To be fair, everything she'd heard about Tyson had been good, well, with the exception of his wife. Anne said his ex-wife was mentally unbalanced. Actually, she said, "The bitch was crazy." Strange he hadn't mentioned her. Before he left, she'd ask about their present relationship. Smiling, she looked around one last time to make sure they had everything.

All her reservations flew out the window when they drove into Sanders Creek Club, the gated community where he lived. As she passed the tennis courts, paddleboat area, walking trails and she imagined Seth on the swings or riding his trike on the sidewalk. As they pulled into a driveway, Tyson waved her ahead into the vacant spot in the garage, while he parked on the pad outside. A two seater red corvette took up the other space.

"This is really nice." The two story brick home seemed to welcome them. It sat back on a large lot, with the golf course behind the huge back yard.

Seth jumped up and down, as he watched the children play. Moving closer to Seth, she took his hand in an attempt to calm him. The last thing she wanted was an attack.

"I'm glad you like it. Go inside so you can get settled. I'll unload everything."

Moving toward the doorway from the garage, she intended to walk ahead of Seth to remove any obstacles that could become a problem. Although Tyson appeared reasonable, she did not intend to lower her guard when it came to her son.

Tyson punched in a code before unlocking the door. Bending he picked up Seth, opened the door and waited for her to proceed him. Smiling her thanks, she noticed the laundry room to her right. The large eat in kitchen greeted them next. As the door closed, she whirled and noticed him watching her reaction. Someone had done an excellent job at decorating his home. The colors were warm, the furniture classy, begging to be utilized. She could get used to this.

"Like I said before, this is really nice." She walked into the family room. "Everything is so coordinated. Did you decorate this yourself?"

"No, the lady from the store did most of it. I just told her the things I liked and what I wanted them to do and she filled the order." He looked around briefly, then back at her and Seth.

"What do you think buddy? Can you live here?" He picked the boy up high in the air, he squealed with laughter.

"Un huh...yeah." He turned to look at her and asked. "Can we mommy? Can we live here?"

Laughing she walked over to the both of them, and pulled a curly lock of his hair. "I think we can baby. I think we can." She winked at Tyson while talking to Seth.

He nodded his head. "I'll bring in the boxes. Why don't you look around and pick out a room for Seth." He put him down and turned to go back outside.

"Uh...just Seth? Where will my room be?"

"In the master bedroom. Where else?" He closed the door.

"Where else? In one of the spare bedrooms," she muttered and took his hand before they set off to explore. They started on the main floor, which had two additional bedrooms with private baths. There was a formal dining room, family room and a half bath. The finished basement boasted a large recreational room complete with pool table, kitchenette, bedroom and bath.

The upstairs had an office, loft, another bedroom with bath and some other locked room. His weapons room, probably. She'd make sure it stayed locked. He told her a little about his hobby as a collector. The enormity of the responsibility shook her. The house was huge. She had never lived in anything so grand. As a child, she'd thought her aunt's home in Kendall was palatial living. In retrospect, anything outside of the ghetto like projects would have seemed like an upgrade. Looking into the excited face of her son, she knew she'd make this work.

She'd chosen a nice room for Seth overlooking the back yard. As she unpacked his toys and clothes, she decided to have a talk with her fiancé regarding her sleeping arrangements. Tyson brought in everything from the car and the truck.

"This is the last box; it's marked 'Seth' so I brought it in here." He put the box on the floor and dropped down next to Seth who played with his toys. "What ya doing buddy?"

"I play with my toys. See, this my blanky and this Mikey." He proudly showed off his favorite playthings.

Nodding his head in approval, "those look good. They look like fun." Tyson leaned down as he spun the Mickey Mouse toy around. Seth broke out in a peal of laughter.

It touched Lynay's heart watching her son interact so well with Tyson. The sound of his laughter lifted her spirits and solidified her decision to enter into this unorthodox union. Idly, her fingers tapped the inhalant in her pant pocket, glad she didn't have to use the device.

Tomorrow she'd make sure Seth understood Tyson would be leaving in a few days. His quick attachment to a strange man signaled his need for male guidance or companionship. This

relationship was temporary. How would her baby handle his disappearance? Would it be fair to him? Is that the lifestyle she wanted for Seth? For herself?

Tyson's eyes met hers with a questioning stare. She shook her head, dispelling the troubling thoughts, refusing to give voice to her concerns. She'd made her decision for the better health care and would deal with anything else later. He picked up Seth from the floor and walked toward the door.

"What's wrong? You look like you're a million miles from here."

"Just thinking. I never realized before." She took a deep breath before looking over at the two of them. Tyson's skin tone, tanned yet much lighter than hers. Seth, only a few shades darker than his, they could pass for father and son. Seth took after his Latino father with his lighter complexion, long lashes and cinnamon shaded eyes.

"Nothing, it's all good," she murmured under the weight of his burning stare. She breathed deeply.

Waiting a heartbeat, he lifted Seth higher on his waist and turned to leave. "I'll go get dinner started." He paused at the door. "Is there anything either of you are allergic to?"

"Garlic, we can't eat that unfortunately. Seth can't eat raisins or cantaloupe either."

"Alright then. We'll just throw out the garlic and get dinner on the table. You gonna help me pardner?" he asked Seth as they walked out the room.

"Yep. Mommy I gonna help," he yelled back at her.

Chapter 5

"Finally, he's asleep." Lynay walked into the kitchen where he sat writing.

"Good," he said. "You've done a great job with him." He chuckled, a dry crackling sound. "I was a little embarrassed when he wouldn't eat with me until after grace was said. I'll need to watch that." Moving over slightly he watched her move into the kitchen.

"It's a little something we do to stay grounded." Sitting down she glanced at the paper he was working on. "What's all that?"

"Those are all the things we need to accomplish tomorrow," he said looking over at her, nodding at the list.

"Hmmm...Let me see that." Taking it from him, he watched as she read the list. She glanced up and down first, and then read line by line.

"We're starting at 9:00 in the morning at H & Y? What's that, some military thing?"

"My attorney. We need to get the prenup out the way first." Pausing, he looked at her.

"I had them draw it up based on what we discussed last night. Is that okay?"

"It depends. We said a lot of things last night and I don't recall agreeing to everything." She pushed the list away. Brown eyes clashed with grey as she thought more about what this situation would mean.

"It has the basics." Picking up the paper, he looked it over and put it back down, then glanced over at her.

She watched and raised her eyebrow in question, waiting.

"For starters, whatever we both bring into the marriage belongs to that person in the event of a divorce."

She nodded in agreement.

"If there are any children, we will have joint custody in case of a divorce." She jumped, startled at this announcement.

"I know we agreed to wait before having sex, but you never know. It's better to be upfront about these things. Right?"

"Yeah... I agree with that. What else? I know there's more," she coughed, embarrassed by her reaction to the process of making babies. Sex. She needed to get a grip on her libido. The idea of sex right now had a certain appeal. She got up to rinse out her glass.

"Fidelity. Absolute fidelity," he preached. "The marriage will be annulled or divorce imminent for infidelity."

"So are you telling me that you are going to have me watched while you're overseas?" She returned to the table, taking a seat.

His face heated, blood pounded in his head at the thought of her cheating on him. "Lynay you need to understand this. The military here is a small community, especially the officers. I don't need to have you watched. If you cheat or screw around, word "will" reach me even though I'm overseas." He captured her gaze with the coolness in his eyes.

"I can take a lot. But that's one thing I won't tolerate. I know this is a unique situation, we don't know each other that well and all. But if you agree to marry me, you are my wife. Period. My name, my home, my protection. You cannot fuck around on me. We need to be crystal clear on that. Like I said last night, that's a deal breaker." They both stared at each other in silence following his ultimatum.

"How will you make it that long without having your needs met?" she asked rubbing her arms.

"I will. How will you?" He challenged.

"I have my toys. What about you?"

"I have my hands." He pulled them out front and waved back and forth.

"I haven't had sex since I was four months pregnant," she confessed quietly, turning her head, looking away.

Stunned, he mentally counted the time. Her son was four years old. His body jerked in need and satisfaction.

"I've been busy with Seth, school and work, so I didn't have time to think or do much about it." Appearing embarrassed, she looked everywhere but at him as she talked. "I can agree to no screwing around as long as it goes both ways."

Clearing his throat, he vowed never to doubt his sister's judgment again. "The last thing it deals with is the care of Aunt Lilly." He looked at his hands, folded and then unfolded them again.

"Yeah, I meant to ask you about that. What exactly is wrong with your aunt?" She watched the dance he completed with his hands.

"Well...she is eighty, has problems walking and she can't see very well." Stopping to pull his thoughts together, he wondered how to explain his aunt. "Aunt Lilly is sort of...um eccentric." Nodding, "Yeah that's a good word. She listens to the beat of her own drums or bangles," he hedged as she leaned back in her seat.

"Is she mentally unstable?"

"What? No, no not at all. Aunt Lilly has more sense than most people. It's just...well she does things differently." He noticed the frown starting on her face and quickly explained.

"Aunt Lilly is a Spiritualist," he said, pausing at her blank look. "She believes in a lot of things, but one in particular is that we or she can communicate with the dead. And she does."

After dropping that bombshell, he waited. A surprised expression showed clearly on her face. She remained silent. He gathered from the grace that she and her son said earlier, they were Christians. He didn't know how all this would play out, it just had to work, time continued to slip away. The General wanted a meeting this week with his team.

"Oh...oooookay." Her eyes held uncertainty. "Just what...exactly do you expect me to do with her again? You never really said."

He had to give it to her, she zeroed right to the significant part. He liked that. "She needs someone to make sure she gets to her doctor's appointments, has regular meals, can get around. That kind of stuff."

"So she needs a chauffeur, cook, and nurse?" Lynay frowned. "I don't know if Anne told you, but I took care of my aunt, the woman that raised me, before she died. The task consumed me. It defies what little you just said. I can't imagine being a full time caregiver of an elderly sick person again and taking care of Seth with all his medical problems. I couldn't do a good job on both, and my son comes first. This won't work," she said standing.

He stood as well.

"When Anne set up this arrangement, neither your aunt's age nor her bad health was mentioned. I was under the impression of a roommate kind of thing. You know, us helping each other, she'd handle her business. We share the place and the chores. I already have a dependent that takes up most of my day. I'm sorry I don't see how I can do this." Turning, she walked out the kitchen toward the room where her son slept.

What the hell just happened?

He needed her cooperation on this. Walking back and forth in the kitchen, he ran his hand through his hair. There had to be a viable solution, he'd run out of options, in a few days he'd be gone. Shit! It never occurred to him his sister's close friend would be someone he could actually like. Mid-stride he stopped and tried to think. What exactly did she say was the problem? Unsure he traced the path she'd just taken and found her in Seth's room, putting his things back in one of the boxes.

"Lynay," he whispered. "Lynay," he whispered louder gaining her attention, he motioned for her to follow him.

"Could you please tell me again what broke the deal?" he asked as they walked into the living room.

"It's not that I have a problem being around old people, I don't. Seth and I lived with my aunt while she was sick and in a lot of pain. So, it's not that I'm worried about him in the same house with an elderly person. As long as she's sane, we can handle that." She paused and swallowed so loud he heard her. "I just can't babysit an adult again. I've done this before and I wouldn't be able to do right by Seth. It almost broke me before. I didn't have enough hands, enough time, or enough energy to meet both of their needs. I was stretched thin in two directions. It's too much."

He felt her disappointment, which gave him hope that they could reach some type of compromise. "I don't understand what you mean by babysit."

"The driving here, taking her there, if she's sick - make sure she takes her meds on time, watching to make sure she stays out of trouble, personal grooming. Although you didn't specify it, that's what you meant." Shrugging, she walked around him. "That's babysitting to me and most adults would find what you want me to do offensive. Are you even sure she won't mind this?"

Following her to the sofa, he sat beside her holding both his hands between his knees. "How can we come to a compromise on this Lynay?" He turned to face her, ignoring her last question. "I need to make this work. I am out of options. What can I do?"

She took a deep breath, before she leaned back on the sofa allowing it to cradle her head.

He knew she wanted this for Seth. The boy had serious medical challenges. He noticed how short of breath the child became from playing with him in the kitchen. His little legs trembled in Tyson's arms after limited exertion. His admiration for her grew.

"Is she on medication?" she asked into the silence.

"I'm not sure, possibly."

"Can you have someone come to handle her medical problems a few times a week? I've gotta be honest with you. My son will always come first. I mean... I cook for him every day; there's no problem there. Since she lives on her own, I guess she takes care of her personal grooming. That's major. Understand I won't hunt her down and try to make her do something if she wants to do something else. I won't be her jailor or administrator."

Staring at the wall, he understood. It was unfair to expect her to do all of that. "So if I get a nurses aid to come in a few times a week to help her medically and a cleaning crew here, what? Two days a week...will that do it?" he asked still looking ahead. "I mean that way you won't have to deal with her meds or clean behind her."

"I don't know her Tyson. You're in a better position to determine her living habits. You tell me, will that be enough? "

He nodded coming to a decision. He'd already talked to a company about the medical assistants coming to the house. "That should be enough. I'll have someone come out to help her medically and I already have a cleaning person coming two days a week now. We'll continue and see how it goes. If you need more days, just order it. Will that work?"

"Yeah," she huffed. "Why didn't you just say that in the beginning?"

"I needed to hear your reasons for shutting down. Your answer made sense, so we can move forward." He moved to add the medical company to his list of things to complete tomorrow.

"Well hot damn."

Surprised, he turned around and noticed her eyes had turned a deep shade of brown as she glared at him.

"What? What happened now?" Confused, he rewound their conversation to find what ticked her off. He came up blank.

Throwing her hands up, she moved to get up when he reached out and grabbed her wrist.

"Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"Is this a game for you?" She pointed a finger at him. "My answer made sense so you're willing to continue with this...this..." She threw up her hands breaking his hold and stood facing him. "This is my child's life. I am not willing to neglect him in favor of anyone else."

Her emphasis made it clear that in her opinion, he'd made a mistake.

"I do not intend to be a jailor, nurse, or caretaker to your aunt. I will be her friend, if she'll allow it. That's all I'm going to offer. Now...I need to get our things packed so we can get back to Durham in the morning." She moved to walk away when he grabbed her by the arm.

"Wait...wait a minute." He softened his voice, not wanting her to go off again. Perhaps he'd handled this all wrong. She wasn't under his command. His aunt probably only needed a friend. "Look, Lynay...Lynay look at me." He waited until she made eye contact with him.

"You're right. In all honesty, I don't know what my aunt needs. I don't know what I would do if she were living here now. I just know I have to make sure she's okay before I leave." Moving his hand slowly down her arm to her wrists, he rubbed them.

Soft, her skin felt so soft.

"Will you marry me, keep my home and possessions safe, be a mom to Seth and a friend to my aunt? Can you do that? Would do that?" He watched as she closed her eyes, opened them slowly and looked around at everything but him. He held her hands in his, steadfast. He felt when she moved from foot to foot looking at the space between them, but not him.

Neither spoke.

After what seemed and felt like eternity, she looked at him. "It depends, what else is in the pre-nup?"

Without thinking, he pulled her close and wrapped his arm around her waist. Settling his chin on the top of her head, he chuckled. "After this last compromise anything in the pre-nup is a piece of cake. I tell you what, take all the time you need going over it. Nothing is going to happen until it's signed anyway. The Chaplain's on standby to perform the ceremony."

"Standby, huh? Pretty sure of yourself." She leaned backwards as he tightened his hold.

"No, pretty sure of Anne." They both laughed as he dropped a kiss on her forehead.

Lynay relaxed against his chest listening to the steady beat of his heart, a peace enveloped her as they took a moment to touch. Like a stalwart lighthouse, he represented safety; steady, strong and she hungered for it. Until that moment she hadn't realized how much she needed it.

"Hmmm...I'd better get some rest. Seems like tomorrow is going to be a long day." She pushed off his hard chest, somewhat disappointed when he released her.

"About the sleeping arrangements..." she asked looking at him, noticing he had that stubborn tilt to his chin again, like when they discussed cheating. Crap.

"What about it?" She wasn't fooled by his casual voice. He released her waist, but not her eyes.

"Um...seriously, where should I put my things...? I know you said earlier the master suite, but...but don't you think it's too soon?"

"Too soon for what?"

"Too soon for us to sleep together. You know what I'm trying to say. Stop being difficult," she snapped. She inched backwards to put some distance between them. He advanced, closing the gap.

"I'm not being difficult. I asked you to marry me. You agreed. The only person you or I can sleep with is each other. I think the difficulty would be if we didn't share a room." Stepping into her space, they regarded each other. "Answer me this. Aren't you curious?" He brought his hand up to her face, cupping it gently.

Swallowing, Lynay looked into his eyes. They never wavered as he continued to stroke her face. Deciding to take a chance, she said, "yeah, a little." Her breath caught when his arms squeezed her tight as they shared a lighthearted laugh releasing the rising tension.

He leaned down and whispered, "I find you very attractive and I can't wait until you're my wife in every way." They stood that way for a minute or two, locked in an embrace of shared goals and resolutions. Both content for the moment.

Chapter 6

Up or down. Lynay couldn't decide how to wear her hair. The sleeveless scoop neck blue knit dress fell above her knees hugging her curves. She tied the matching short crochet three quarter length jacket beneath her breast. The color looked good on her.

Tyson walked in the room as she dressed. She turned from side to side still trying to decide how to wear her hair. Glancing over to get his opinion, the words died in her throat. Crimson fire described the color of his face and neck as he clenched his jaw. Not sure of the problem, she glanced down and saw he was rising to the occasion.

Payback could be a bitch.

"Which way?" The imp inside insisted she preen in front of him. She looked back at the mirror, fully aware that he hadn't moved or said a word. "Up," she pulled and twisted her hair, turning to face him. "Or down?" she asked allowing her hair to cascade around her shoulders as she shook it. Pushing some of the strands out of the way, she stared at him; waiting.

"Both look good. Do whatever you want." He responded in a low tone, walking at a fast clip past her to the closet.

"Hmm..." she smiled at his discomfort. "I'll go get Seth up and dressed. How much time before we leave?"

"About forty minutes."

"Are we going to eat here or grab something out?" Waiting for a response, she turned and caught him staring at her ass. Slowly, he bought his eyes up to meet hers.

"Eat now... I mean we'll grab lunch later. But feed Seth before we go."

"Alrighty then," she sassed and put a little more sway into her step.

The morning sun beamed bright as they left the attorney's office downtown off Hay Street. Tyson's generosity left Lynay in a state of shock. Granted, in the case of divorce she would take only what she brought into the relationship, fair enough. In the meantime, she had access to almost everything he owned. According to the prenup, he'd pay all the domestic bills, help her finish college and take care of all Seth's expenses. Seth could take his last name; he left it up to

her. They signed the document in a short amount of time since there were no surprises on her part.

Now they were on the way to the Chaplain on base. Lynay pinched herself. In a few minutes, she would be married. Married to her best friend's brother. Anne had shouted this morning when she called to give her an update.

She closed her eyes and breathed deep. His cologne of musk and something else teased her senses. Tingles shot down her spine. She'd never planned on marrying after the debacle with her son's father, but Tyson would make any woman change her mind. It felt good, right somehow.

Settling into the car, she glanced at Tyson. His eyes dragged the hem of her dress even further than where it had risen. Inwardly she smiled as he licked his lips when she crossed her legs. She probably should pull it down, but decided to let him stew.

Last night after they'd come to an understanding. After all that getting up on her, he decided it might be best if they slept separately, insisting she have the master bedroom.

Alone.

The ceremony had been sweet and brief. Soft music played in the background. Several men from his unit had shown up, which surprised Tyson. As Commander, he had earned the unwavering respect of his men. The upcoming mission appeared to be their typical fare, a covert op in hostile territory. He recognized the signs. A couple of the men were on edge, though they'd never give voice to their fears. Team members received a little of his time in which he assured them everything was in order. Every man needed his head on straight, prepared to get back into the game. His Executive Officer or E.O., Blue, could survive in any situation; they'd each depended on one another in the past.

"Nice, nice Bradford, didn't know you had it in you." Blue smiled as they stepped to the side for a private conversation. "How'd you get a sistah like that to give you the time of day?"

"My charm Blue, my charm." He chuckled at the look his friend gave him. Blue never cared for Allison, his first wife. None of his men had. Considering she'd been snobbish and rude to most of his team, it came as no surprise when a few of his men threw him a divorce party. He hadn't given much thought about Lynay and Seth interacting with his team or their families, she appeared to be handling it well, enjoying their company.

"Damn. She got any sisters, friends, cousins?" Blue glanced over at Lynay.

Tyson shrugged, from what Anne said, she had no family. At least until now. "Ask her. Although how you gonna make time for someone else with all the women you handle now is beyond me".

Blue was definitely a ladies' man. He was as tall as Tyson, but not as wide. His dark chocolate complexion, low buzz and serious wit made him a hot commodity with women. Tyson called him "terminal" due to the number of women he ran through.

Both men turned as the tinkling sound of her laughter drew both closer to the half circle. Tyson hadn't realized he moved until he bumped into one of the men. She drew him with her smile, and beckoned him forward without lifting a finger.

The reality of the situation slammed into him, traveled low and curled deep in his gut when she looked at him. For a brief moment in time, they connected. Blue bumped into him severing the connection. He lifted his glass in salute to her. She nodded in recognition.

One of the men on the team regaled her with funny jokes. Both men stopped shy of being close enough to be overheard.

"This seems like it's going to be a tough re-con." Blue spoke low. "I'm going to bring some of the other things that you and I talked about earlier. This whole op seems off to me. It's rushed and the Intel is fuzzy." Blue's concerns resonated with Tyson. He nodded acknowledging the comment. They had been working together long enough, that he not only respected Blue's hunches, but demanded them.

"Bring whatever you think we'll need. I agree, the Intel is shaky; but it's all we have. We go in, do our thing, get out and do it again. Got it?"

"Sure do."

Seth walked over with his hands stretched upward. Bending, Tyson lifted him, signaled to Lynay and strode toward the door. "I'll see you guys later." He waved as they made their way to get the ID badges. Thanks to some high level assistance, he'd already completed the paperwork, so after submitting them, they headed to the bank.

By afternoon, exhaustion and hunger had set in. Rather than eat on base, they dined at one of Lynay's favorite restaurants nearby. Seth couldn't keep his eyes open. She patted him on his shoulder in an attempt to usher him into dreamland.

Watching, Tyson pulled him into his arms, patted and rubbed his back a few times. He fell fast asleep. A short man in uniform walked up to the table as he laid Seth next to him in the booth.

"Hi Ty, long time no see." Tyson's fist balled at the nasally voice.

"Yeah, what's up Chuck?" His response or lack of it made it obvious that he didn't care for this person. Lynay turned and looked at him. Cautiously she peered at the uninvited guest.

"Not much. What's up with you?" He nodded in her direction.

No one spoke.

Eventually Chuck dragged his eyes back to Tyson, who sat with his hands folded over one another. Wedding band on display. Tyson looked down. Chuck followed his gaze then looked over at the simple band on her hand and grimaced before his face changed into a superficial grin.

"You sly dog! You got married again." His braying laugh attracted attention, heads turned in their direction. "Congratulations Mrs. Bradford." He bowed in her direction.

"Thank you," she murmured. Tyson understood, the jackass didn't sound happy for them, more sarcastic than anything.

"Is that your son as well?" He stretched his neck trying to get a better look at Seth.

"Yes." Both men stared at one another.

"Well, once again congrats." He sidled off, cap in hand.

She waited until the man walked out the door. "What was that all about?"

"We'll talk about it later." He continued to watch the door. He'd bet his next paycheck that Chuck called his sister -Allison, his ex wife- as soon as the door hit him in the ass. His phone would ring before he finished lunch.

Lynay had taken Seth to get his cup from the truck when a car whipped into the lot, squealing brakes and then a loud screech. It came to a stop behind Tyson's SUV. Holding Seth tighter, she made soothing noises to get him to calm down.

She sent an evil eye to the car currently blocking them in. Pressing the key to unlock the doors, she wished Tyson were here to deal with the asshole blocking them. She'd handle it. Taking a deep breath to calm her pumped up anger, she placed Seth in the truck as the door opened from the offending car. She twisted backward to get a look at the rude person. A small woman slammed the door and stomped in her direction.

"Who the hell are you?" The red head snapped at Lynay.

Stunned, Lynay glanced at Seth, reassuring him again, before gazing at the wide-eyed terrier who'd pranced up to her, looking her up and down.

"I asked you a damn question...who the hell are you and why are you getting in my husband's truck?" Her voice escalated as more people walked by. The former Mrs. Bradford placed her hands on her hip, walked closer and glanced into the SUV.

"That is not Tyson's bastard, and I don't appreciate you trying to make it seem it is." Her finger pointed at Seth, as she stopped in front of Lynay. The unwarranted attack on him released her from the temporary paralysis. Closing the door, eyes narrowed, she lost it.

"Bitch...I don't give a good damn about what you asked me." She spit out in measured tones as she stalked forward, taking off one shoe, then the other, dropping each to the ground. A universal sign to those in the know, that a beat down was imminent.

A small crowd grew.

"But don't you ever, as long as your stupid ass lives, refer to my child as a bastard," she spat the words at a fast clip, removing her earrings, and backing the redhead away from Seth, from the SUV.

"I will kick your dim-witted ass if you ever say or do anything that places my child in danger.... Do. You. Understand. *Me?*" She screamed in the face of her opponent who'd backed all the way up and sported a mottled red face. Obviously, she hadn't expected this reaction.

"Bitch, I asked YOU a question?" Lynay swung as strong arms grabbed her from behind and pulled her against a hard chest.

"It's okay baby, it's okay. " Tyson spoke softly into her ear as he backed away in slow motion from her prey. Once again, Allison had overplayed her hand. She'd better be glad someone came and interrupted his conversation with a fellow Officer near the restrooms or she'd be picking her face up off the pavement.

He felt slight tremors rack Lynay's frame, her rage tangible. Not once did she yell or scream as Allison decided to do now that it appeared safe. She shrugged him off. Her eyes sent a clear promise of retribution as she glared at the woman before turning to check on Seth.

Allison stomped her feet and jumped into her car. Tyson didn't know if he should be turned on or concerned. His respect for Lynay ratcheted up a notch at the screech of tires signaling his ex-wife's departure.

"What the hell happened?" Still shocked at the display he'd just witnessed, he buckled Seth in the car seat while waiting for her reply.

"Tyson," she sighed, picking up her shoes and gathering her earrings from the hood. Turning she slid in the truck as he closed the door.

"I can't believe she walked up on me without knowing anything about me. Damn, I can't believe I almost had a fight on my wedding day." Glancing in his direction, "I take it that was your ex?"

He took her hand. "Yeah, Allison. Her brother stopped at our table earlier. What happened?" He squeezed her hand. No censure, just a sincere desire to know the truth. She gave him a quick recap.

"Allison is a first class bitch and a hateful enemy. You'll need to watch out for her."

She shrugged.

"Seriously, she has a reputation of getting even. Neither Aunt Lilly nor Anne cared for her."

"I know. I remember Anne calling you an asshole for marrying the crazy bitch." She laughed at his scowl.

"Hey those were her words not mine. Although now that I've met the charming woman I'm inclined to agree."

Chapter 7

Tyson's mind wandered as they made the two plus hour drive to Aunt Lilly's home. A quick glance at the sleeping form of Lynay and then Seth brought a sense of accomplishment. He smiled, immensely proud. He'd done it. In a few minutes, the last part of his plan would be in place and all would be well. Thank God for Seth. Aunt Lilly's strong sense of family will have her packing before the end of day.

Lynay surprised him. On the surface, she appeared cool and unruffled. But underneath he sensed real, serious passion. Talk about waters running deep. Leaning back against the headrest he chuckled.

No one watching earlier had any doubt that Allison would have gotten her ass kicked. His wife had been livid. "His wife." The words tasted right on his tongue. She hadn't been kidding when she said her son came first. Idly, he wondered if they'd ever get to a point where he'd matter. Seth was lucky to have a mother who cared enough to wade through taboo waters to protect him. He knew better than most, not all mothers cared.

In all likelihood, his ex wouldn't come at Lynay in that manner again, not alone anyway. She'd do something underhanded, maybe through Administration since her brother worked over there. Picking up his cell, he punched in a number and quickly relayed what had happened. He wasn't the least bit surprised that the public argument had already reached the General's ear. Together they devised a plan to limit her involvement with his personal data and to keep her frustrated.

Drained, the only word Lilly could use to describe how she felt as she navigated the stairs. Hearing the popping and creaking of her knees, she knew the time had come for another treatment. Her back bowed in fatigue as she pulled herself to the landing and trudged into her bedroom. Plopping onto the faded worn chaise, she covered her eyes with her arm. Sweat beaded on her brow from the short journey upstairs, she took a moment to catch her breath.

Her guide had informed her she needed to be ready. Change was coming. Hearing a car, she waited. Now that the car doors were opening, she pulled herself with the realization she had guests, and shuffled to the window.

"Oh Lord, its Tyson." Seeing her nephew step out his truck caused some apprehension. Normally he called before he came to visit. She hoped this wasn't another attempt to get her to move in with him. She appreciated him wanting to take care of her, but as a single man, he needed his space. More importantly, she needed hers.

Peering through the upper bedroom curtains, she saw he was not alone. As he opened the truck door, a nice looking black woman stepped out, stretching a little as they chatted. Together they walked around the truck, opened the door and pulled out.... Lillian craned her neck to see and remain unseen.

"Oh my," she gasped, and placed her hand over her mouth. Moving closer to the curtains to get a better look, she nodded in satisfaction. He had bought a child to the house.

"Trust me," he spoke in a low voice as he closed the truck door, after assisting Lynay. "She knows we're here. Right now, I'd guess she's somewhere watching, trying to figure out who you are." After he gave her a smile of encouragement, they removed Seth from the truck and walked to the front of the house.

Tyson glanced over at Lynay wondering what she thought of his childhood home. Not that she knew it was, but he couldn't help but speculate if she felt the same magic he did. This large colonial had always been a sanctuary of sorts for him with fantastic memories of time spent with his dad and grandfather. Either fishing or swimming in the large pond behind the old house, or hiking in the nearby mountains. He loved every square foot of the old rambling mansion. There were seven bedrooms and six bathrooms upstairs. It boasted of all sorts of formals on the first floor, and a large eat-in kitchen in the rear; better known as the throne room or Aunt Lilly's domain. She always felt you could judge a person by how they treated their kitchen. Not everyone made it into her kitchen.

Eying the peeling paint, the lifting boards on the porch, a sense of sadness filled his chest. He hated the house was in a state of decline and had offered to renovate it after his first Iraq tour. His aunt refused, telling him that he would need the money soon for a major event in his life.

A year later, he paid Allison a large lump sum in the divorce. He may not agree with her religion, but he certainly respected her hunches.

The door opened before they could knock. Lynay's indrawn breath at her first sighting of Lillian Gray exceeded his expectations. His aunt could be a little hard to explain.

"Hello." She waved them inside.

Short of stature with piercing grey eyes, he knew she didn't miss much. She'd been a beauty in her day. At least that's what she told everyone. Her appearance had changed through time, yet she stood, with a slight bend, before them. Her white frizzled hair framed a wrinkled, kind face. Articles of clothes and cloths in contrasting colors wrapped haphazardly around her torso and fell to the floor. Like soft armor.

"Hello, how are you?" Lynay murmured and moved forward.

Tyson wondered how she moved her arms with all the bangles from wrist to elbow in every color imaginable on her arm, as she shooed them inside. The living room took you back in time. Black and white portraits covered the walls, tables and mantles. Faded velvet fabric gripped the aging sofa and love seats. Lynay sat down tentatively, as if testing their strength.

"Hi Aunt Lilly, I missed you." He greeted her with a hug and a kiss. She grasped his face between her hands, and gazed deep into his eyes. His new wife watched as he allowed his aunt to have her way. Seth, restless with the delay, fidgeted near his mom's legs. In an attempt to calm him, she lifted him to her lap.

"Leave the boy he's fine. I'm just so happy to see Ty at peace." Turning her gaze toward Lynay while releasing his face, she smiled and ambled forward; her right hand caressed and stroked Seth's back, instantly calming him.

"I take it you and this fine young'un is the cause." She gazed at Seth who smiled and reached out for her. Without waiting for a response, she reached and he all but jumped into her arms, hugging her tight around her neck. He'd peek back at her face, squeal and then return his head to hide in the crook of her neck. Laughter erupted as Seth played with the older woman. The enormous grin on her weathered face confirmed she loved every minute of it.

Moving out of the way, Tyson leaned against the wall. He watched emotions chase across Lynay's face from surprise to awe. She'd probably never seen her son react so strong or quick to another person. When he first met the boy in the daycare, and later at the park, Seth held back initially. He'd had to coax him out of his shell to play and talk. Lynay appeared shocked as she observed him playing and laughing with Aunt Lilly.

The freedom to be yourself happened to be the beauty of this house, the magic of his aunt. That's why he would marry a stranger to make sure she was safe and secure.

Seth's persistent requests had Lynay joining the play, as the older woman moseyed along. Lynay moved a few things out of the way allowing them to run more freely. She launched after

him, catching and tickling him until he begged her to stop. Hooting in victory, her eyes met the pleased ones of his aunt who merely nodded and strolled after Seth into another room. Following behind them, Tyson realized that somewhere in those first few minutes, Seth had captured the heart of an old woman and Lynay had made a friend.

He couldn't believe his aunt's reaction to Lynay and Seth. They hadn't even been introduced. But he'd bet his last dollar that right now they were in his aunt's "throne room", her kitchen, eating a snack and talking like old friends.

Allison had never made it to the kitchen, very few did. Even Anne hadn't made it there this fast. He smiled in relief and strode down the hall. Until now, he hadn't allowed himself to think how important it'd been for them to get along, or accept one another. Heaviness floated from his shoulders.

Hopefully, this trip would make it easier to convince his aunt to stay at his place when he left. In less than 48 hours, he would be reporting on base. This matter needed settling as soon as possible.

Strolling into the large airy room, his memories unfolded, taking him back to the times he'd spent here as a small boy. He and his aunt had made some of their best meals here. He'd struggled over his homework and class projects at the very same table in the middle of the room. His aunt had been just as patient with a child's inquisitiveness then, as now.

"What's that?" Seth pointed to a bowl on the table before looking up at Aunt Lilly who sat next to him stirring something that smelled good.

"A little of this and a little of that," she said smiling as the boy looked harder.

"What is it Aunt Lilly?" He leaned over the bowl. Tyson watched her eyes soften and water at the child's words. Their eyes met over Seth's head.

She nodded.

Lynay turned from watching the byplay at the table and stirred something on the stove.

Aunt Lilly offered Seth a spoonful of the bowl's contents as Lynay joined them with her bowl. Soon the two of them were involved in a deep conversation and paid him little attention. Sliding closer to catch the thread of the discussion, he wasn't surprised to learn it centered on him.

"No...I didn't care for Allison a'tall," his aunt grunted as she wiped the crumbs from Seth's face. "She never loved my Ty, just used him. I can't abide folks like that."

"Hmmm..." Lynay continued eating.

"You're not in love with him are you?" Her frank question stopped both Tyson and Lynay.

No mam, I'm not."

"And he's not in love with you either, I take it?" She continued feeding Seth while watching Tyson.

"No mam, he's not."

"Then why'd you marry him?"

"For that little fella you're feeding." He looked at her. They hadn't discussed how to approach his aunt regarding this situation. But, the truth worked and his aunt would be offended by a lie.

"Seth has severe asthma which caused some other medical problems. Sometimes it gets so bad, I have to take him to the hospital, miss work and school." She sat down and blew on the spicy hot gumbo.

Tyson got a bowl as well.

"And..." his aunt prompted.

"Well, I went through a rough patch. My rent had just gone up and my work hours went down. Medication prices kept escalating and I didn't feel he," nodding at Seth, "received the best treatments available. I didn't know what to do. Anne, my best friend, suggested I house sit for him while he went away. She said he needed someone and frankly the only reason for me to do it, were the improved medical benefits. We couldn't get those unless we were married."

"So you married my nephew for medical benefits and he married you to watch his home? Is that what you expect me to believe?" She demanded looking between the two of them. Lynay eyed her bowl and remained silent.

Taking a deep breath, Tyson spoke for the first time. "I also wanted someone to help you out. You promised me Aunt Lilly that the next time I got deployed, you would move near the base so you could get help if you needed it." Looking at the mulish expression on his aunt's face, he prepared to battle.

Help came from an unlikely source. "Aunt-ee...aunt-ee..." Seth sang, lifting his hands toward her, wanting more from his bowl. Her weathered face lit up as she smiled, and put more food in. Everyone laughed at Seth's antics as he clapped his hands, jumped in place and squealed in delight. Glad for a break in the conversation, Tyson introduced Lynay and Seth.

"That's a pretty name; of course you're pretty as well." Taken aback at the apparent camaraderie between his aunt and Lynay, Tyson ate and listened.

"Thanks." They all watched Seth run around in circles near the table. Lynay patted her pocket. Tyson remembered seeing her place an inhalant there earlier.

"Dang..." Lynay stared at Seth as he picked up a stuffed toy and talked to it. I can't get over how he's acting." She faced Tyson and his aunt, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

She offered a fragile smile. "I have to say thanks to you both. I don't know what it is, but my son has never been this free around anyone other than Anne. It's like he's blossoming, changing right before my eyes. It's...it's so good to see him run and play without...well having symptoms or an attack." Taking another deep breath, "thanks again" she said while watching him run and play with stuffed toys and blocks.

"No problem, though to be honest I didn't do anything. He's a great kid, and like I told you before, you've done a great job with him." Tyson watched Seth play.

He noticed his aunt's silence as she watched Lynay and him with a smirk on her face. He didn't dare ask what she was thinking. "Aunt Lilly, I'm leaving in less than 48 hours. How much time will you need to get your stuff packed?" he asked instead.

"Not much dear. I take it you have room for me in your truck?" Everyone knew he came to get her.

"Yes I do. We bought our gear so we'll spend the night, and get on the road in the morning. Will that work for you?"

"Hmmm...yes that'll be fine." Humming a small tune, she stood and took her dishes to the sink, preparing to wash them. Tyson and Lynay insisted on cleaning the kitchen since she'd cooked. She finally agreed when Lynay asked her to help Seth get ready for bed.

Chapter 8

The full moon became a bright beacon lighting the overgrown path down to the pond, piercing the velvet darkness of night. Aunt Lilly sent Lynay to "fetch" Tyson. The General had called and needed to see him tomorrow. She was worried about him driving so late at night after all day. They'd be leaving her home within hours instead of tomorrow.

Disappointment at what might have been buffeted her. The day had been wonderful. For a brief moment, when their eyes met in the chapel, she'd forgotten this was a business arrangement. His smoldering eyes carried the message of his desire for her. She'd hoped they'd have some time alone tonight. Now that was squashed.

Lynay pushed aside branches as she examined the unfamiliar ground to ensure she didn't trip and fall. Peering ahead, she started to call out and froze. Not thirty feet from her, flexing, kicking and leaping in smooth movements, was her fine ass husband.

Struck dumb, her eyes feasted as he executed a combination of movements. Some sharp, others more fluid. He appeared totally focused. She doubted he knew she stood there drooling. Slowly, he pivoted in her direction, freezing her breath in place as he went through his motions.

She swallowed hard before emitting a small moan under his deep scrutiny. Moisture pooled between her legs as he executed a backward flip or twist, she had no idea of the proper name, but it made her shivery and hot. Placing one hand on her neck and chest, she attempted to calm her reaction. Business, girl remember this is just business. Yeah but with side benefits, her traitorous body screamed. Damn, he looked good.

So did Chavez.

Shut up! She snapped at her mind before taking inventory of his muscular arms and chest, slick with sweat. His six-pack abs and sculpted back competed for her attention as he twisted, causing a rippling affect not only in his body, but in hers as well.

Hell, she appreciated a good-looking physique as well as the next girl, but he took perfection to another level. Dangerous and sexy, her new favorite twins.

Licking her lips, she imagined the feel and taste of his puckered nipples. They beckoned as he moved sideways. Drawn to his compelling dance, she moved closer for a better look. Deep

need unfurled and called her to his glistening body. Without slowing, he'd captured her imagination and her eyes, as he worked his brawny legs through a series of kicks.

Lynay wrapped her arms around her waist as she fought to bring her body back under her control. What was the matter with her? She stopped short of offering herself to him sacrificially as he took his godlike body through its paces. Her fertile imagination saw him stretching, pulling and commanding her flesh into obedience. This heat coalescing within her was new. She had no experience with this type of hunger, need.

Through the darkness, Tyson's eyes dared her to look away while he seduced her without a word. Could he see the signs of her arousal? The staccato beat of her heart against her neck, sweat dripping from her forehead, her clenched thighs. Ensnared, she prayed he wouldn't notice the hitch in her breathing, or her pebbled nipples begging for his attention.

In the shadows of the night, she allowed her mind to be seduced. Backing up slightly to give room for her torrid thoughts, she imagined his strong arms lifting and impaling her on his cock, demanding her to ride him hard. Her vaginal walls clenched, leaving her panties drenched.

A quick glance between his thighs confirmed what she suspected earlier that morning; homeboy had the goods and wanted to play. She tried to appear indifferent and reign in her out of control libido. Shifting from foot to foot, she took a deep breath, as he appeared to cool down.

They stared at one another. Shaking her head, she tried to remember the reason she had imposed on his solitude. "Uh...uh..." she stuttered, a childhood trait exposing her nervousness kicked in while he wiped off with a nearby towel and pulled his sweats over his exercise shorts.

She inhaled and tried again. "Sorry to bother you, Aunt Lilly wanted me to come...uh...fetch you. I guess she needs something." The huskiness of her voice surprised her as she glanced everywhere but at him. Trapped, excited tingles wrapped around her. She twisted at the sound of him moving forward and stared transfixed at the movement of his long legs, surprised when they stopped. Glancing up, she realized he stood right in front of her. Without thinking she backed away only to be stopped when he placed his arm around her waist.

"Tell me Lynay... my wife. What do you need? Hmmm?" He leaned in and took her lips prisoner.

She slanted into his heat, and breathed deep. If strength had a fragrance, Tyson embodied it. He tasted salty sweet and felt even better. Reaching up, she placed her arms around his neck to

draw him in. She ached to get closer, closer to his heat, his fire. Fiery shivers raced down her spine as he took control of the kiss. He sucked and played with her tongue.

She couldn't breathe, didn't want air, right now all she needed was him. More...more she moaned into his mouth. Dragging apart, they fought for air, and then stormed together again. He nipped her bottom lip, demanded access, as she allowed entry and permission to plunder.

Gasping, she tilted her head back as he kissed and bit her ear encouraging small tremors to race down her back. He nipped and then laved her neck; he placed his hand on her ass and pulled her front flush over his hard erection.

A loud moan pierced the night at the sensation, he rubbed and rolled her all over his heavy heat, leaving no doubt in her mind what he craved. Tyson backed her against a nearby tree, and retook command of her mouth. His other hand plundered south, exploring, teasing and discovering her secrets. By the time he reached her crotch, she writhed and trembled in need.

"Look at me," he grunted, passion filling his voice as her head lolled to the side attempting to comply with his request.

He placed one and then another of his fingers in his mouth, sucking them clean. The movement so slow and erotic she leaned in to take them in her mouth. He denied her a taste but in slow motion moved them between her legs, slid her panties to the side and played first with her clit, then her sopping wet cunt. Her walls clenched again, hungry for him. Crying out at the pleasure, she moved in tandem with his deep strokes. His palm pressured her clit, her legs buckled as he worked his fingers in her tight sheath.

"Look at me," he demanded again.

Her eyes drifted shut at the exquisite bliss his hands created. "You will remember me Lynay," he huffed just as affected.

She moved in rhythm with his fingers, she was close... so close...swallowing deeply she bucked as he hit her spot and moaned aloud. She felt his smile as he stroked faster, deeper. Her walls clamped tight and spasmed, causing her to cum by his hand. Mindless with need she held onto his arms as the tremors shook deep within. Opening her mouth wide, she felt a sound coming, struggling for freedom, only to have his lips swallow her scream of pleasure as she fell apart.

"Damn," Tyson murmured afraid he'd blow a load in his pants. Her tight walls still spasmed around his fingers, he could not believe his luck. The proof of her pleasure spilled over his hand

and down her thigh. Without thinking, he dropped to his knees, pulled up her dress and lapped her tasty juices. Pulling her panties off and throwing them to the side, he had complete access to her bare lips.

Earlier when he heard a noise, he thought Aunt Lilly had come to fuss again. It took only a second to realize his error. The moonlight stroked Lynay's skin like a lost lover, giving her an ethereal glow that enchanted him. Her full lips beckoned as did the sway of her hips and the high swell of her breasts. The hitch of her breath functioned as a sirens call, leaving him no choice. He had to answer. Countless hours of training prevented him from taking her on the spot when she'd come closer as he went through his maneuvers. His control almost snapped at the predatory gleam in her eyes, claiming him.

He'd almost stopped and taken her when he heard her soft groan. It became a test of wills to complete his workout. His eyes commanded, no had begged her to stay, to wait until he completed his reps. In his secret place, he knew if she decided to leave, he'd cease and hold her to him. This attraction for her was ridiculous in its intensity. Watching her wrap her arms around her small waist initiated wicked thoughts of his hands holding that same part of her anatomy as he pounded in her snug canal over and over.

He felt it. His balls were heavy.

He had needed to channel his energy into his routine, if only to prove his control over his desire for her. After allowing her to sleep alone last night, his gentlemanly overtures were tapped out. Deciding to focus, he made the mistake of looking at the lust-filled stare of his wife and lost it. He'd been hard all day wanting her and refused to go another moment without tasting her.

Fuck it, were his last thoughts as he went into his cool down. She'd been right earlier; there was no love between them. Just hard-core lust, it knocked and he damn sure intended to let it in.

Pity she didn't realize she'd called out to him on a gut level, but she would reap the benefits all the same. He had tried to be patient, give her time to become acclimated and all, but he failed. Even as he marched toward her, not hearing the words she spoke, he knew one thing. It was time to claim his woman.

It had been years for her, he knew she needed this ...badly. She moved back and forth, fucking his mouth with the tenacity of a desperate woman. She tasted divine. Her moans sent him into overdrive, a flick of the tongue followed with a strong suck on her hot button and she exploded again.

Holding her steady as he rose, Tyson felt a sense of pride that he'd caused her to be this limp, pliable. He leaned in and kissed her, gently this time. Peppering her mouth with small kisses, he couldn't believe how good she tasted.

Starving, he wanted more. His body jerked at the sensation when she flicked his nipple. Heat from her mouth scorched his chest as she went downward, pulling and suckling his nipple. His cock jumped against her stomach.

"Stop before I come." He wondered when she'd taken control.

A wicked smile caressed his chest, she grazed the top of the nipple with her teeth and then laved the sting when he grunted and pulled her face closer. Changing to the other side, she teased and taunted, taking him to a fevered pitch. His nipples were sensitive and highly responsive so he allowed her time to play, get to know his body.

Heaven help him, she'd found the spot above his belly button, he shivered in response. Her hand reached down. He snatched and held it tight against his leg.

"No... Too close," he groaned. He held her head still with his other hand to stop her sucking. They remained frozen as he fought to regain control of his body.

"Damn."

"Yeah... I want you to remember me as well," she spoke into the quiet. He leaned back to search her eyes.

"Oh hell no...I'll never forget you." He leaned forward, and then broke away holding her around the waist. "Someone's coming."

They both watched the pathway as Aunt Lilly walked sure footedly toward them holding a sleepy, yet whining Seth. Passion simmered in the background; they stepped forward to meet them.

"What happened? Is he okay?" Lynay patted her pocket. He was sure it held the inhalant.

"I think it's just being in a strange place and all. He wanted his mommy." His aunt smile at him as he fought to bring his ardor under control.

"He doesn't have a fever or anything." Lynay touched his forehead before kissing it lightly. She rubbed his back to calm him and murmured in a low voice. "You've been such a trooper throughout this whole merger, meeting so many new people."

"Let me see him." Tyson watched as she walked over to him.

"I'm going back in, I'm finished packing. Anything else I may need, I can always come back later and pick up." Aunt Lilly smiled and returned to the house along the same path.

Tyson nodded. He reached out a hand, Lynay took it and together they walked down to the pond with Seth. He explained about the water, swimming and fishing to Seth as he related stories from his own childhood. She inched closer to his side.

"We'd go up there." He pointed toward the mountains. "And camp at night. Then in the morning, we'd go climbing. One day I'll take you. Okay?"

"Uh...huh..." a sleepy Seth answered as he returned his head to Tyson's shoulder and rubbed his eyes. Reaching out, Tyson pulled Lynay close to his other side and they stood that way for a moment or two.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly looking down and squeezing her waist.

"Sort of," she chuckled. "Not completely fulfilled if you know what I mean."

"Yeah I do," he grimaced. "Unfortunately we need to get on the road soon since Aunt Lilly is ready. Maybe we can finish later at the house if little man here is okay."

Sighing deeply while looking over the water, he took solace in the peacefulness of the moment, and for the first time wished, he didn't have to leave for an assignment.

"I'm sorry we won't be spending the night; it's been a long day. Are you sure you're up for another two hour drive?" she asked as they trekked toward the house.

"I have no choice, the mission's been moved up. I'll be fine." Taking her hand, he helped her navigate over some cracked steps.

"I wasted the first few weeks dealing with companies and newspaper ads," Tyson said. "I wished I'd have called Anne as soon as I got my orders. I know you're getting the medical benefits for Seth and I'm glad to help with that. He's a great kid, I mean that." He repositioned Seth on his shoulders. They faced one another.

"But I know with the speed of this whole arrangement, you haven't had time to process everything. My aunt appears to be comfortable with you and Seth, so I know she'll be okay at the house." Looking away for a moment, he clenched his jaw, and returned to her wide gaze.

"If you decide that..." He stopped, took a deep breath. "What I'm trying to say is—"

"What you're trying to say is that if I change my mind and want out of this marriage, then I can do it. Is that right?" She finished for him.

"Yeah," he muttered, hating hearing it out loud.

"What if I don't change my mind, have you changed yours?" She challenged.

He started at her reaction. "No! Not like that. I don't know how long I'll be gone. There's really nothing to hold you to our agreement. I know couples that married for love and didn't make it." Hell, he'd done it himself, although now the love angle seemed a bit far-fetched.

However, the stress of the separation and other factors often were too much and caused breakdowns. Now that he knew his aunt would be with her and Seth at his home, he could afford to be magnanimous, even if it disagreed with him.

"I just wanted to give you the option...you know. If you want to cancel this; we could as soon as I return." Walking forward, he turned to look back, and realized she was still standing on the path. The moonlight highlighted her cheeks; her skin appeared smoother, richer. His pants tightened as his cock engorged. He cursed the lack of privacy along with the need to leave.

"What about my word?" The softly spoken question boomed in the quiet of the night.

"Huh...what?"

"My word. I took a vow to be a wife. I've never done that before. Granted, it wasn't out of love but respect, which I hope is mutual. You're no the only one with a honor or integrity Tyson. I could have said no. I want the best for my son, most parents do; but not at the expense of losing my integrity, my soul. True, I trusted Anne's judgment when she proposed this. I'm sure you did the same."

He nodded, and waited for her to continue.

"But you're the one that sealed the deal. If I didn't feel I could trust my son and me with you, we wouldn't be here. I guess what I'm saying is if I change my mind about this "arrangement,"." She used her fingers as quotes. "It won't be because of the speed in which it happened. Are we straight on that?" She walked up to meet him on the path.

"Yeah...we're good." He breathed out, releasing the tension as the three of them followed the path. Tyson moved quickly to pick up the torn panties from the ground and stuffed it in his pocket.

He smiled.

Chapter 9

Allison yawned, moving slow and stretching languidly as she blinked to get her bearings. The beige non-descript walls, large comfortable bed and a gorgeous hunk strewn over the mattress screamed roadside motel. She groaned looking at the name on the desk stationary. Not even a three star dump. She couldn't believe she'd come to this.

Even though her body quivered from the delectable memories of the previous night, her mind promptly informed her greedy flesh nothing would ever come of this little liaison. In her opinion, non commissioned officers were good for one thing, hot sex. Sometimes boiling, climb the walls and slap me crazy sex. Call her biased and prejudiced, but she never fooled herself in that regard.

Running her finger over the flaccid cock next to her, she smiled in remembrance of it's volcanic performances last night. His talented tongue and crazy moves made her swoon. Surely, there were scorch marks on the walls and floors. He had been insatiable, mounting her from every angle and taking her in every hole with equal furor. Damn, he certainly knew how to make a woman fly apart. She had been well and truly screwed. Oh well, the heat of last night fizzled with the cool rising of the morning sun. Time to get moving.

"Humph," she muttered as she moved his arm from across her stomach and threw her legs around wincing when they encountered his heavy boots. Unable to move as fast as she'd like, she created a simple counting rhythm in her mind to neutralize the pounding in her head and the pain between her legs and rear. She'd been utilizing counting as a mechanism to complete some of her most mundane tasks since her early teens. It steadied her. One foot in front of the other, she encouraged herself. Slowly and gradually, she made her way toward a door she hoped was the bathroom. She glanced to the right of her path, noticed something pink, and picked up her panties along with the matching bra.

"I'm sure I'll need these."

She made use of the meager facilities, catching a glimpse of her face as she passed the mirror. The reflected image startled her. Her forest green eyes seemed less bright, mad at the

morning sun. She patted her curly reddish blonde hair, her best feature or so she'd been told. time for a trim.

After turning from side to side, she decided her body was in good shape. She lifted her breasts for inspection in the mirror; and jiggled them in her palm. They were still high and full. Overall, she felt she could still hold her own and nodded her head in approval.

Upon closer inspection, she gasped. "Where had that line come from?" She moved closer to see. Only this time lines fanned from her eyes disappearing in dark circles. Her curls lay limp, lifeless around her face. Breasts that appeared perky moments before drooped. There was a definite pooch in place of her flat belly. In her bewildered mind, she appeared a mere shell of the attractive woman she'd thought herself minutes before. Hands on the vanity, she tried to make sense of what she saw. She shook her head to dispel the murkiness inside trying in vain to grasp tidbits of data that seemed slightly out of reach.

Last night she'd gone out with some of her co-workers to the NCO club. She'd been feeling low. Her traitorous brother refused to help her get information on the bitch living with Tyson.

"That's right," she moaned as she cautiously sat on the commode, holding her head in her hands. She remembered that she'd seen Tyson's aunt. What was her name? She shook her head searching for a clue and cringed at the pain from that slight movement.

"It was a flower or something," she muttered. "Rose, no not rose." After deciding it'd come to her later, she tossed it to the side. His aunt and the imposter, she growled low in disgust thinking about the fraudulent Mrs. Bradford, were at the mall when she spied them in the children's store shopping. She'd never cared for the old biddy and the feeling had been mutual. The old woman was too peculiar for her. Seeing the two of them together with the little boy reminded her of her husband's defection.

Her mind refused to accept he had married someone else. Sure, he had his own place, while she lived in an apartment, but that had no bearing on their relationship. In a little while, they would be back together. There were a few things she needed to get out of her system before they could reunite, have that family they wanted.

Surely, he understood that. He's trying to make me jealous," she muttered.

It worked she admitted to herself. He had allowed that black bitch to threaten her. She still could not fathom why he'd take someone else's side over hers. No other man affected her the way

Tyson did. She'd grown weary of making comparisons. Last night's sex-capades had satisfied her immediate physical needs, but left her empty. A strong untouched yearning raged inside.

Sighing, she rubbed her hands over her face, before peeking between two fingers to check the mirror. Her head tilted toward the door, she heard slight movement in the other room. Although sluggish, she got dressed. Considering everything that had happened, she decided right then to stop these games and become the wife Tyson needed. She knew precisely what to do to organize her affairs.

"First things first," she murmured. Finger combing her hair, she heard the footfalls come closer. After closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and waited. The door creaked open, and she smiled. He was fine, smaller than Tyson in every way, creative with what he had.

"Good morning Suga."

Appreciating the way he sauntered through the door, she offered her lips for a kiss. She never remembered their names. That took too much effort, especially since it did not matter. These men had one purpose, to make her forget and for that moment in time, to feel wanted.

Pity she couldn't spend another night with him, he'd been insatiable. But she never broke her one night rule with NCO's, the risks were too high. She couldn't afford for word to get out or emotions to get involved.

Theirs of course, not hers.

If anyone could change her mind, he'd be the one to do it. Gazing in the mirror as he used the facilities, she decided to get one more big O for the road.

Lt. Pat Krengle and Allison had been friends since high school. They kept that information on the down low because of Pat's job in Tyson's C.O.'s office. Allison had called, and they were meeting for lunch at her apartment. It had been a long time since they'd seen each other, and Allison looked forward to a pleasant conversation with her friend. They were stellar opposites.

Pat was tall and thin, a carryover from a childhood marked with health challenges. However, her positive personality, practical look at life and generous smile kept her in demand in the dating market.

"I'm dating Bunche, Captain Nate Bunche, you remember him?" The blush on Pat's cheeks said he meant something to her.

"Kinda tall, nice smile, real polite, is that him? He's from where? Pennsylvania or something like that, right?" Allison made sure she kept the astonished expression from her face and made the appropriate "happy for you" responses. She knew Pat's Captain intimately.

"Yes, yes that him. We've been talking off and on but I didn't want to tell anybody. He has a reputation of getting around." She blushed harder and picked up her glass of sweet tea.

Allison's mind veered in remembrance of her sexual exploits with that particular man, not too long ago. His stamina and imagination were two things that impressed her. He'd told her he wasn't ready for a commitment. When was that? She tried to remember. Maybe about nine months ago she concluded, while nodding at Pat in an attempt to listen to her brag about this man. He'd stopped returning her calls and avoided her in general.

"So when are you guys going to tie the knot?" she asked. She wanted to be happy, but she simply could not accept that he chose Pat over her.

"I don't know, although we've been seeing each other for about a year, sometimes I'm not sure I'm ready," Pat said as she pushed her plate away.

Allison's mouth opened in surprise. She snapped her jaw tight. "You've been dating this man for a year, and I'm just finding out about it!" She moved to the chair facing Pat, plopped down, upset.

That Bastard, she fumed. How dare he screw around on her! This was all too much. It reminded her of her bigger loss with Tyson.

"Yeah. I kept it quiet because he's such a dog. More embarrassed at first, then about, let me see, hmmm... six no, wow, nine months ago he decided he wanted a monogamous relationship. He demanded that we only see each other and all that shit." She looked at her glass with a goofy smile. Allison sat there thinking, remembering how the first strains of love felt.

"Look at me, talking on and on about what's been happening with me. Tell me what's up with you?"

Her face heated. "Not much. I've been thinking a lot lately that I fucked up when I messed around on Ty." Lifting her hands, and then dropping them to her lap. "I don't know why I freaked when he left for Iraq, and cheated on him. I did love him. I still love him." Her eyes watered.

Choking on her tears, she realized she spoke the truth. Giving full reign to her emotions, she allowed the water to cleanse and free her so she could focus on the important stuff. And right

now, reconnecting with her husband took center stage. Pat wrapped her arms around her while she cried, patting her back as she heaved and shook through her pent up emotions.

"Sweetie... Look at me." She called out again, "Allison."

When they pulled apart, Pat frowned. "I know that look. Stop being stubborn and face this. You need to listen to me, Allison." Holding both of her shoulders, her friend squeezed them slightly.

"He's remarried, he's moved on with his life. You need to do that as well."

The two women stared at each other. Allison smiled, reclined on the sofa, and tucked her feet under her legs. "Yeah he told me," she lied. "He's just jealous. Honestly, he got mad cause I had a little fun on the side and broke up with me. Well, he's had his fun." Picking at the lint on the sofa, she smiled. She knew how to get him back. He liked it a little rough, and there were places on him that sent his orgasm through the roof. All she needed was a little alone time with her man and she'd make it right.

Pat frowned at her.

"We'll work through this and get started on that family we wanted at first," she finished.

Pat coughed. Her face reddened, eyes wide as she shook her head, and grabbed her hand. "You know, this reminds me of some of the stuff you did back in school. We were kids then, but not anymore. You always had problems accepting things that don't match your plans." She paused, licked her lips and continued.

"Remember that deal with Jeff Brown and—?"

You know how much he loved me Pat. You were at the wedding. You saw how he couldn't keep his hands off me." Reaching toward her drink on the table, she took a sip and licked her lips. She reached over and patted the back of her friend's hand since her mottled face looked in need of comforting.

"He loves me Pat. This is just a game he's playing. We'll be back together soon, you'll see." She laid her head back and hummed the tune from a song used in her wedding.

"You know...Major Bradford's really not the type to play games like this. I don't think he would ever marry one woman to get another. Especially if he wanted you back, all he had to do was call since you've been after him since the divorce." Pat tapped the coffee table with her fingertips.

"Wait a minute; did you call your divorce a break up?"

Allison smiled in response.

"Shit, I've fallen down the proverbial rabbit hole." She shook her head in disbelief. "Tell me what happens if he doesn't change his mind, if he never comes back? What will you do then?"

The question took on hands and squeezed her heart to the point it stopped beating. Her breathing shuddered as dark colors of magenta, black, and brown swirled before her eyes. She trembled as the colors wrapped tight around her body, securely around her mind, tightening as a noose. Her mission seemed clear to her. Tyson belonged to her alone.

It took her a moment to form an answer. "I...don't know Pat. He's the only man that loved me. You know what I mean?" Waiting for her friend to acknowledge she did.

"Ty made me feel as if I mattered. I felt special for the first time in my life. He saw me as a real person, not an ornament; he didn't want anything extra from me. Not connections, money...he just wanted me." She whispered, her heart breaking. "I fucked up. I admit it." Pushing her hair behind her ear, she tilted her head forward to gaze at the swirling colors. "I'm still not sure what made me stray. Heck, maybe since Ty thought so highly of me, I figured others would as well. It'd been a first." Shaking her hair loose again, she folded her hands over one another.

"But you know what, none of it mattered. Only him. Tyson completes me. I miss being his wife, I miss him." Taking a deep breath she paused, and looked at her friend, resolved. "He's mine, and I'll do anything to get him back. No bitch is gonna take what's mine."

Chapter 10

Lynay and Seth were in the back yard when she felt her phone vibrate. Looking at the caller ID, her breath hitched in excitement. It was Tyson. They had talked earlier this month and she'd been hoping to hear from him. Pressing the answer button, eager to hear his voice she added sass to her greeting. "Hey baby."

"Shit...sorry. Didn't mean to call you." The female voice didn't sound the least bit sorry on the other end of the phone.

Surprised, she pulled the phone from her ear, looked at the number again. "Who's this?"

"Allison, but we...I mean I pushed the number by mistake. I'll have Ty call you back when umm... when he's not busy."

What the fuck?

"Where are you Allison?" Lynay tried to grasp the facts. Allison was calling from Tyson's phone, which he kept with him. Or did he? Confused, she wanted answers.

"In D.C. But you know that right?"

"Why would I know that?" She moved closer to the fence to watch Seth, and not overheard by her neighbors.

"I'm sure you knew Ty had to come stateside for a couple of days. He needed to report on something. What I don't understand is why you chose not to be here with him. Not that it's important because I'm here. His real wife."

As she listened, hundreds of thoughts flew through her mind. Is this true? Had Tyson gone back to Allison? How did Allison know he was in the country when she didn't? What about their agreement? She was dumbfounded as all the questions chased through her mind.

"Hello...Are you still there?"

Her question met with silence. Tendrils of doubt searched for fertile ground to undermine the harmony the two of them had created in the previous months.

"Silly bitch," Allison muttered as she disconnected the call.

Dazed, Lynay assisted Seth as he picked up his toys to go inside. It'd been a long day starting with playing in the community pool and then the large playground. He was worn-out and ready for dinner, bath and bed. Her mind on autopilot, she navigated their nighttime routine without mishap.

"What happened?" Aunt Lilly asked.

She whipped around, noticing the older woman in the darkened corner of the family room for the first time. She realized she wouldn't be able to escape to the quiet of her room without answering questions. In fact, the two of them had become close enough that she would've eventually sought the older woman's counsel.

"I got the weirdest call earlier." She paused. "You want something to drink?"

"No, thanks, but help yourself. Is this a conversation that we need to have in the kitchen with food or will the family room work?"

In the preceding months, they'd discovered that kitchen conversations caused them to be more imaginative in their solutions. The family room discussions were more rhetorical, and didn't result in concrete answers to problems but offered a lot of variables and pathways.

"Truth told, I'm not sure Aunty. I'll get me a drink and come back here," she said as she moved toward the kitchen. She wanted to slap herself for the slip. Aunt Lilly had been trying to get her to call her "Lilly" for the last few months, but she'd refused. Instead, she continued with "Aunt Lilly." Her use of Aunty probably alerted the older woman something major was wrong.

Impatient, she followed and asked, "What happened, Lynay?"

"Well, earlier when I had Seth outside," she said after sitting across from the older woman. "I got a call from Tyson. At least the caller ID said it was from his cell phone. When I answered, Allison greeted me on the line."

"What the hell you say?" The older woman's hands fisted on her hip as she twisted in the chair, her face a red mask.

"Shhh, I don't want to wake Seth." She motioned with her hands to bring the volume down. "But that's what I thought, except my words weren't nearly as clean."

"What the hell was she doing with his phone?" Her tone had lowered just a smidgeon. Anger rode her hard. "Is it an old number, an old phone from before the divorce?" They both agreed on the strangeness of Allison with Ty's phone and tried to discover it's meaning.

"No" she said. "It's the same number he called from the past two months." She was certain of the authenticity of the number. She glanced at the baffled frown on Aunt Lilly's face.

"Well damn... what'd the heifer say? I know she had somethin' to say." Her gnarled hands were clasped tightly together, the brown spots glared through the pinched white skin.

"She wanted to know why I wasn't with Tyson in DC, and that she'd have him call me later - when he wasn't busy." The words tasted as foul as they sounded. The urge to gargle with mouthwash pressed against her.

"What?" the older woman shrieked. "She asked you what? That fool, she's crazy, you know that right. That heifer is crazy." She stood and paced the family room floor muttering as Lynay sat quietly.

"Where's your phone? I'm going to find out... what in the world, she's out of her l'il mind. How dare she ask you that?"

Lynay reached in her pocket and gave his aunt her phone.

Silent, she watched as Aunt Lilly called her husband of three months. She'd wondered why he hadn't called her by now. The witch probably didn't tell her they talked. Questions still plagued her. Why did Allison have Tyson's phone and why didn't he tell her he was stateside? She knew theirs wasn't a traditional marriage, but she respected him. She also liked him, and it hurt that he'd turn to Allison rather than her, even for a day. Rubbing her forehead, she received her phone. She placed it on the coffee table and looked at a pissed Aunt Lilly.

"What you thinking girl? I hope you don't think Tyson's reconnecting with that viper." She stalked to the sofa and sat.

"What should I think? She called from his phone. She knows where he is and at some point, they had to come in contact for her to get the phone. So you tell me, what should I think?"

She heard the woman stir, and looked over as she rubbed her ever present bangles. The older woman was silent for a moment. She'd learned to wait rather than rush these conversations.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "But, I will say this, something is off. Tyson would never cheat on you and I know he's not interested in Allison. Lord knows he could've had her at any time. I know it doesn't look good right now," she said. with a faint smile. "But we'll get to the bottom of this, Okay?"

"What if he did change his mind? We can't be sure. They were married, and he must have cared for her - "

"Do you still love Seth's father?"

"Hell no." Lynay recoiled. The thought of being with him was forever linked with slime and vermin. She shivered in disgust at the impossible possibility.

"Then why the do you think that because they have a past they have a future?"

"Because she's there and I'm not," Lynay snapped. Shame shot through her at the needy admission. The past three months, she had let her guard down. Tyson had called often and they talked like a real couple, a real family. He genuinely seemed to care about her and Seth. How could she have forgotten this was just a business deal? So what, the man was nice and caring, it didn't mean anything. Once again, she allowed a man's kindness to go to her head. Stupid, stupid, stupid she reprimanded herself. After the major fraud named Chavez, she should know better. Men said whatever to get whatever they wanted and did whatever they wanted.

Damn.

Silence and then the wily old woman smiled. "Would you like to go?"

"Not like this." She sighed. "If he wanted me there he would've asked." Reality was a bitch, but it cleaned away the fog so you could see the bullshit. "Look I agree something's off, I just, well, I just didn't like that she's there and I'm not. I know our marriage is a business deal, but- "

Thoughts from their last night at Aunt Lilly's house by the pond bombarded the gateway to her mind, complete with colorful images, sounds and feelings. The way they connected when he touched her. The idea that he would give that to anyone else bitterly stung. Sighing, she didn't want to travel down the path of what ifs or maybes, she put this incident in the I've-learned-my-lesson file.

Instead, she said. "We agreed to be faithful to each other and I'm keeping my end of the deal," Standing, she looked at the tightened features on her aunt's face, becoming concerned.

"Have you taken your meds today?"

Startled, the older woman snapped out of her thoughts and focused. "What? Oh yeah I took them before supper."

"You look a little tired, you sure I can't get you anything?" She walked over and stooped in front of her.

"No...No sweetie. I'm fine, just concerned that's all," she assured her as she cupped the younger woman's face. The two women stared at each other, taking and giving support in

silence. His aunt had him on a pedestal of honor, and if he proved to be a chicken-shit it'd hurt her tremendously.

Lynay rubbed her face against the palm holding it and stood, offering her hand to assist the older woman. She took it, and the two of them walked their separate ways to bed. Nothing more could be said. The sole person that could clear all this up was silent.

Later that night Tyson returned to his hotel room. He'd been in debriefings all day. After delivering his package, he would reunite with his team in six hours. It was just enough time to get some rest and meet his flight. Things were ratcheting up on this mission and he needed to be back in the field. He hated these delays, and handling things personally. Striding to the elevator, he ignored the appreciative and hungry looks thrown his way. Rather, he listened as his fatigued body screamed for rest. The previous thirteen hours he'd been traveling non-stop before the meetings today. He slapped his pocket for his cell, thinking to call Lynay and his aunt before he went to sleep.

"Damn." He'd forgotten and left it in his bag in the room. No matter, he would call home as soon as he showered. He slid the card into the door lock, took a couple of steps, and stopped, going on maximum alert. Someone had accessed his room.

Slow and steady, he backed out the door, looked at the room number on the wall, and then surveyed the room again. His eyes stopped at the bed. He had to be imagining things. He shook his head to be positive he wasn't. Sure enough, sprawled over the bed a semi nude Allison looked up at him, smiling.

You've got to be fucking kidding me. He wearily wiped his hand over his face. Hoping this was a mirage, or a bad dream he glanced back into the room, refusing to step inside.

"Hi baby...surprised to see me?" she asked in a throaty voice as she sat up and turned on the lamp next to the bed.

Tyson looked around the room, then at her. Even though it'd been a long time since he'd been intimate with a woman, he felt nothing but frustration. On top of that, now he couldn't get his rest.

That pissed him off more.

"What the hell are you doing here Allison?" he growled, his irritation obvious. He refused to walk into the room with her current state of undress. The soldier who'd gotten off the elevator with him stopped with a question in his eye. When he nodded, the man lingered in the hall. The occupant from the room across the hall opened his door, and looked at him.

He nodded and repeated his question.

"My goodness Tyson, please come on inside so we can talk." She stood, and wrapped another sheer gown around her waist.

"No mam. I am not entering this room. I don't know how or why they let you in my room, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave." He stated as he noticed another Officer standing in the hallway watching.

"Tyson we're married, we can be alone in a room together," she snapped.

"No Allison, we're divorced. I've remarried. My wife wouldn't understand you being in my room. Like I said, I don't know how you got in, but trust me it'll never happen again." He knew he came across as a cold-hearted bastard. She'd killed anything remotely akin to kindness with the stunts she pulled. This was over the line and needed to stop now. As much as he hated scenes, he knew if he didn't do this publicly, she'd make up lies and possibly repeat it in the future. Turning to the Officer in the hall.

"Sir, would you please call security."

Hearing her gasp, he glanced back into the room. She hadn't moved from the corner of the bed. "Allison, if I was you, I'd pack my things and leave before security gets here." He offered this small courtesy, more because of the respect he had for her grandfather than anything he felt for her.

"Enough is enough Tyson. You've had your fun. I fucked up. I said I was sorry. Now it's time for us to move forward. I am ready now, don't you understand. I'm ready to be your wife, start our family." She walked toward him with her hands outstretched.

He shook his head. Words had no impact on her. He wished she'd drop his last name and stop pestering him. For some reason he'd yet to understand, she was under the impression that if she could convince him she was sorry, he'd forgive and forget. Then everything would revert to the way it was.

She was delusional.

Maybe the humiliation of security throwing her out would be the catalyst to help her accept it was over between them. By this time, there were four witnesses in the hall. All in uniform. He nodded to each as he waited for security, and ignored her pleas to come in and talk.

Two Security Officers walked briskly to the doorway and asked the nature of the problem. After Tyson explained, they radioed the front desk. Everyone in the hall heard the desk attendant's response.

"Mrs. Bradford showed her military ID, said she was here to meet her husband and asked for the key to their room. Another Officer recognized her and vouched for her identity. That's the only reason we gave her a key." Everyone looked at Allison as she backed wide-eyed, deeper into the room.

Tyson, who'd grown angrier by the second as he listened to the front desk clerk, stated explicitly. "This is my ex-wife. I guess she still has her military ID from before. Shit it's been three years since the divorce!" he exploded. Trying to reign in his temper, he looked at security.

"If she gives you the ID card then I won't press charges. But if she refuses, take her ass to jail. She knows I've remarried; this was a deliberate lie and invasion of my privacy." He leaned against the wall in the corridor and waited for her to leave.

The security guards stepped into the room and requested her ID card. For the first time, Tyson noticed she looked frightened. She looked at him, then at security as if she couldn't believe it.

"Believe it," he muttered. She'd been a thorn in his side way too long.

"Tyson...Tyson," she called out as he turned to stare at her. "Don't do this Tyson. You're making a mistake. We belong together. You love me, remember?"

"Mam...mam, either you give us the card or the police will take you to jail. What's it going to be?" the guard interrupted.

She whipped her head back and rifled through her bag. She then threw the final connection from her marriage at the guards and hissed. "Take the damn card."

Grabbing up the bag, she stomped to the bathroom. Scant minutes later the door banged open as she charged forward, completely dressed. She snatched her bag, personal items and pushed them in her carryon luggage. Face red, tears streaming down her face, she stormed out the room at a speedy clip. Without a word, security handed him the card and followed behind their departing guest.

Tyson turned and spoke to a few of the men in the hall, getting contact info just in case. Weariness dragged him down. He still had a few hours to rest. He looked around the room; he hadn't bought much with him. But with Allison you never knew. He checked his bag; change of clothes, toothbrush, and phone. Nothing appeared out of place. Picking up his belongings, he left the room. He may as well rest on base he thought, as he left the hotel taking her card with him.

Chapter 11

Lynay's transcripts transferred to Fayetteville State. After her first day of class, and a brief discussion with her professor, she shared her excitement with her friend.

"Seriously Anne, he stood there watching me walk to my next class." She flopped on her bed still flush from the excitement of her first day of class. It'd been great. With this full load, she should be marching after the following semester. Kicking her legs up in the air, she laughed aloud.

Enough of him, can you believe it? I'm almost there." She closed her eyes and envisioned the graduation, cap and gown, and her walking across the stage. Rolling on her stomach, she kicked the bed in glee.

"Of course I believe it. Your determination to make it happen made it happen. I'm proud of you girl."

"Thanks, I couldn't have done it without you. Check us out, it's not a done deal yet, I have to pass these classes first." Looking over at the clock, she realized she had a couple of hours before she'd pick up Seth. This conversation dug into her study time.

"How's my beautiful god-daughter?" she asked, deciding to hit the books later.

"She's doing well. Won't sleep and still cock-blocking, but hey it's his fault right?" They both laughed.

"Yeah, Seth did Tyson like that his last night here. Every time we'd move to get closer or play a little bit; Seth would wake up. Eventually, we all fell asleep; frustrated as hell I might add."

Kids, huh?... Gotta... love 'em, right?" She tried to stop laughing.

"Well that night, I could've pushed mine out the bed. I wanted some hot lovin' before he left. You're not going to believe this, but it's been years."

"I believe it. You were always funny like that. If my brother made you drop the drawers that quick then all I can say is "damn" he must be the shit."

"That he is, he is," she murmured. Memories of his lips and hands on her still had the ability to make her cream her panties. Not that she would share that with Anne, but damn she had needed a little more.

"On a serious note Lynay," Anne said soberly. "You hear me?" She demanded a response.

Lynay had propped her head against the headboard as she reached for the remote control. Rarely did she get the house alone and she intended to exploit this occasion to chill.

"Sure, what's up?" She flicked through the channels.

"I know Tyson messed up. I'm sure there is a good reason for what happened with Allison. But he should've called you when he was stateside, period. I also know that you're really feeling him. You wouldn't have been so tore up about it if you weren't."

Lynay turned off the TV, so she could focus on Anne's remarks. "Okay."

"But whatever you do, don't go tit for tat with him. He's not the one. Some people think rationally. They say well I fucked up, so I can't be upset with her when she fucked up."

"What are you talking about?"

"You and Tyson," Anne answered. "Listen, my mom did a thorough job on his dad and he went through it with them. She's still a slut. All I can say is she must be decent at it because she keeps a man. She's not important in this other than to help you understand why he's a nut about honor and fidelity."

She gripped the phone tighter as she sat up. "Go on," she said, eager to learn more about him.

"She broke his dad's heart. Repeatedly. For some reason we've yet to figure out, he loved her. Ty didn't matter, her vows, their vows, none of that mattered to her. His dad would go and fetch her from her boyfriend's house, hotel rooms or apartments. It didn't matter. There were a lot of men, Lynay. A lot." The raspy quality of her voice signaled her mom's actions still hurt.

"After she ran off the final time, she sent him papers for the divorce. Tyson said his dad cried like a baby and pretty much gave up on life. He stopped caring about any and everything. That shit marks a kid for life."

"No offense Anne, but how'd you stand her?"

"That's another story for another day." Her voice hardened. "Right now I need to you to understand what drives my brother. If you don't want him, divorce him. But don't cheat on him. You cannot be with anyone else. Not even a date. Divorce him first. I know this shit sounds

harsh, but men are hitting on you. My brother got your motor running, but didn't complete the tune up."

Lynay had wondered why Tyson demanded fidelity from a stranger and now she knew the answer to part of that question. "Did you miss the part where I said I hadn't had sex in years? I hope you know that was by choice. My choice. I have no intentions of cheating on him, smack him upside the head maybe." Her tone held a smidgeon of seriousness.

"And you're right he got me going, I wanted more, but from him, Anne. He's the first man I let down my guards for since he-whose-name-is-chickenshit. Granted, this went down fast, and yeah I wanted to rape his ass. But just him. I don't think anyone else could fill his shoes." She opened her heart, revealing her innermost thoughts. "I don't just want to get laid. I need to get laid by Tyson, and there's a difference." She chuckled. "So slow your roll, I'm not about to mess around on my husband."

"Well, the next time the professor or anyone else addresses you as Ms. Bradford, correct their ass with a quickness. Tell him it's Mrs. Bradford as you flash your ring, all right."

"Gotcha. I appreciate it girl. Good looking out."

Chapter 12

The front boards creaked under her weight as she stepped into her parlor. For some reason the drive seemed longer this time although she knew that was not the case. Perhaps the covert nature of her solitary trips to Henderson pulled her down. Lynay thought she constantly hung out with those insipid gossipy creatures, when all she craved the solitude of her house. She feared her sweet niece wouldn't understand.

She loved her family, but she needed time alone with her faith, and her guide who was an intrinsic part of her. So twice a week, she would make an excuse and drive her new car home without anyone's knowledge.

"Besides, I'm old and entitled to eccentric behavior," she muttered trying to set aside the guilt of deceit. Within moments, she entered her prayer room and lit incense and candles scattered around the room. The fragrances mingled in the air, their smoke curling and dancing in assent. She'd just stepped into the bathroom to change when she heard engine sounds coming from the rear of her property. Standing on tiptoes, she gazed out the window searching for the source of the sound. Two cars parked side by side at the old barn beyond the pond.

"What the hell?" She reached for her purse, grateful Lynay convinced her to purchase a cell phone. She dialed the police.

"Hello...hello?"

"Yes, how may I help you?"

"There's some cars parked on my property and— "

"Hello, Miss...Hello."

"I think...I think they are trying to break into my house," she whispered shrinking onto the floor with a death grip on the phone.

"I need you to lock yourself into a secured room. Give me your address."

She gave the address while locking the door to her inner sanctuary. Vaguely she heard a noise. "They must've broken open the storm door; I hear them rattling the knob."

"I've dispatched someone to your location."

Her fingers twisted her bangles; sweat glistened on her brow as she struggled to hear the intruder's progress. Did they see her car out front? Was this a robbery attempt? Or more? She never checked the locks when she came, is it possible they'd been inside before?

Small tremors wracked her elderly frame; her mind replayed every television drama where the elderly and women were targeted victims in their homes. Her breathing hitched, and caught in her chest. Each breath became a struggle as her mind locked onto horrific probabilities. She rolled onto her side, pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her waist. A low keening sound ripped from her throat. Dark dots formed into larger patterns inside her tightly closed lids. The dark patterns enlarged, encasing her thoughts, erasing her fears. She floated, her limbs numb as she ascended into the gray area.

Within moments, she felt the soothing presence of Godfrey, her spirit guide. He smiled offering her a brief nod of welcome. "You've had a journey," he said. The melodic quality of his voice always soothed her. Each time they met, she desired longer conversations with him. She suspected it took tremendous effort for him to communicate with her in this manner. Initially, all she received were impressions, now she could hear him clearly.

"Yes, I doubt I'll be able to hide these visits from my niece any longer. She'll be hurt I lied to her."

"Perhaps. Your niece is stronger than you think. She will need her strength soon; you need to help her through her pain. Be prepared, much pain is coming- "

Through the fog of her conversation, she heard the operator calling out to her.

"Miss, Miss, if you don't answer the Officer will break down the door. Are you all right?"

"Yes...yes I am fine. I must have dozed off." She paused, feeling somewhat refreshed and wondering how long she'd been out. Slow and deliberately she stood. "Tell the Officer I am on my way to the front door and he is not to break it down."

After opening the door, the police Officer quickly checked the house. He explained they had apprehended a couple of gang members storing illegal contraband on the property.

"Contraband?" She frowned.

"Guns and some drugs." He stared. "Didn't you hear the gunfire?"

"Gunfire?" She squinted up at the sour faced man.

He returned her stare. "Are you all right ma'am? Do you require assistance?"

"Assistance?" she flinched at the last word. Visions of Tyson's warnings buffeted her ears. "No, I'm fine. I'll call my niece to come stay with me while you nice gentlemen finish up whatever you're doing." She turned away and punched in Lynay's number.

"That's a good idea, they'll be working outside for a while. I'm to wait with you until someone comes to ask you some questions later. Do you mind if I have a seat here?"

"No, no...please get comfortable. I'm sorry. My manners must have flown out the door. Can I get you something to drink?" She glanced around the faded room, seeing it with a prejudiced eye. Old, faded furnishings languishing from a time period never to return. The Officer sat gingerly on the old settee. She understood his reluctance. He was a big man. The sofa in Tyson's family room offered comfort and warmth. As soon as this fiasco settled, she'd renovate the old homestead.

Lynay saw Tyson's name on her cell. "Hello." She held her breath, not sure who would be on the other end.

"Hey Mrs. Bradford, how're you doing?" His husky voice soothed like vintage scotch, smooth and warm.

It'd been two months. Sixty days since Allison's call, and Lynay hadn't heard a peep. Nothing. Nada from either Tyson or Allison. Aunt Lilly kept telling her that everything must be okay. No news being good news and all that.

Tears pricked her eyes. She turned from everyone and blinked hard. "Hey Mr. Bradford, haven't heard such a welcomed voice in a while. The question is how you doing?"

"I know, right? I just got an opportunity to give you a call. Been out of the country for a few months, and we'll be heading out again soon. I wanted to hear your voice and check on Seth, Aunt Lilly. I got the message I'm an Uncle. How's Anne? Have you seen the baby?" He threw so many questions out, she laughed.

"Hold up, let me answer before you go on. Seth is in daycare and doing great, I am in college this semester trying to finish my Early Childhood degree. Aunt Lilly's fine, she had some gang members using her barn in Henderson to store illegal stuff. We saw Anne and my goddaughter last month. They both seem to be doing well."

"What?" Tyson shouted. "Did you say gang members on the property in Henderson?"

"Yeah."

"Was anyone in the house? No she wouldn't be there. Did the police contact you after they caught the gang members? Where are you now? Where's Aunt Lilly?" He shot each question off, not giving her a chance to answer.

"Tyson. Aunt Lilly was here at the house. She called me after she called the police who came and got rid of the gang." She paused. "Stop yelling at me Tyson. I cannot tell her what to do, nor can you. She wanted to come home and she did."

"How did she get to Henderson if you didn't take her?"

"She drove her new car."

Silence.

"Aunt Lilly is a grown woman. She bought a car."

"She bought a car?"

Lynay steeled herself against the icy tone in his voice. "Yes."

"May I speak to her?"

She pivoted, anger spiked through her system at his attitude. Not once did he address the Allison fiasco. "Aunt Lilly." She raised her voice to get the woman's attention. "Tyson wants to speak to you." Lynay watched the mercurial change in the woman's face. His name spurred the older woman to push aside the cop talking, and gesture for the phone.

"Hello Tyson dear, how are you?" Her smile slowly morphed into a frown and then a scowl. "Tyson, I hope you find it." Her tone droned as she glanced at Lynay.

"Why your mind dear boy. Obviously, you've lost it if you feel you can talk to me this way. I am too old to have my nephew chastise my lifestyle or purchases that I make with my own money. If and when I want your opinion, I will make it my business to ask for it. Surely your life is full enough that you don't feel the need to poke around in mine."

She winked at Lynay who could imagine the fire engine redness of his face right about now. The man had serious control issues.

"Is that supposed to be an apology Tyson?" she asked. "Hmm, well I am quite busy right now with the police and all. We will definitely talk another time. Here is your wife, feel free to tell her what to do since you seem inclined to give unwanted commands and advice." With that last dig, she handed Lynay the phone.

Chapter 13

Lynay purposely delayed her discussion with Tyson until they were alone. She wanted to watch his facial expressions when she confronted him over Allison's call. Previous experiences with deception from people in her life taught her to rely on a combination of things. Body language became an additional barometer she used to filter conversations.

Her foot tapped a tune in sync with her heartbeat as she thought about how she would proceed with the intended discussion. She stopped tapping long enough for the flight attendant to offer her a beverage. Declining the drink, she leaned back and rubbed her index finger and thumb together trying to remember everything from his call. She stared out the window of the plane determined not to make more of this trip than what they agreed. Her imagination ran full tilt with all the possibilities of being alone with Tyson again.

She smiled in recollection on how he'd made certain she had her flight and hotel arrangements within twenty-four hours after Aunt Lilly slapped his hand. She blew out a jittery breath; he appeared just as anxious she did. They'd emailed each other every day, teasing and building the tension.

As he went through months of correspondence from them, he frequently sent requests for clarification; or praise and encouragement for her finishing her classes. He had lots to say about Aunt Lilly's new car, her friends and activities but wisely kept his comments between the two of them. He claimed he wanted to watch this new out-going person for himself; he had a tough time believing all the changes in the past five and a half months. Overall, he had seemed pleased.

It'd been a long time since they saw one another. Rubbing her hands on the arms rest, she'd warned him his aunt wasn't the only one that'd changed. Without trying, she'd dropped a few dress sizes from a 14 to a 10. Walking with his aunt in the neighborhood and across campus was the basis for not only the weight loss but the overall toning of her body as well.

Since she didn't have the hectic schedule from before in Durham, she'd taken out her braids and kept her long thick hair in an easy maintenance style. Her skin glowed with health and vitality from the compromised diet she and his aunt created.

She had given up her beloved pork and beef. And Aunt Lilly had added chicken and salmon to hers. They all benefited from the fruits, nuts and vegetables that dominated their diets.

She closed her eyes as the memories of their last time together replayed in full color. It always heated her in moist places. Her nipples pebbled and her breath hitched hoping he'd taste them again. Glad the flight was light and the seat next to her empty, she opened her eyes, hungry for Tyson. Fine tremors shook her body. The reality of landing grabbed her. Soon she'd see him.

That thought alone sent moisture pooling between her thighs. Her breath caught with the attendant's landing announcement. She looked down at her new dress and attempted to smooth out the wrinkles. Large curls hung around her shoulders, and caressed her face. The rust colored dress clung to her body and complemented her complexion. Fingers crossed, she hoped he approved.

Being in first class, she departed the plane as soon as the agent secured the doors. Proceeding up the jet way, she pulled her carry-on luggage, and looked around quickly to determine if he waited just inside near the gate. A pang of disappointed stung at not seeing him; she took a deep breath to relax and headed out of the secured area.

"Ahem."

She kept moving; now in a rush to see him again.

"Lynay, Lynay Bradford."

She stopped, and searched intently for the source. Tyson unfolded himself from the seat nearby. She stared, drinking him in as he advanced toward her. He'd changed too. He appeared leaner, darker and hungrier. Her feet glided in his direction. She offered a slight smile, suddenly feeling shy, uncertain.

"Tyson?" she whispered as he took off his sunglasses. Stopping a hairs breath away, she reached out one hand to him. He snatched her off her feet. Holding her tight to his chest, he lifted her in his arms. Tears filled her eyes as she tucked her head in the crook of his neck, inhaling his never forgotten scent. His arms tightened around her waist as she cried openly.

"Baby, it's okay, I'm okay," he whispered raggedly in her ears as he rubbed her back. His palms caressed her as she wept in relief.

He's safe, he's home. Pulling her head slightly back, their eyes met, she smiled before he greedily attached his mouth to her lips. There was no give in his claiming. People flowed around them, never intruding the small world they'd formed. She stood on tiptoes, squeezing and

stroking his back in an attempt to give him more, needing to receive more until they broke apart to breathe.

He brushed her face with his finger, tracing her lips as their foreheads met. She trembled as he grazed his thumb across her bottom lip. Tilting her head up, she searched his eyes hoping he'd see what she couldn't put into words. Not yet. With a swift peck to her lips, he pulled her close, grabbed her hand and luggage to leave.

"You're so beautiful. Damn, I about missed you, I was staring so hard at your ass," he grinned at her.

Releasing a pent up breath, she relaxed even more against him. Pleased by his welcome, she allowed herself to accept whatever happened between them for the next few days. She wouldn't ask questions, or analyze it. For once, she'd just go with the flow.

"Why were you running out of here?" He drew her closer.

Happy, she smacked him lightly on the arm. "If you have to ask that then we have more problems than I thought." She pinched his arm for the smug smile on his face.

"Do you have more luggage?" He squeezed her waist.

"No, this is it."

Smiling broadly, he tugged her closer to leave the building. At first, he moved so quickly, she jerked to a stop to get him to slow down.

"I can't walk as fast as you."

Surprised, he noted her posture and shrugged. Reluctantly, she took her hands from her hips and trudged forward meeting him halfway. They couldn't keep their hands off each other. She stroked his thigh, his arms, face. Any and everything she could reach.

He kept his hand on her thigh under her dress, rubbing. He kept repeating how smooth her skin felt.

"Don't forget you owe me." Her eyes locked onto his.

"Baby I promise to pay you over and above what you think I owe."

"I missed you, Tyson." Her voice sounded uncertain, yet sure. An odd mixture of desire and denial.

He stared at her, not moving until a horn blared. He coughed. "I missed you more."

"Not possible, but good to know."

"Very possible and it's great to be missed."

By the time they reached the hotel, she didn't think she'd make it to their suite. He wrapped his arms around her, supporting her weight, as they strode through the lobby to the elevator.

Once inside, he pulled her in front of him. She felt his hardened need for her even as she hid it from the others. He bent his head to kiss her neck and inhaled.

Flushed, she responded by giving him greater access, releasing a slight moan as the elevator emptied. Embracing her close, he rubbed her firm ass against his hardness, torturing her in the process.

Pain had never felt so good.

Tyson desperately needed to be in her soon. Reaching their floor, he yanked the luggage with one hand and hers with the other as they moved at a clipped pace down the hall to their room. Sliding the card in the lock, he thrust it open, and pressed her forward, ahead of him.

Their hands freely roamed each other, remembering, discovering, and inciting fevered flesh. She trembled in his arms as he lifted her without missing a beat, walked in the bedroom, and eased her gently to the bed. Feeling her wetness, he took a moment to grind his cock against her hot flesh.

She wouldn't release him and held fast around his neck. Lying atop her, he inflamed their bodies further. She stroked and squeezed, testing his limits. He couldn't believe how great she tasted, smelled and felt beneath him. Her scent held him captive. He craved more.

Reaching down he kissed her as he stroked her long toned legs. The edge of her dress scooted up with his questing hand. Leaning to the side, he looked at her rust colored thong and inhaled a sharp breath. Forgetting to breathe, he went on automatic pilot.

His head began a slow downward trek toward her weeping cunt. Reverently, his fingers touched her nether lips, she widened her legs allowing him to pay tribute. Drawn to her essence, he explored her with his tongue, and reacquainted himself with her passion. He reaffirmed his place in her life and now her bed. He intended to remind her to whom she belonged as he inserted two fingers in her tight juicy canal.

She shouted his name.

Home," he breathed inside her as he licked, sucked and brought her to completion. Lapping up her tasty juices, he listened to her whimpers as the tremors subsided. Hard as stone, he slid up beside her and smiled.

"I missed you Lynay," he said between plastering her face and lips with hot kisses.

"Off, off Tyson. Take off your clothes," she breathed against his mouth, grabbing and pulling the offending articles.

Leaning back, she watched him rip off his shirt and then his pants. He toed off each shoe and stripped off his shorts. Raising his arms in the air, he turned around slow for her inspection. He heard her inhale sharply, and watched as she clenched her legs together.

"Your turn baby." His gravelly voice told its own story of how close he was to the edge. "I need to see all of you."

A slight tremor shook her frame after she placed her hand in his. Pulling her up, he backed off to watch. She reached up and over, and pulled her dress down off her shoulders as his eyes devoured hers.

She licked her puffy lips, his cock jumped. A tiny shake of her body and the clingy material fell down. He stretched out his hand, frowning when she shook her head, no. A sultry smile graced her face as she slowly pulled down her thong with one finger, kicked it to the side; then unsnapped her bra and threw it to the side. Placing her hand on her hip, she turned slowly around, gyrating.

Blood drained from his upper regions, flying south. His cock stood straighter as pre-cum flowed from his tip. He hurt with need.

"Come here Lynay," he demanded.

His eyes felt gritty, his mouth dry. The dark neediness of his voice betrayed him as he inched across to her and ravaged her mouth. Placing his hands under her hips, he lifted her, and rubbed his rod against her heat. She wrapped her long legs around him, as he walked over to the bed.

Sliding down, she wrapped her fist around his rigid length. Her gentle, yet demanding touch threw him into overdrive; he grabbed her hand to prevent her movements.

"I want to be in you when I cum. Later, you can play later." He tried to reign in his passion.

"Promise?" She pouted as she licked his juices from her fingers eliciting another groan from him. She was too damn sexy. Unable to wait, he pushed her backwards and inserted a finger, then another testing her readiness for him. Her cunt was wet and tight. Rising up on his elbow, he lifted her leg and looked at her.

"Are you going to use a rubber?"

He blinked in confusion. "Why would I use a rubber?" He held his position gazing down at her.

"Have you been sexually active since we've been married?" She ignored his frown.

"No...Have you?" he demanded. Frustration at the delay and the possibility of infidelity clenched his insides.

"No damn it, I haven't had sex in over four years."

"Well damn-it Lynay I'm trying to fix that now. So what's it gonna be?"

Moving her hips in a circular motion and palming her breasts with her hands. She smiled at him, "get a move on Ty."

Pulling her leg up, he moved and poised his cock for entry. Feeling her pushing up, he pushed all the way in, balls deep.

"Holy shit." He breathed through clenched teeth as he tried to recapture some semblance of sanity as her tight sheath pulsed around him. Head down, he breathed deeply while taking a tentative stroke.

He held still as she moved beneath him, her movements drove him slowly insane. Her tight walls welcomed his cock and challenged him to work for every stroke. Lost in the intensity of pleasure, he felt her rhythm change.

Matching and then changing the tempo, he pulled her leg higher and stroked deeper. She screamed out in pleasure. He stroked faster through her orgasm, reaching his peak shortly after. As his tremors receded, Lynay stroked his face and chest.

"Damn, never and I do mean never have I cum that hard," she whispered into his ear. "Thanks baby, I truly needed that." She chuckled as she nipped and flicked her tongue over his ear.

Slowly he rolled over. Trying to control his breathing, he placed his hand possessively across her stomach and thigh. "Can I say something?" He'd covered his eyes with his other arm and gasped for breath, barely able to get the words out.

"Sure." She moaned as he rubbed her naked mound.

"That was the best I've ever had. Tight and juicy just the way I like it."

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Bradford. But I should remind you that the pussycat and I are a package deal. You've got take us both. And just so you know. The cat and I don't always agree," she said as she climbed back atop him.

"Good to know Mrs. Bradford, good to know." Rubbing his hands on her upper thighs, making quick flicks on her clit, he loved that she got aroused again. His rod stiffened under her. That brought on another thought.

"Why'd you ask me about rubbers? Didn't you get my email about you being responsible for the birth control?"

"You mean the one where you told me that if I didn't want to have any more kids, after I told you about the sickle cell trait that ran in my family, I'd need to protect myself. And that you refused to wear a rubber when you finally hit it. Is that the email you're referring to?"

"Yeah, although I didn't mean it the way you make it sound." The way she'd said it made him appear unreasonable and that wasn't his intention.

"I got the email. But that was before." She gasped as she rubbed against his hardening length.

"Before what?" His interest divided by touching her. Her pussy was glistening with their combined juices and he wanted to ride her hard and fast.

"Before Allison called and told me the two of you were together in DC a few months ago." She watched him closely.

He heard what she said. Surprise and then confusion must have chased across his face, as he tried to remember the last time he had seen Allison. Then it clicked. He knew that witch had been up to something. She must have called before he got to the hotel.

"What do you mean Allison called and told you we were together in DC a few months ago?" He sat up, holding her in place on his lap with one hand. His eyes latched onto hers once he settled.

Lynay briefly told him what happened, and waited.

He lifted her off his lap, and placed her on the side of the bed. "Hold up a minute, let me show you something." He got up and went to a bag in the corner. Rifling through it, he snatched out a manila envelope and strode back to the bed. Sitting on the corner of the bed, he offered it to her.

Studying him, she took it.

"Open it," he said as she unclasped the top and pulled out the papers. After reading the title, she glanced up at him. Nodding his head to the document, he indicated she should be reading. She did.

He regarded her the whole time, the way her eyes widened in surprise at times and frowned at others.

"Damn... she lied and got in your room?"

Her amazement of the documented accounts from the hotel personnel and the eyewitnesses should've soothed him, but it didn't. She thought he cheated on her, with his ex-wife of all people. Disgust rose in his chest. Her expressions of disbelief that any woman would go to those lengths for a man screamed so loud, the deaf could hear. The stories he could tell.

But not now, he wanted to get through this and continue sexing his wife. He pushed aside his indignation as he lay across the bed, playing with her hair and took his time answering.

"Yeah, but I know her. If I'd gone in that room to talk, she would have fabricated the entire conversation and probably claimed rape or that I made her pregnant. I knew better. Anne nailed it. She's delusional."

"But how'd she know you were in D.C.?" She returned the documents to the envelope. "Why didn't you call me when you were in the country?"

"According to the General, a Lieutenant in his office told her. Claimed she returned a favor from before. Trust me, it's been handled. As for calling you, I planned to call but finding her in the room derailed me. At any rate, there are times when I return quickly to handle sensitive materials and then leave right back out. That was one of those times. I spent most of my time in debriefings and only went to rest a few hours before heading back to Afghanistan when I discovered her in my room. I always call you when I can." He rolled over taking her with him.

"I thought you'd changed your mind and wanted her."

He placed small kisses up her body. Squirming, she grabbed the sheets and held on as he reached her center.

"Don't waste your energy on her. I'm right here. I only want my wife, that's you, Lynay. Don't forget it." He may not be sure what this relationship with her would evolve into, but he knew he had no interest in his ex-wife. The divorce merely buried their dead relationship.

Exhaling, his breath shuddered as he realized contentment had wormed its way into his life. He'd claimed his wife. They'd been married for half a year and he'd missed this.

Inhaling her sweet scent, "I think I'll simply stay here for a while, you taste so good. Is that all right with you baby?" he teased against her clit.

"Unh huh...it's ... uh ...yeah...ohhh yeah..."

His tongue worked her over. He loved that she got lost in the pleasure he gave her.
"Lynay...Lynay," he called up to her.

"Um yeah?" Her voice heavy with passion, her eyes heavy lidded and glazed.

"Just so you know. I won't cheat on you. As long as we're married, my cock, tongue, hands, everything is exclusively for you." Smiling at her thrilled expression, he went back to driving her wild.

Chapter 14

Lynay went home. Tyson returned to his assignment. They had spent most of their time in bed. He'd been relentless. They stoked each other to fevered pitches with sizzling interludes of kick'em high lovemaking. Not only did he demand more of her, she gave her all quite willingly.

Standing, sitting, or laying down, the positions they tried, pushed her boundaries, while sending her soaring and trembling in satisfaction. His mouth competed with his cock in bringing her to completion. If pushed, she would declare a tie. Both received high marks.

Time away from the world allowed them to connect on a level she'd never experienced before. In between bouts of hotter-than-she-knew existed sex, they talked and learned more of each other. She liked what she discovered. Behind that fine, sexy body was a kind, compassionate man.

After a month at home, she missed him terribly. School would be starting again soon, and she intended to complete her coursework this semester. Images of her graduating and walking across the stage had sustained her often through tough times. Closing her eyes, she focused again on her vision, only this time she saw not her cousin and his family. But Tyson, Aunt Lilly and Anne in the crowd cheering her on as well.

"You're home early." The older woman surprised her. She thought she had the house to herself.

"Yeah, Seth's next door and I... well I have some things on my mind. Are you hungry?" she asked before walking toward the kitchen.

"No, I ate at the club with the ladies. You go ahead and get you something." Aunt Lilly followed her to the kitchen and sat down at the island counter. After a moment of silence, she sighed. "What's the matter, your colors are all wrong. They're too dark. What's got you so grim?"

During the past months, she had become accustomed to the older woman's views and talks. She took auras seriously.

Lynay shrugged not sure how to put her feelings into words. "My Aunt Jo died three years ago today. I got to thinking about her and my childhood. A trip down memory lane is not always a popular journey."

"Maybe not popular, but necessary at times. I've found that most trips are less painful when shared. Tell me about your childhood." She paused as Lynay looked at her.

"Believe me, it's not pretty. This house is a long way from the projects of Miami where I grew up. Twenty-Seventh Avenue didn't look anything like television's portrait of that city."

"No, I don't imagine it would. The truth wouldn't be nearly as entertaining, would it?"

Lynay searched the older woman's eyes for pity and found acceptance instead. Strengthened by the genuine concern emanating from the older woman, she closed her eyes for a moment allowing older memories to scroll across the tapestry of her mind.

"Like I said my Aunt Jo died three years ago today. I don't remember much about Glenda, the woman that gave birth to me. Never knew my dad. Aunt Jo said they were both cokeheads. I think I was about seven years old the last time I saw Glenda."

Coke? She took drugs?"

"Yeah. She did it all I suppose."

"Who's Aunt Jo?"

"Aunt Jo was really my cousin. My grandmother had two daughters. Libby - Aunt Jo's mom died young. Twenty-five years later, she gave birth to Glenda."

"Your grandmother raised your cousin alongside Glenda?"

"Pretty much. Aunt Jo was older and moved away when she finished high school. I never knew anything about her until Social Services got involved." Lynay shook her head, smiling.

"Boy, when my 30-year-old "Aunt" took me from social services, she'd made it clear she expected more from me than my drugged out mom. She didn't play. My only activities were school and church. She wanted me to excel at both."

"Sounds like my kind of woman." Aunt Lilly smiled as Lynay drank her water.

"Yeah, the two of you would've gotten along real good." She curled up in the chair with her arms wrapped around her legs. "I was so scared of her. When she saw how skinny I was with all the bruises on my back, legs and arms, she cussed up a storm, and constantly asked God to forgive her. I remember she cried so hard, I started crying." The last few words were said on a whisper as tears filled her eyes in remembrance.

"You were made strong because of what you went through, honey. No child of yours would ever suffer what you suffered. Many women aren't strong. Some are lazy, scared and totally unprepared to have full time care of another human being. It's an awesome responsibility."

"You think that happened with Tyson's mom?" Lynay asked, realizing he had his own abandonment issues and this woman had been his Aunt Jo.

"There's no telling what went on with Loretta. She didn't want to be tied to one man. Or maybe she did at the time and then it grew old. Maybe she needed the excitement of a new conquest, or a new venue. Whatever she needed, it was not a child. I am surprised she kept Anne around as long as she did, although that little girl paid a heavy price for that selfish act. If there were a picture depicting a woman not qualified to be a mother, it would be of Loretta."

"No child should ever suffer at the hands of the one who birthed them."

"True, but we must live the life we're given. Your friends are your choice, which is not the case with family. They are given to each of us and we make do." Aunt Lilly reached forward and patted her hand.

"You were privileged, Anne wasn't as lucky. Glenda's case was obvious, drugs, prostitution. But Anne and Tyson," Aunt Lilly shook her head in sorrow, "their mom wasn't obvious in her cruelty. Neglect is deadly to a child. Emotional abuse can carry the same weight as a physical beating. Tyson escaped with his dad and me. But Anne was trapped as a mannequin, pretty on display in a cold and desolate home. Her mom was never affectionate with her children and had no shame when it came to laying up with different men."

Aunt Lilly snorted. "Maybe she wasn't a prostitute on the streets like Glenda, but she damn sure sold herself to the highest bidder. Men have supported her most of her life, including my broken brother."

"Maybe that's why Anne and I clicked so well, so fast. I knew she came from a broken home like me. We pledged to look after each other's kids. No one will ever abuse our children."

"That's good. Remember, you have Tyson and me in your life as well. And you know me well enough by now that I would geld anyone that'd hurt that little boy. I don't play that either." The older woman's voice held heat.

"I know Aunty and I appreciate it. I'm glad to have you in my corner and my life." She reached out and squeezed the wrinkled hand lying on the counter.

"Good. And Tyson? How do you feel about him?"

A few layers down, Lynay acknowledged the fear of trusting again. It had taken years to find her way back, regain her own personality, acknowledge her own needs, and she was determined to stay in control; living her life to the fullest.

"Tyson's good," she answered slowly.

"Good? As in a good man? A good husband? Lover? What do you mean he's good?"

Lynay jerked under the barrage of questions. "All of those. He's good in all of those you mentioned."

"So you think you might be making this marriage permanent?"

She didn't regret coming clean about their contract marriage with Aunt Lilly, except for these uncomfortable moments.

"We'll see, it's not just up to me you know." She evaded her keen eyes.

"No it's not. What else is bothering you?"

"Lupus and sickle cell run strong in my family. My grandmother, my Aunt Maggie and Aunt Jo died from complications of one or the other disease. Somehow, neither disease tagged Seth or me." She spoke it in a rush, releasing her biggest fear for her future with Tyson.

The older woman cocked her head, waiting.

"Aunt Jo battled the sickness every day. It was torture watching her suffer. I didn't know what to do, so I excelled in school, sang in the church choir, cooked and cleaned my ass off to make sure she did as little as possible."

"That's commendable. You helped ease her suffering. Did that bother you?"

"No, not in the way you might think. Tyson wants children. So do I for that matter. What if our child suffers with the disease?" She suspected she was already pregnant and fear dogged her thoughts. "Seth's asthma and allergies are bad, but at this point, they're not a death sentence." Hearing the words aloud, gave them wings. The problem seemed huge. The women in her family died young. Fear crawled down her throat, choking her.

Aunt Lilly rose, walked to the seat where she sat and touched her shoulder. "There are so many things in life we cannot control. People have sex every day, but not everyone becomes pregnant and delivers life. Not everyone receives that gift. No one knows why. If you are granted this gift, don't squander it with "what ifs". Embrace it, have the child and deal with all the consequences later."

Lynay stared for a moment longer and nodded. Aunt Lilly squeezed her shoulder and walked to the refrigerator. "Didn't you say your brother's wife was pregnant?"

"Rashid and I call each other brother and sister since we grew up together with my aunt. His mom was my her best friend; she died in a car accident and left Rashid with Aunt Jo. Sickle cell doesn't run in his family as far as I know."

"Oh, I thought he was your blood relative. The two of you are so close."

"We are close. We have bumps like all brothers and sisters. I haven't seen him since Aunt Jo's funeral. I have to say, Anne was my rock, keeping my panic attacks at bay. She completed the funeral arrangements, rented out the house in Kendall and sent the guests away after a brief repast."

"That sounds like her. When Tyson introduced her to Allison, she was like a papa bear trying to save her cub. She did everything within her power to stop that train wreck. Pity she couldn't. Would've saved us all a bunch of grief."

Lynay laughed. Tyson's marriage to Allison was the one blemish on his character Aunt Lilly allowed criticism. As long as Allison was the target, and not Tyson.

"Yes Aunty, so you've said."

"I do."

"School will be starting soon. I'm almost finished. I used to daydream about my Aunt's face as I walked across the stage.

"She is proud of you. Never think she isn't looking out for you and Seth."

Lynay smiled. She had long accepted Aunt Lilly's belief in communicating with the dead, even though she didn't agree.

"Thank you Aunty. She wasn't pleased with my choice in men. The first time she met Seth's dad she blasted me for wasting my time with him. I remember he turned red and stomped from the room. At the time, I was angry and embarrassed. Of course she'd been right, he was worthless."

Even though her self-esteem had taken a major hit from all the put-downs, never being good enough, pretty enough or smart enough for Chavez, she hadn't wished death on him. In her more candid moments, she struggled with the fact that she was happy he couldn't harass her anymore.

He'd left for greener pastures when she refused an abortion. However, what sent her reeling were the cruel taunts over Seth's paternity.

Initially, he denied parentage, which was laughable since she'd been a virgin. When that didn't get the desired reaction. He claimed her unfit to care for his child. As she continued to avoid him, he'd had an attorney contact her to begin custody challenges for her unborn son. Nothing in her past prepared her for the anguish he'd subjected her. No, she didn't wish him dead, but she wasn't sorry he was gone either.

"I'm sure she would've loved Tyson." His greatest supporter, said stoically.

"Of course Aunty, of course."

Looking at the clock, Lynay realized how late it had gotten. She needed to get dinner started before she picked up Seth from the neighbors. He had a new friend, and they took turns over which house to play.

"It's getting late, do you want me to go get Seth?"

"Would you please?"

Aunt Lilly nodded, smiled and left the kitchen.

Seth's treatments helped him go longer periods without attacks, a huge plus. He blossomed in childcare and seemed to get along with the other children. Bending, to grab a pot from the cabinet, she held on to the counter as a wave of dizziness washed over her.

Aunt Lilly had been on her to take a home pregnancy test, but she had opted for an official visit instead. They had an appointment in two days.

Chapter 15

It had been a year since Tyson had been home. He breathed deeply as he deplaned. "Home, I'm home." He sighed. Moving briskly, he strode toward the clearing where the families waited. He couldn't wait to see Lynay. She claimed to be big as a house. He still chuckled at the email she had sent announcing the baby.

"It seems you owe the airlines some additional money for my trip since there were two Bradfords instead of one on my return trip."

It had taken him a moment to get the implication. He'd broken into a huge smile and sent her a straightforward reply.

"Hey one seat, one ticket. I'm sure you could hold him in your lap." They had talked more later. She'd sent him pictures of her development. It still didn't seem real, a baby. When he turned the corner, he saw a vast crowd, many waving signs. Yet, he heard her voice out of the sea of noise and turned in her direction.

Standing near the front, with her hands placed firmly on Seth's shoulders, stood his family. His heart swelled in pride at how good they looked. He felt a surge of emotion and tried to tamp it down. It wouldn't do for him to break down here and now. Striding forward, he plucked Seth from the ground, held him tight and spun around. Seth shouted with glee and held him tighter around the neck. As he slowed down, he looked into Seth's teary eyes.

For a moment, they both stared at each other. Seth's little lips trembled as he stroked his hair. Crying aloud, Seth buried his face into his neck, and hugged him tight as Tyson closed his eyes. He had been completely captured by this little person who stole his heart.

"Hello son," he whispered.

"Hi daddy," Seth whispered against his neck. "I missed you so much," he added as he leaned backward to look at him. "Are you going to come home now?" Tyson looked into the red eyes and knew if no one else loved him, Seth did. That unconditional love caused his eyes to mist over.

"Yeah son, I'm going home with you and mommy. Is that okay with you, Tiger?" He tickled him on his side.

Squealing, Seth laughed and wiggled. Tyson put him down without releasing his hand. He glanced over and caught Lynay wiping tears from her eyes. His heartbeat quickened as he went to her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Baby, don't cry. Shhh...It's okay," he whispered choking. He was too close to the edge emotionally to watch her fall apart.

"Let's get Seth home. Be strong for him baby, alright?" He rubbed her back as she nodded against his chest. He gave her a moment to compose herself as he held her with one arm and Seth's hand with his other hand.

"You ready to go?"

"More than ready, let's blow this joint." He laughed as Seth ran ahead of them.

"I can't believe how much he's grown." A tired, but content Tyson told Lynay as he entered their bedroom later that night. Seth had claimed his attention all night. Wanting to show him everything he'd done in school, with his new friend Junior, and wanted his daddy to bathe and put him to bed.

He had to promise repeatedly that he'd be there in the morning when he woke up. Seth fought sleep and held tightly to his hand, but finally he fell into a peaceful rest.

"Yeah, he's filling out and growing like a weed. This new treatment they have him on seems to be working well." She responded as she walked into the bathroom to shower. "He's only had four attacks since we've been here and those took place in the first three months."

"I suppose Aunt Lilly's tried some herbs on him."

"Yeah, she has and it seems to help. They should be here soon. Anne called about a delayed flight, but Aunt Lilly had already left to pick her up." She yawned. "I think I'll take a nap so I can stay up and visit with them when they get here."

"You about to take a shower?"

"Yeah, it's been a long day— "

He smiled at her squeak when he pulled the shower door open as she adjusted the water temperature. His hands palmed her ass and pulled her backwards to his chest.

She relaxed into his hold as he rubbed his hands over her growing mound and tender breasts. He cupped them feeling the extra heaviness in her globes. He reached forward and pinched, then pulled her elongated pebbles. His chest expanded as her body trembled. With her head against his chest, he bent down, tasted her neck, her face, and then captured her mouth. He loved the sound of her breath hitching as he continued to touch, tease and torment her warm flesh.

His large hands took her sponge, poured the soap into it and gently bathed her. She moved slightly and watched the hypnotic play.

"Miss me?" he murmured into her ear as his hands reacquainted themselves with her body.

"Um hmm." Lynay moaned as he cleaned her entire front while standing behind her, holding her up. The friction of the soapy cloth against her tender breasts had her gasping for air.

"I've thought about this, coming home to you and Seth for months. I missed this with you," he murmured against her neck. "You are so beautiful. I love how you respond to me."

Shudders wracked her frame as he held her upright. He became her anchor, her tether to reality. "Ohhh...Tyson, honey that feels so, so good." Taking a ragged breath, she tried to hold back a moan as his hands worked in tandem, slowly touching and igniting her body.

He washed her neck, paid homage to her stomach and gently spread her nether lips. Unconsciously, she widened her legs, giving him full access. Moaning as he dropped the sponge, allowing his fingers to tease her mercilessly. Her legs buckled under the assault, her pussy wept and clenched, hungry for more.

She screamed when he turned the portable spray head directly on her, causing her to cum so hard, that she shook in his arms. She could barely make out the soothing words he said in her ear. He pulled her leg up and she felt him prodding against her entrance.

"Yes...yes Tyson...Now...I need you so much." She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. He lifted her into position. She prayed he wouldn't be gentle. "Gentle later, hard and fast now," she mumbled near his ear.

She felt him tremble. Then he filled, stroked and reclaimed her. She was losing her mind. Nothing should be this good.

Holding him tighter, she moaned, "Please, please Tyson I need you. Please, I missed you so much." She begged him to speed up the pace. She was close. She felt a tingling in her toes, coming up her back.

"Ah...shit Ty...I...oh shit," she yelled as she bucked and came so hard she knew this man was it for her. Come what may, he was hers.

Tyson left Lynay asleep in bed. His internal clock was haywire. It would take a couple of days for him to adapt to days and nights again. He headed for his office, but noticed the mail on the counter. This mail had gone to his PO Box. While overseas, he'd asked Lynay to check it for him, but she didn't have the key. In his rushed departure, he had forgotten all about it. He planned to cancel the service since he only needed it when deployed. Picking up the mail, he did a quick sort, tossing out the obvious junk.

His eyes rested on a manila envelope and then some other legal correspondence from his attorney and investment banker. Groaning, he got a glass of juice from the refrigerator, and sat down in the kitchen preparing to go through the mail. He'd just finished the bulk of it when he heard a key in the lock. He waited before he disarmed the security system.

His face relaxed into a broad smile as he reached for his niece and threw Anne a kiss. He grinned at Aunt Lilly and threw her a kiss as well arching an eyebrow over her modern ensemble. Gone was the draping fabric she had worn when he left. Instead, she wore a stylish two-piece pantsuit that complemented her reduced figure. He walked over, offering hugs and kisses to each.

"She's beautiful Annie," he whispered as he placed a quick kiss on her forehead. Handing the baby girl back to Anne, he offered his aunt some juice while his sister went to lay her daughter down.

"No thank you dear." She paused, searching. "What are you doing up so late?"

"I couldn't sleep. My internal times are all messed up; it'll get better in a day or so." He grinned as he sat back on the stool to look at her. Taking both her arms, opening them wide, he smirked.

"You look real good Aunt Lilly. Watch out for the dogs, now." He barked. "Are you dating or something?" he teased, loving the blush that stained her cheeks.

"Don't be ridiculous," she gushed looking up as Anne walked back into the kitchen and slid her a worried look.

"Well something has happened to place that glow on your face. Have you lost weight as well?" he asked leaning back in his chair. "You look different. In a good way, I mean." He laughed and raised his hands, at her raised brow.

"Um hmmm..." she snorted and then smiled at him. "I'm glad you're home safe Tyson." She walked around the table and gave him a lingering hug. "We've all missed you so much, I'm glad you're home safe and whole."

"Me to Aunty, me too," he smiled as he inhaled her scent. He loved this woman, and it pleased him to no end that she thrived in his home. Squeezing her slightly before releasing her, he looked over at Anne who watched them.

"You okay little sister? Raul treating you right? Do I need to kick his ass?" They both knew he wouldn't hesitate a minute to go to bat for her. Although with Raul, it wasn't necessary. He loved Anne and would exchange his life for hers in a minute. As a retired Ranger, Raul was no slouch and wouldn't tolerate anyone messing with his wife. Not that Anne required saving, she was tough herself.

"Naw... I'm good, and he's even better. I missed you too and wanted to be here when you got home. Raul's doing his thing so... I came to see my big bro." She walked around the table to hug him and sat in the chair next to his.

"Good to see you too. Lynay's sleep right now, a l'il worn out."

She pushed his arm. "Stop bragging."

"What? I'm just saying she's tired and asleep that's all." He smiled and winked at her. They both turned as Aunt Lilly walked into the kitchen from her room.

"What are you two up to?" She frowned looking around the room again.

"Nothing." Stretching his arms, he popped Anne playfully on the top of her head. "Oh excuse me, my bad, I didn't mean to do that." He lied, laughing at the bunched fist she shook at him.

"I can't imagine what my girl sees in you. She never dated and now you've got her nose wide open. I'm warning you Tyson, you'd better not hurt her," she told him changing from playful to serious in that one statement.

"Trust me she's not a girl." He reached out and tugged her hair. Chuckling at her expression, he sobered. "Besides Anne, both of our noses are wide open. Thanks for bringing her into my life. In a few months, we will have a new addition to our family and I am very happy, happier

than I've ever been. So don't worry about your girl, I'm not going to hurt her." He reached over and kissed her cheek.

"She's a good girl Tyson. I just don't want to see her hurt. She's a loyal and loving friend," she whispered trying to hold back tears.

"Hey, hey no tears alright, I value my relationship with my wife. I'm not going to do anything to mess up. Okay?" he said softly as they touched foreheads.

"Okay."

"I'm almost done here, so why don't you ladies call it a night, get some rest, and I'll see you in the morning." He reached for the final envelope, smiling as he watched them get up. Tearing it open, he noticed both women froze at the entrance.

Chapter 16

"What? What are you looking at?" Tyson asked as he pulled out the contents of the envelope. He saw the color drain from his Aunt's face and his sister looked at him. Confused, he glanced at the contents before going to comfort his aunt and froze.

"What the fuck?" he yelled, as he pulled pictures of his wife hugging and kissing some other man. Looking quickly through the batch, he came across the one with her on top of some man having sex and smiling. He jumped backward, the chair crashed to the floor as he stared at the damning evidence of Lynay's betrayal. Several thoughts chased across his mind. The last being anger.

"Who is that motherfucker Anne?" Taking a step away from the island, he pointed at the picture again. "Who the fuck is that with my wife." She had looked guilty a moment ago, was it possible they knew and covered for her? No, not his aunt. She'd never co-sign for this.

No one answered.

"That bitch." He continued to stare at the picture. Belatedly, he noticed the silence in the room. His aunt and sister were looking at the photos in silence. "A good girl you said... right," he snarled at Anne pushing the pictures over to them.

Placing his hands on his head, he paced back and forth in the kitchen with his eyes closed. He couldn't concentrate. This was so fucked up.

How could she do this to him? What did he actually know about her? His mom played his dad all the time. Allison cheated. They all cheat. Random thoughts whirled around his mind; finally he stopped, placed his hands on the island and hung his head.

"Who's the fucking guy Anne?" his voice rumbled low. He was close to his breaking point. Pain hammered his chest. He craved this woman. No, he refused to be like his dad. Damn if he would accept this. Fatigue had been chasing him and now kicked his ass. He looked up meeting her eyes.

"Who's the guy?" He slapped the counter top. "I know you know."

"I don't... I don't know, and she is a good girl. There's... there's something not right here." She cringed when he responded with a bitter rasping laugh.

"Yeah." He chuckled drily. "I'm not right. I've been married for a year to a bitch in heat that obviously can't keep her word or her legs closed." Pausing, he stared at his sister. "Tell me Anne is the baby even mine? Or is this some plot the two of you cooked up so her child could receive free medical help?" Reminding her of one of the reasons she had given him for the marriage.

"What?" She jumped up. "You're an ass Tyson. Lynay wouldn't do that to you! You can insult me all you like. But I'll be damn if I let you disrespect her like that. I'm gonna tell you one more time motherfucker, that something is off here!" She stepped up to his face.

Tyson looked down at his sister, her red face, heaving chest and trembling lips. He recognized the signs; she was pissed and on the edge. Well so was he. Too bad she was loyal to a cheap whore.

Lynay isn't like that, something's wrong. Slow down. The thought flowed swiftly, he faltered. Shaking his head, he grimaced at his sister.

"Tell me one thing Anne, is that Lynay, my wife - your best friend- in those pictures on the countertop?" he asked in a hushed voice, more to convince himself, as he pointed toward the pictures. He noticed his Aunt still looked at them.

"They look like her."

"Didn't she agree not to fuck around on me?" He fought to keep the savage pain out of his voice. He felt like yelling into the wind at this injustice. It could not be happening to him again.

Maybe it's not, slow down and think. He shook off the thought as Anne spoke.

"Yes she did, but I'm telling you Ty something's off here. I can't place it yet, but something's wrong." She stomped back to the counter and sat down.

"The only thing wrong is that I seem to attract women that can't be faithful to me. I wonder if it's genetics." Both women looked up at him. "And Anne, the only thing wrong is that you chose to give your loyalty, and friendship to the wrong woman. She fooled all of us."

Taking a deep breath, he looked down again at the pictures, then back up at the women staring at him. "I want her out of my house, she violated our agreement." His heart broke, he just wanted to leave and grieve.

"I'd wake her ass up now and throw her out if you think that's best," he said into the silence.

"There's no need, I'm already up. But before you throw my ass out the door, would you mind telling me why?" Lynay asked as she moved slowly into the kitchen tying a robe around her protruding waistline. She looked at the hard expression on his face, then at Aunt Lilly and sent a slight smile to Anne. She went to look at Tyson again, and her eyes fell on the pictures.

"Who's that?" She walked closer to the island to get a better look. "What the hell? Who... what's this?" She whispered as she went through the pictures. She grabbed the island with one hand as she looked in horror at the ones with her screwing some man. Looking up she searched the faces in the quiet room.

"Is this some kind of fucking joke?" She yelled. "Who the hell is this dude? What's going on?"

"That's you Lynay... and your lover boy," Tyson said snidely. "Why don't you tell me who he is? Even I can see what the fuck is going on." He walked closer.

Her head whipped around as he approached. His jaw clenched, and fist balled by his side. This had to be a dream, no a nightmare and any minute she would wake up.

"You think...you think I cheated on you?" she choked out; holding her hand out to stop him from answering. "With this guy? You must not think I have any integrity. But you know what...I'm going to be honest with you. I have never cheated on you with anyone. I've never had a reason to."

"You know, my mom used to say that to my dad all the time. Even when he caught her in the act with someone else. I may be my father's son, but I am not him. I see the evidence of your cheating around. How can you claim honesty and integrity? Right now where I'm standing, you're no better than she was."

Lynay could tell in that moment she lost him. His eyes turned to gray chips of ice. "I don't know who that is, or where that picture came from, but I'm telling you I did not have sex with any man but you in the last 4 years." Her heart shattered beneath his taunting cruelty. She saw the sadness on Aunt Lilly's face and the tears on Anne's cheeks. Did they think she'd cheat on him? She braced herself for their disappointment.

The cynic in her ranted I told you so. Men couldn't be trusted. Her mind replayed the drama with Seth's dad; she couldn't understand why it kept happening to her. She needed to protect her heart, her children. It yelled at her to run before he said or did something that would break her

down. So many warnings she'd heard, but it was too late. She watched the one man she respected throw away her love for him.

"So what you're saying, what you're asking me to do is to believe your word over what I see?" He ran his hand through his hair.

She died inch by inch. The evidence was damning. He obviously didn't know her at all if he believed she'd do something like this. A tear escaped, mourning the loss of what could have been. On autopilot, she moved to the counter and sat slowly, keeping her eyes on him.

"Yeah Tyson, I guess that's what I'm asking you to do. But, I guess that's too hard, since you think you're the only one with any honor or integrity." Her voice remained steady in spite the chaotic emotions swamping her.

Everyone in the room stilled as he pulled his hand back and punched a hole in the wall, grabbed his keys and strode to the door. Anne moved closer and stood behind her.

"Have your shit out of my house tonight or I'll throw you out myself." He slammed the door behind him.

"Tyson, you're not thinking," Anne yelled. "What about the baby?"

Slowly, the door reopened. Tight-lipped he strode to her.

"Is the baby mine?" He caught his sister's fist as she swung over Lynay's head to punch him in the face and then pushed her away. "Stay out of this Anne. You wanted me to marry her, so this is who she gets."

"You're deliberately being an ass," Anne hissed. Her hot tears landed on Lynay's shoulder. "You know this baby is yours!"

"I don't know a damned thing other than this, she spread her legs for some asshole. Now stop messing with me Anne. Lynay answer the damn question, is the baby mine?"

Anne sent him an evil eye when she heard her daughter fuss and turned to go see about her. He looked back at her, slumped in the chair.

"Yes." her voice as broken as her heart.

"Well after the blood tests prove it one way or the other." He snatched up some of the pictures. "I'll see you in court. I am sure a judge will love to see the type of woman that wants to raise my child. Maybe they'll have something to say about the one you're raising now."

Pain laced through her chest, as she tried to imagine her world without him. "You bastard," Lynay screamed. "You'll never take my babies. Never, you hear me!"

"Fuck you Lynay. Oops... that's right I already did." He turned to leave.

"Tyson, that wasn't necessary," his aunt reprimanded. "You're not thinking clearly. You need to leave before you do irreparable damage." She watched Lynay.

Lynay collapsed against the counter as the wheels spun out the driveway. Glancing at the pictures again, she almost blacked out; she couldn't speak as tears clogged her throat. She shot up from the table and toddled to the half bath down the hall, dropped and vomited into the toilet. Rushing behind her, Aunt Lilly and Anne crowded around the door murmuring. She couldn't make out what they said, her head buzzed, as she fainted.

Chapter 17

Lynay moved in a daze, idly picking up and replacing things. When she entered Seth's room later, her heart skipped a beat as she watched him sleep so peacefully.

"Oh my God." She placed her hand to her mouth as a new batch of tears fell. How was she going to explain this to her son? She wished she had never let them get close. All the phone calls over the past year, the promises made to each other. Tyson's disappearance would devastate the little boy.

Suddenly, it was too much. She spun and ran out the room through the rear door. She sat on the moon lit deck, and cried. Another baby was on the way. There would be no tender touches, and no tender smiles to help through the pain.

Once again, there'd be no back rubs or freaky food runs. Pregnant with Seth, she had sworn that she would never go through another birth alone again. Married and pregnant, yet abandoned again, what did she do wrong?

Nothing.

Just because someone sent fake pictures that anyone with decent computer skills could create, her life now hung in tatters. Dropping her head in her hand, she moaned as her heart cracked deep inside. She wrapped her arms around her waist to ease the shaking of her body.

Somehow, he'd slipped in. She slapped her palm against the wood. She didn't know when it happened, but he did. She loved his fickle ass, and now she'd pay a heavy toll. Sniffling, she considered his last words. No way would he get the baby. Whatever she needed to do to protect her children, she'd do. Rocking back and forth on the bench, she startled at the arms that enfolded her shoulder pulling her close.

Anne, she knew it was her friend. She'd heard her girlfriend take it to her husband earlier, and smiled. Anne could be straight up gangsta and didn't take shit from anybody. She would fight first and ask questions later. They sat together quietly, watching the stars and thinking.

"He's an ass Lynay. I'm sorry I introduced you." She squeezed her shoulder.

After clearing her throat, she shook her head. "Um, he's not an ass. He's been burned before. You warned me. Remember? To him I cheated like Allison or your mom." Patting Anne's hand, she continued. "Don't get me wrong, I'm hurt and pissed. I trusted him with my child, my heart and my body." Looking upward, and then at her friend, as tears pooled in her eyes. "But he didn't know me. After this entire time girl, he still has no clue of who I am," she whispered thickly. Swallowing hard, "that's what burns Anne. If I had seen those pictures of him and someone else, I would listen and think there could be another explanation; because I believe he's a man of honor and integrity. I'd always give him the benefit of the doubt. You feel me?"

"Yeah I feel you. This is just so wrong."

"When Allison called on his phone, I asked and listened. I didn't go off like you would've."

Anne snorted. "Like you didn't go off with Robert and the baseball bat?"

"Hey, he called you some ugly names at the park. You better believe I'd take it to his ass,"

Lynay said, frowning at the memory.

Anne pushed her shoulder and they laughed. "You've done a lot of good here, the back yard, the swings and toys. It's obvious a lot of love and caring went into turning this house into a home."

"Thanks." She looked at the yard, felt the tug of the house and released it. The cost was too high. She'd take her losses and leave. The last man she'd run behind, laughed in her face with his other woman. Over meant over, leave meant leave. No second guessing and reading shit into stuff. There'd been enough rejection in her life that she wouldn't hang around for someone who didn't believe in her, in them. He'd once told her to take him at his word, but he hadn't been willing to do the same. Fuck it.

Tyson's going to feel like shit when he discovers his mistake." Anne sounded gleeful.

"Well don't get so excited about it." She tapped her friend on the shoulder and then hugged her. Anne had believed in her the entire time, that thought pushed away some of the pain.

"Just make sure you let him sweat extra for me, Okay?"

Not ready to think about the implications of those remarks, Lynay stood up. She needed to get alone and think. Crying would come later after they she settled.

"Come on partner, I want to get out of here. I'll go to the Extended Stay while I try and decide what to do."

"Uh...no, you'll be going with Aunt Lilly and me to the house in Henderson while we decide what we are going to do," Anne corrected, daring her to disagree.

"That's what I said, didn't you hear me?" They walked in the house arm in arm. Aunt Lilly had waited in the kitchen. It was obvious they were all tired, they'd just made the trip from Raleigh.

"We will leave sometime tomorrow ladies. We all need to get some sleep."

Stopping abruptly, Lynay bumped into Anne. "I thought psycho man said for us to leave tonight," Anne said.

"No tomorrow's fine." Aunt Lilly's voice held confidence as she turned to go to her room.

"What makes you so sure Aunty?" Lynay called behind her.

"Because I told him we'd leave tomorrow," she yelled back. "Now get some sleep, we've all had a long day."

Tyson had been staying with Blue for a large portion of the past week. He'd mentioned to Blue that his wife cheated on him and Blue's quick defense of Lynay still made him angry.

"Lynay didn't cheat on you man. She's not like that" he'd, replied so matter of factly that Tyson wondered if his friend had made an attempt to check her out. Mocking his friend, he'd pulled out the pictures and threw them on the table. The man let out a loud long whistle that had Tyson itching to punch him in the jaw.

"These are good, but are they supposed to mean something?" he asked calmly while still looking at the photos.

"She's fucking some other dude, that's what it means," he yelled. Snatching the pictures, he threw them on the floor, and flopped down on the sofa grabbing his beer.

"Or, it could mean someone knows your trigger and wants you to think she cheated on you to cause problems in your marriage. Glad we both know you're smarter than that, right?"

Tyson got angry and left.

The next day, Blue came by while he watched TV. Blue sighed as he sat across from him. "Ty considering our training and what we do for a living, I can't believe you broke up your family over a damn picture." Blue shook his head. "If anybody knows how pictures lie, it's us. Remember when we had that op over in —"

"I get it, I get it," he snapped. "I was irrational at the time." He was embarrassed for being so exposed.

"Now let me see..." Blue continued as he sat forward, tapping his finger on the table. "Who would know your personal P.O. Box info and know that you'd automatically believe what you've been trained to ignore? I wonder who stands to gain from your blue balls... hmmm." Blue scoffed shaking his head. "Anybody come to mind?"

He'd felt the blood rush to his face. He couldn't believe how he'd allowed himself to be played. Infidelity. That one issue had always been an Achilles heel for him. His heart tried to warn him, and he'd dismissed it. Anne, Aunt Lilly and even Lynay had tried to tell him, but he'd been so mired in the past that he failed to live in the present.

Wiping his hand over his face, he flinched at all the fences he'd have to mend. Beginning with Lynay and Seth. His heart wept at the promises he made to Seth and then broken. How could he have done that? He remembered the disillusionment he had experienced as a young boy when his dad forgot his birthday, or wouldn't go with him to an event after promising he would.

As a child, he remembered not trusting his dad's promises. Each "next time" became meaningless words. God help him, he didn't want that for his son. He needed to fix this fast. Shaking his head at his stupidity, he grimaced. Blue had hit it on the head right off. The military manipulated photos when necessary to confuse an enemy or gain additional information. Such a simple thing, an easy explanation. Both he and Anne missed it, and she mastered in stuff like that. Obviously, they were too close to the situation and hadn't been thinking rationally.

His sister would probably kick his ass before she forgave him, and he could only imagine his aunt's disappointment. She hadn't returned to his home since Lynay left. Every time he thought about the things he'd said and done, he'd grab a bottle and proceed to get drunk.

Earlier that week he'd called his aunt to ask how everyone was doing, and she'd snapped at him without telling him anything. Lynay wouldn't answer or return his calls. Anne would bust his balls for sure, so he hadn't even bothered calling her. They had a baby on the way, and his wife wouldn't speak to him, not that he blamed her. He refused to lose her and Seth. Whatever it took, he'd get his family back.

Chapter 18

"Get up man, the General wants to see us today at 1300 hours." Blue stared at him, a slight frown marring his face. "I take it you haven't made up with Lynay."

"Why do you say that?"

"Other than the fact you've been getting shit-faced every day, and you look like a bomb exploded over you? No reason."

"Fuck you."

"Never. Are you gonna be okay man?"

"Hmm... Yeah, I'll be fine. Just need to get - oomph." He stumbled and fell over the coffee table. "Ow... shit, who put that there?"

Blue laughed. "It's always been there, man. Uh... like I said are you going to be alright meeting with the General?"

"Do I have a choice?" Tyson yawned, bleary eyed.

"Nope." Blue chuckled before going to his room.

"Well then I'll have to pull myself together and make sure I'm all right." He limped toward the bathroom.

Tyson pulled himself together in time to make their appointment with General Jenkins. He looked and felt like warmed over death. Walking into the office, the Officer motioned them into seats. General Jenkins looked over at Tyson and then glanced at Blue.

"What's been going on with you Bradford? You look like shit!" His latent southern twang obvious as he glared at him.

"Just a few problems I'm ironing out sir. I have it under control," he said even as his head recoiled from the General's loud voice.

"Good, make sure that you do." Pausing, he looked at both men for a moment before dimming the lights in the office. "I came across some information lately that I thought you both

needed to be made aware of." He pointed toward the screen and punched in some information into his computer. They all watched as it came on line.

"I want you to know someone sent me this email as part of an ongoing investigation. I believe you'll understand why in a moment." He continued typing, they watched as a gay website came on the screen.

"Um... I'll just scroll until I get to what you need to see." The next picture caused both men to jump from their seats.

"What the fuck?" Tyson yelled. "I don't do that shit." He turned to his commander, Blue did the same. The General watched them.

"It gets worst gentlemen. Obviously, you men have an enemy. There are pictures of the two of you kissing and having sex, repeatedly." He told them as they stared in shock at the graphic pictures of Blue penetrating Tyson, sucking one another and other sexual forays. He paused on the picture of them hugging each other around the neck, dog tags clearly visible with their names and ranks. Stunned silence permeated the room as they looked at themselves on the screen.

Unable to believe it, Tyson looked at his Commander. "What, where...where did this come from sir? Who did this? Why?"

"Is this because he's been drunk and crashing at my house for the past week?" Blue sat slumped into his chair, in an apparent daze.

"No this has been up much longer than a week, or a month for that matter. I think someone wants you both kicked out of the Army. From what I'm told, this website gets a lot of traffic. There are pictures of both of you in uniform." The General admitted as both men swung backward to look at him, recognizing the seriousness of the matter.

"Sir, with all due respect, you can certainly ask me, and I will tell you, I'm not gay," Tyson ground out. Blue was poised to echo his statement when the General, waved him down.

"Hell I know that man. That's not in question here. The question is why? Someone went through a lot of trouble to destroy your name and set you up to lose your commission. Why now? Is it someone from one of your missions? What's been going on Major? Captain?"

Taking a deep breath, Tyson glanced at Blue, and then the General. He repeated the story about the night he returned from overseas, the photos, the breakup and his wife's departure. Blue chimed in with him being gullible enough to fall for such a ploy.

"Captain that's enough," the General chastised, before making another comment. "Did you hear me Major?"

"I'm sorry sir. I'm still trying to take all this in."

"I was just telling the Captain that these photos starting showing up on this site over 3 to 5 months ago. You need to be aware, there's an ongoing investigation on both of you for homosexual activity. I have sent in my report, they'll be contacting you soon. Fucking internet, now we have to monitor it because it can be so deadly. I simply can't have my team's information online for some terrorist or enemy to get their hands on."

Tyson noticed how the General watched them and could tell it bothered him to be having this type discussion.

"Anything happen around then that might give us a clue," the General asked. Tyson and Blue looked at each other trying to think clearly.

"We were on a couple of missions, first in Iraq and then Afghanistan....we hit Pakistan for a little while," Tyson answered thinking about the ops they'd run. Nothing had gone wrong there were no casualties. "No sir, nothing I can remember. Is it possible that this stems from a previous op?"

"Hmmm, that's something to think about." The General jotted down something on a piece of paper.

"Didn't you return stateside during that time to drop off that package?" Blue asked into the quiet.

"Yeah.... I did. Oh Shit." He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"What... did something happen?" the General questioned. He stopped abruptly. "Lt. Kringle from my office and Allison. Shit, this is getting to be a damn nuisance Major!" he said. "Where is she?"

"I don't know Sir. I haven't seen or heard from her since security escorted her out of the hotel that night."

He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. This would be an incredible payback if it came from Allison. His career, his marriage and his relationship with his family, all destroyed if this worked the way she planned. Without firing a weapon she'd hit him hard, almost fatally. She'd probably hired someone to follow Lynay and take pictures, maybe even hired some actors. She had a lot of pictures of him and Blue from happier times.

"Is she capable of doing something like this?"

"Yes sir," both men answered at the same time.

The General sighed as he glared at them. "Women, damn the wrong one can make your life a living hell," he muttered drily and gave them with a mock salute. "First, we have to do damage control. We'll pull down your pictures and information off these websites. Hopefully we'll get them all."

"You, you mean there's more, Sir?" Blue asked, his voice fearful.

The General looked over his glasses at them and folded his hands across one another. "I showed you the tame ones. Someone has your face all over the Internet screwing everything with two and four legs." Standing, he walked over to the board on the other side of the room. "They went too far by giving out your personal information, especially your clearance level info. For that, they'll have our brightest on their asses."

The blood had left Tyson's face. He felt faint. He couldn't look at Blue, he was sure he'd empty his stomach on the carpet if he did.

"We keep watch on your credit when you're on ops. One application made it through the approval process for a Visa a few months ago. We assumed it was your wife, so we let it go through." He informed Tyson handing him a sheaf of papers. "The others we blocked suspecting fraud. I suggest you check your credit report and your credit cards. It's possible you're being victimized for identity theft in more ways than one Major. You too Captain, it seems someone is dragging you into it because of the close connection." Blue nodded and accepted the papers the General handed him.

A stunned Tyson and Blue walked over to the chart with the Commander and half listened to some critical data for another operation. Tyson's mind raced with all the possibilities. He'd lost his wife and son because of this bullshit.

He could face charges leading to dismissal, his authority undermined, his face recognized in foreign countries alerting everyone of his military status. This hit hard on multiple levels. The strategist in him appreciated the simplicity and genius of the plan. The soldier bucked and demanded retribution.

"Go home Bradford," General Jenkins said. "I said go home Bradford, work out your problems. You're one of my best, and you're operating on half a tank. Right now with your information compromised, we're going to keep you stateside for a while. I have personnel

tracking the culprits, and we'll prosecute as soon as we catch up with them. What they've done is a crime, and we'll handle it." Pausing, he continued, "I understand congratulations are in order." He held out his hand.

Tyson took it and gave it a firm shake. "Yes sir. Thank you sir."

"Dismissed."

Chapter 19

Tyson and Blue walked toward the truck, he noticed Blue kept looking in different directions. "What's wrong with you? What are you looking for?" Tyson asked as they reached the truck.

"Those pictures freaked me out." He paused. "You think some of the people here saw them?"

"Probably, there're gay men and women in the military, and I'm sure they've seen those photos. One of them probably turned it in. Shit, they've been on the web how long, four or five months?" Shaking his head, he shot out a question. "Did you happen to see how many hits that site gets? It's ridiculous." They sped toward Blue's home. He hated his partner got dragged into his mess.

"Hey man, I just want to thank you for putting up with me this past week," Tyson said as he walked around to get to his truck.

"No problem. Just one question though." Blue squinted against the sun, turned and looked at him.

"What?"

"Do you love her?"

The question surprised him. "I'm not sure" He wondered where this was going. With Blue, you never knew.

"Why'd you freak out then? If you don't love her, what difference would it make if she fucked up?" He stroked his chin, considering. "You'd just divorce her like you did Allison. Hell, you didn't react this strong after catching her in the act."

He shrugged, before leaning against his truck. "I didn't care one way or the other by then. The divorce was just legally burying something that in my mind had been dead for a while." Looking around at the clean yards, large homes and children playing in Blue's neighborhood, he knew that's what he'd had with Lynay. Family, stability, he'd never felt this type of connection

with Allison. He decided to come clean with Blue. The narrow escape of losing his job and his family shot through a lot of BS.

"The difference my friend is, she matters. Lynay matters a lot to me. I'm guilty of losing my mind when I saw the pictures. That's never happened before, and I didn't handle it well. Tell you the truth, I can't deal with the thought of her with another man. Unfortunately, someone figured that out and used it as a wedge."

Do you think Allison's behind this?"

I'm not sure. She is mean enough, but I never would have credited her with this much smarts. If someone else made the suggestion, I can see her all for it and even providing the information. But she's not the brightest seed in the pumpkin patch and has little patience to wait this long for revenge. Someone went through a lot of trouble gathering data, manipulating pictures, and I can assure you it will take a minute to track them down. This smacks of a professional job, and she's not a pro by a long shot." Tyson turned his neck to get the kinks out, hearing a slight pop he realized how tense he'd become.

"Listen, I want to apologize for them dragging you into this. Messing with our careers is a tough pill to swallow, and I'm sure this will all be sorted out soon. If this is my crazy assed ex-wife, I'll be clapping as they lead her off to jail."

"Yeah but her family is mad core military. You really think she'll see time or they'll ever let it get that far?"

He thought a moment about Allison's brother who was a Major on Bragg, her grandfather was a retired General, with lots of other connections through other family members. Blue had a point; she might never see the inside of a prison. But her dad, an Army Pilot, was a rigid by the books kind of guy. It could be a toss-up; you just never knew.

"I don't know man, but one thing for sure, they'll get her out of our hair, and that's all I can hope for right now. As I said, I'm sorry they dragged you into this." He stepped up into the truck, sent a mock salute and pulled off toward home.

Lynay couldn't believe it. Three days after she'd moved out of Tyson's house, she realized her cell phone was dead. There had been so much happening with packing, moving and settling in temporarily at Aunt Lilly's that she'd never checked. Another day slipped by before she

realized she hadn't brought her charger with her. Thanks to the remote location, it took another day to locate an outlet for a replacement. She'd been heartbroken and furious at Tyson for not calling by now.

Neither Aunt Lilly nor Anne mentioned him at all, and she found herself reluctant to be the one to bring him up. The upheaval surrounding the discovery of the fake 'Lola' website with her in the starring role, wiped her out. She'd never seen Anne so angry before. Her girl had been red and shaking. Raul closed it down.

Anne and Aunt Lilly agreed the 'Lola' site wouldn't matter when she'd lamented she wouldn't be able to teach elementary school. She knew parents were funny about things like that. They may indulge in a little freak themselves on the side, but they did not want anyone like that in a position of influence around their young kids.

The stress and worry caused her to faint a few times, pissing Anne off at Tyson even more. The doctor told her to take it easy and to stop worrying. Tired, she headed upstairs for a nap. Taking her phone into her room, she closed the door and powered it up. There were over 20 voice mails, most from Tyson and two from her cousin Rashid. Inhaling, she pushed the buttons to hear the voice messages. She sat on the chair and listened. To her surprise, the first message occurred the day after he told her to leave.

"Lynay, baby I'm sorry...(hiccup)... pleeesh...uh shit. Pleeesh. Fuck, baby I'm just a little juiced. You the bes...best mom inda whole...I mean, shit, not like, like, um. What the hell was I saying...oh yeah? I'm sawry... don't leave me. You good woman, good mama. Shit, I'll be home soon, we uh can talk, make up - okay, you hear me? ... Lynay? ... Lynay? ... (hickup).. Blue man, she hung up on me."

Lynay fell over laughing, she couldn't help it. From what she'd been told, he never got drunk, and she could hear why. Sloppy is the word that came to mind describing him on the phone. Moving to the bed, she curled up with a pillow as she replayed that one again. It felt good hearing his voice, and she warmed knowing he realized his mistake right away. It soothed away some of the pain.

Getting comfortable, she listened to each message smiling, as he sounded more and more distressed. She'd never pegged him as a man to plead his case, but with each call, he opened up in an attempt to explain his behavior from that night. She was pleased to note he was sober in each subsequent call.

"I flipped when I saw you with another man. I didn't think. A hole ripped through me, and it hurt like nothing I'd ever felt before. Believe me Lynay, I didn't respond that way with Allison, and I walked in on her screwing some guy...."

"I hope you don't throw everything away because of my jealousy. If anyone had told me before that, I was the jealous type I'd have laughed at them. I've never been jealous before..."

"I miss you and Seth so much. We need to get pass this. Please let me come see you, talk with you. I need to make this up to Seth and to you baby. Don't throw us away..."

"So many women in my life have cheated, including my mother. Still that's no excuse... you're not like them"

"Okay, I promise to stop hounding you; I can tell you haven't forgiven me. I tried to come see you, but I'm not sure you want to see me. I don't know what to do anymore. I've left all these messages apologizing, begging for another chance. I even called Aunt Lilly to make sure you were good. But she wouldn't tell me anything." Lynay raised her eyebrow at that announcement. She had no idea he'd called his aunt.

"Please tell me what to do Lynay. I want my family back. I won't call you anymore. I'll wait for you to call me. I miss you babe. I miss my son too. Please call me."

By the time the last message played, she was a basket case. The hurt in his voice mimicked hers, and tugged at her heart. Pushing her head deeper into the pillow in an attempt to muffle the sound, she cried for all the suffering their family went through. No matter the cause, they all hurt. Seth missed Tyson. Tyson missed Seth. She needed him, he needed her.

What should she do? She'd never had any guidance in this area. Her heart and mind were at odds. She almost missed it. She shot up from the bed and replayed the message. Her cousin's

anniversary party was this weekend. He reminded her of the date and demanded she and Seth come. Wiping her tears, she realized she needed to go. It would allow her time to focus on her situation without being so close. Shutting her eyes, she replayed everything Tyson had said.

Trust, her mind reeled over how quickly he dismissed their relationship. They lacked trust. She didn't doubt he'd been jealous. He was a possessive man. Nor did she doubt the sincerity of his apologies. Hindsight is a bitch. She simply wasn't sure she could live with someone who could flip so quickly. More importantly, what would stop him from doing it again? She had to think of Seth and the baby first, no matter how badly she missed him.

Quickly, while she had the courage she called and made reservations for the next day to Denver. A week or two in the mile high area would benefit her greatly, and Seth loved playing with his Uncle Rashid. Satisfied with her plan of action she got up and packed.

Chapter 20

Tyson pulled up at his aunt's home later that week. He sat in his car for a moment, looking at all the changes. The house sported a fresh coat of paint; the boards on the porch lay flat and the new railings added a touch of class. Overall, the house looked good. Getting out of the truck, he walked up the driveway to enter the house using his key.

The door didn't open. He looked at the key a second time; recognizing it was the right one, he tried again. No luck, they'd changed the lock on the door. He rang the bell and waited for someone to open the door. He'd seen his aunt's car, it was early evening; and someone should be here. After a moment, he knocked and rung the doorbell alternatively. Finally, a light came on downstairs and he heard footsteps.

"Tyson, my goodness why didn't you call and tell me you were coming?" She appeared slightly out of breath as she opened the door. One side her hair was flat giving him the impression she'd been lying down.

"I didn't know I had to call first. Is that a new rule now?" He closed the door. "Oh yeah, my key didn't work just now."

"That's right I haven't seen you since I had all the locks changed." Walking to a bowl on the counter, she dug in and reached her hand toward his. "Here take this; you can use Anne's set." She placed the keys in his hand and shuffled toward the kitchen. He stood looking at the keys in his hand wondering where Lynay and Seth had gone. He hoped his aunt would provide him with some answers.

Clasping the keys in his fist, he trailed behind her. Reaching the kitchen, he observed her bent over reaching into a lower cabinet pulling out a large pot. Placing it on the stove, she motioned for him to take a seat.

"What brings you here?" She threw vegetables and other things into the pot. He sat at the table and watched for a moment, not failing to notice her lack of greeting, and chilly reception.

"I just wanted to see you and apologize for my language and behavior during the fight." He could also gauge the difficulty of his journey of making amends with Lynay by how his aunt responded to him. He knew better than to admit that.

"Oh... alright, go ahead." She continued placing vegetables and meat into the pot with her back to him.

"I was wrong. I should've listened to Lynay and Anne. I'm a trained professional, and know better than most, that pictures are doctored. I'm sorry for the problems I caused."

Her shoulders tensed. Before he could utter another word, she whirled around; red faced, eyes squinted in fury.

Oh shit, she's the calm and sensible one. His heart dropped, he didn't stand a chance with Lynay or Anne.

"Not good enough," she hollered as she slammed the knife into the cutting board, and marched to the table with a steely glint in her eye. "You deliberately crushed the spirit of an amazing woman who loved you and is having your child." She stepped closer and smacked him upside his head.

"Ow... I guess you feel I deserve that." He rubbed the spot on his head.

"The things you said... I still can't believe you'd be that vindictive," shaking her head she turned and took a deep breath. "What the hell were you thinking? She was your wife, carrying your child. Not once, not once did you stop to think what you were doing to her. You were so caught up in your own pity party," she spat and walked over to a drawer. He watched warily as she pulled out some pictures.

"Look at this," she ordered. "Look at this, Tyson." She pointed to the woman in the picture. "There is a whole website dedicated to "Lola". That's the name they gave her. There are pictures with her face doing the most un-nat-u-ral things." She shook her head in disgust.

"I pity Allison when Anne and Raul catch up with her, but in the mean time, Lynay has to live with this stain. Someone is attempting to destroy her name, her character and integrity. She struggled to finish her degree you know that, right?" Without waiting for his response, she barreled on. "Her degree is in elementary education. Now she's convinced she won't be able to get a job because of this, this bullshit. All her dreams and hard work for what? For some jealous heifer to come steal it?" The menace in her voice had him leaning back in his chair.

"Do you realize this has been going on for months? Oh yeah, Lola has quite a following. People from all over the world view this website just to see what crazy Lola's doing."

He didn't know about the website, but she didn't require an answer from him.

"It devastated Lynay when she found out about the site. Raul closed it down. But another can pop up and may take months to track it down. She didn't sign up for this Tyson. Your baggage is making her life miserable." Moving back to the stove, she picked up her knife. "I'm not accepting your apology until Lynay accepts hers." She gave him her back.

He waited a heartbeat before asking the question that had been burning in his mind since he started this trip. "Where is she, Aunt Lilly?"

"Where's who?"

Sighing, he should've known this wouldn't be easy. His aunt and sister were loyal as ink on paper, and he'd pissed them off. Placing his hands on the table, he watched her stir the pot.

"Lynay."

"Gone, she asked me not to tell you where. Said she'd call you when she had it all figured out. She needed some space to decide what she wants to do from this point on."

Stunned, he stared at her back. It never occurred to him that they were over for good. He knew he messed up, but that happened in relationships. He'd assumed they could talk, realize they made a mistake and go on with their marriage. Aunt Lilly's talk in the past tense concerned him.

"What about the baby?" How would he know if everything was all right or not?

"What about her?"

"Her... who do you mean. Lynay?"

"She's having a girl. She kept fainting from all the stress and the doctor completed an ultrasound to check everything. He was finally able to get a good enough view and told us the sex."

"They're both okay, right?" he asked, wondering why no one called him. Even with the break up, they knew he'd want to be sure that she was okay.

"Yes, they're fine." She wiped her eyes. "I'm going to miss them. You said the other day that I'd changed, that I looked good. Well Seth and Lynay had a lot to do with that. It felt good being around children again." She sniffed.

"Seth cried for days and asked for you constantly. Lynay confided in me that you'd promised him you'd be there the next day." Her look grew fierce. One hand anchored onto her hip and the

other flew up, finger pointed. "Well thanks for teaching him a lesson we'd all rather he not learn; to make false promises. You had no right, no right to promise that child a father and then bail on him the way you did." Her hand fell into fists by her side. She heaved with the weight of her emotion. "I thought you'd call and explain your absence to him, but you didn't. What the hell's wrong with you? How could you disappoint that little boy that way?" Her eyes held him captive, demanding answers.

His eyes closed in shame for allowing others to interfere in his personal life. He fucked up. If it was just her and the baby, his wife might be willing to take him back. He held out little hope that she'd allow Seth to get close to him or any man in the future. Exhaling, he leaned back in the chair, looked up at the ceiling and tried to put his feelings into words.

"I did call. I called her the next day, well night to be exact. She didn't answer or return any of my calls." He took a minute to gather his thoughts. "I love her. I don't think I've ever felt like this before. Seeing her with another man in that picture ripped a fresh hole in me. I couldn't think past the pain. I mean we're so good together, my mind got stuck in the past, and couldn't process what I knew to be true."

She stared at him.

"I know Lynay would never cheat on me. It's not in her. That night...that night I just short-circuited. These feelings were raw and everything. I'd just admitted to being happy and then bam, I see a picture of someone banging... excuse me." He apologized at her glower.

"I mean having sex with her not long after... well, after I left our bedroom. I freaked out. Not pretty and I'm embarrassed as hell. But, there it is. The calmer she appeared, the angrier I became. I guess I equated it with her not caring about me or being as serious about our relationship. I don't know." He sat with hunched shoulders, at the kitchen table of his youth. Shame over his behavior ate at him. It had been a long time since he'd had to give an accounting in his aunt's throne room. Talk about regressing.

"All I know is I wanted her to feel some of the hurt, the pain I felt. And I took it to another level. I'd never mess with the kids, if she doesn't know that by now, then she will."

"Why'd you wait so long to come after her? It's been four weeks."

His eyes slid over her face, and focused on his clasped hands, heat flooded his cheeks. "I was drunk most of the first week, especially when she wouldn't take my calls to let me apologize. The past few weeks I was restricted to base, sorting through a bad case of identity theft and

going to therapy. My wife's not the only one that got hit. They took some old pictures of Blue and me, and placed them on a gay website. They had the two of us doing all kinds of freaky sex together." He smiled at her gasp and look of astonishment.

"But, but," she sputtered.

"Yeah, don't ask, don't tell. Someone wanted me kicked out the military. Well, the General got involved when they messed with his team. He's not allowing us to leave the country for a while since there is an investigation and until they're sure this is a domestic problem. If Allison is behind this, she's going to jail and everyone with her. I belong to the government and by giving out classified Intel she breached National security. Her vengeance will cost her. General Jenkins in particular is extremely pissed. I'll let him know about these attacks online."

"My goodness what a mess, that's pretty low. Someone needs to be arrested for all this." She shook her head. "Now, what's this about therapy?" She walked closer and looked deep into his eyes.

He could tell she had no idea of the magnitude of this attack. He didn't wish it on his worst enemy; well he wouldn't go that far.

"The General is requiring that I get some therapy to help me with this problem I have stemming from dad and Loretta. He feels it affected my training, and I need to be able to function on all burners even when I'm emotionally distressed."

"In other words he's pissed you messed up and believed the pictures without questioning them." She speculated.

He cut his eyes at her and glared. "Not only that."

She shrugged and chuckled.

"I need to operate in the present and let go of the past. The reason I couldn't come after Lynay and Seth right away is that the situation reminded me of my dad chasing his wife. When I was ten, I remember thinking he was pathetic to want her like that. I lost the little respect I had for him. In my mind, he was the definition of the man 'not to become.' The fear that I might be like him, paralyzed me." Looking at his closed fist, he took a deep breath and forced himself to relax.

"By the next day I knew I'd been wrong. I got dressed and mentally prepared myself to beg if necessary. Instead, I got chills and became nauseous. In my mind's eye, I saw dad begging Loretta. I froze. I sat in that damn truck for an hour Aunt Lilly, a whole hour unable to move,

scared by her possible rejection or worse, her admitting the pictures weren't totally wrong. I wasn't sure how far I'd go to get her back. I know she's not my mother, but I'm my father's son, and I can't live like that. I couldn't chase her like he chased Loretta."

Reaching forward, she took his large hand into her much smaller one and squeezed. He looked up and noticed the tears she held imprisoned. "Simeon was my brother," she admitted softly. "I loved him. But he was weak. You are his son, but you're not him. You're not weak at all." She patted his hand.

"Did you know he never admitted your mother was at fault in all her escapades? He made excuses for her cheating. He blamed himself, you or even the men she cheated with, but never her.

She tapped the table. "That's weakness baby. If your wife had been guilty of deceitful acts against you, then you'd have been right, and no one would blame you. But your past prevented you from recognizing the differences between the two; no make it those three women. Loretta did not love Simeon. She loved Loretta. Allison is crazy and cannot love anyone. Lynay loved you."

At some point during her rant, she'd grabbed his hand, and now gripped it tighter as he attempted to pull away.

"Listen to me, coming after your wife and child when you've hurt them is a sign of strength not weakness, son. You have another child on the way, and if you allow this fear to keep you away from your family, then yeah. Yeah, you would be like your father." Leaning forward, she kissed his cheek softly, and looked in his eyes.

"You hurt her deeply Tyson. There is no denying that. The only reason she feels that kind of pain is that she loved you just as deep. Trust is a precious gift, and you damaged, if not destroyed that with her. I hope you learn from this, and complete your therapy. I am delighted that you're accepting responsibility for your actions. I'm proud of you for that. One word of advice though," she added as she stood.

"Anything would be appreciated." He was pained, yet hopeful, as he regarded her.

Smiling, she pulled his ear and leaned down close. "Don't throw away your knee pads; you have some real begging and groveling to do."

Smiling, he kissed her cheek, stood, yawning and stretching. "I'll handle it," he said cheekily. "It's been a long day, and I'm going to go lay down for a while." Turning to leave, he stopped.

"Will you help? Put in a good word for me?" He suspected he knew the answer. Still, it didn't hurt to ask.

"No, I won't. You'll have to do this all on your own."

Knowing she was on target, he nodded his thanks and left to go to his room upstairs.

Chapter 21

Three days in the area and Lynay loved it. Seth enjoyed playing with Rashid and followed him everywhere. He was an engineer with a large firm in the area and lived in a spacious home. He'd married his high school sweetheart, and they all got along great.

"Here Lynay, this is too cute, and it'll look good on you," Gayle handed her another maternity outfit. They'd decided to get some shopping done while the weather held up. She admitted it did look good. Smiling she added it to her growing pile.

"Thanks Gayle, you're really good. I never would've put those pieces together, but they look great."

"No problem, you look so pretty pregnant."

"Thanks, that's very sweet." She didn't feel pretty; she was huge and no closer to making a decision about her marriage. She'd spent hours, weighing her situation and still hadn't come to a decision.

"Rashid and I are trying to get pregnant you know. I hope I look as good as you when I get knocked up," she said in a serious tone. Then they both broke out laughing.

"You are still crazy, and you'll be beautiful knocked up."

While in the fitting rooms, Gayle's cell went off. "Hi Mama, how ya doing?" She paused. "We're still shopping, but we'll come by when we finish."

She turned to Lynay. "I hope you don't mind, I think she gets lonely with daddy gone and Mike overseas."

"Not a problem. I've always thought your mom was cool. Remember when you and Rashid starting talking in high school?" She smiled in recollection. The two of them had looked like the odd couple. Her linebacker cousin and his petite girlfriend.

"Mama wasn't sure what to do with that big boy. She didn't believe we were only one year apart, me being the oldest. It didn't take her long to love him and treat him like hers."

"I got pulled in along because of him. Thank God for your moms. She could throw down in the kitchen." Rubbing her expanding waistline, she smiled. "The memories. Let's go, I'm ready to eat."

Mama Louise, Gayle's mom, looked just as beautiful today as the last time Lynay had seen her. Her smooth, dark brown complexion glowed with vitality and health. Her hair showed some gray, but she stood tall and proud.

"Oh my goodness! Oh my. You're having a baby!" she gushed. "You're so beautiful, your skin, and you've let your hair grow out." Her fingers combed through Lynay's tresses. "Sweetie, your aunt would be so proud of you. Married, with a baby on the way." She pulled her in for another hug and kissed her cheek before they walked into the dining room where the bulk of the meal waited on the table.

Lynay's mouth watered at the heavenly aromas wafting from the bowls. She could have sworn her daughter leaped in appreciation. After grace, she piled her plate with the southern delicacies. Fried chicken, potato salad, biscuits, buttered corn, greens and sweet tea.

"Where's your husband? Is he overseas?" Mama Louise wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"No ma'am. He's home in North Carolina."

"Why didn't he come with you then? He couldn't get time off?"

It became obvious that she wouldn't let it rest, so Lynay explained what happened. Both Gayle and her mom appeared surprised, then angry, and then thoughtful.

"You've been through so much," Gayle said. "You're such a strong woman. I've always envied that about you."

Her seriousness shocked Lynay into silence. Gayle picked up both Lynay's hands and squeezed them slightly.

"Rashid told me a little about your mom and your aunt," Mama Louise said. "I know things haven't always been easy for you. I sure that's an understatement."

Gayle released Lynay's hand. "Then you hooked up with that prick," Gayle blurted. "Now homeboy was fine - no lie," she smiled breaking some of the tension. Squeezing Lynay's hand again, she released it and sat back, as they all watched each other.

"But he was a dog. He had us all fooled girl. I remember being so happy for you. I thought finally she's found someone who'd make her smile. Enjoy her life. You were always so serious."

"Now, I know you took a chance on your husband," Mama Louise jumped in. "And right now you're hurt and pissed. You should be. The way that you start a relationship is the same way it ends. You have to train his ass now."

Train him? How? She leaned forward, eager to hear, to learn.

"Teach him now that he can't say whatever comes across his mind, and then expect to wash it away with an excuse or apology." Gayle nodded in agreement. Both women were serious as they schooled her.

"But after you make him sweat some, and pay for his half baked actions." The older woman held both women captive with her words. "You gotta screw his brains out repeatedly, to remind him that there is a whole lot at risk. Starting between his legs and yours."

All three women laughed, lifted their hands to the other offering high fives.

"Hmmm, he sounds like he could work a sister over."

Taking a moment to fan herself, Lynay nodded as Mama Louise glanced at her. "Listen, if he's like my Sonny was, he's worth the effort to train for the long haul. Some men aren't, but a man that's basically good at the core can be trained to be a great husband."

"Be strong, hold out for a while longer and then I think he'll reward you for your patience," Gayle said. "You want to make sure he never even thinks about doing this shit ever again."

Lynay stared at Gayle in awe as Mama Louise beamed, looking on. "Where'd you learn all this from?" Lynay asked, leaning forward on the table.

"My mom told me." Gayle pointed her thumb at her mom, who smiled wider and nodded in agreement. "She had to do it with my dad when I was smaller."

She smiled. "You see, there's basic good in most people, and you should be able to weed them out through the dating period. But a lot of men lack the benefit of having a man in their life to model or teach them how to be good husbands."

"True, just like a lot of women don't know how to be good wives or mothers," Mama Louise chimed in.

Lynay nodded, thinking of her biological mother, and Tyson's mom.

"So while we were planning my wedding, mama schooled me. If he's worth fighting for, invest the time and train him. Best to do it early. If he's abusive and just rotten, cut your losses

near the beginning and get the hell out. The real deal is this. Everyone makes mistakes. It's what you do after, that makes the real difference."

Mama Louise applauded Gayle and gave her a quick kiss. "It's good to see you were listening. I passed onto you what my mom passed to me. Make sure both of you pass it on to your daughters."

Glancing at Lynay, she waited. "How do you know if he's worth it?"

Lynay shrugged, she didn't know the answer. So far it all made good sense to her. She wanted to get back with Tyson, but she still had questions, doubts.

"How soon did he apologize?"

"He left a message on the machine the next day."

"How did he sound?"

Smiling in remembrance, she chuckled. "Drunk and babbling how sorry he was."

"Do you believe him?" Mama Louise asked raising an eyebrow in question.

That caught Lynay off guard. A part of her believed him and another was unsure. "I believe he realizes I didn't cheat on him. I believe he's sorry I left and I think he's sorry he disappointed Seth."

"Here's the most important question." Both Mama Louise and Gayle stared at her. "Can you see yourself with this man in ten, or twenty years? If you can, then go ahead and put him in check. Train him and keep going. But if not, forget it and kick his trifling ass to the curb."

Lynay felt them watching her as she thought about everything they'd been through, his affection for Seth, his love for his aunt, and his sister. The light that came into his eyes when he pleased her and touched her. She wasn't sure how he felt about her, but Tyson was a good man, but he had a blind spot she didn't trust.

"You don't need to answer me, just think about it. You have Seth, and the baby to think about as well. Not just the two of you."

She nodded, relieved. She didn't want to think that deep right now, but later. Later she'd place some things in perspective and possibly give her husband a call.

Chapter 22

Exhausted, but unable to sleep as memories of Lynay and Seth haunted him constantly since his return from Aunt Lilly's. Exhaling, Tyson walked further into the kitchen and picked up a picture Seth had colored. He'd found it in the boy's room after they left. Just holding it, he felt more connected, and less adrift. Therapy helped him realize the root of his pain and consequent actions, but he needed his family to complete him.

In the end, he knew Aunt Lilly was right; he had to work this out on his own. He could only hope Lynay would forgive him soon, he ached with missing them. He threw his keys on the counter, and headed for the bathroom to take another cold shower. Lately, he often woke up in a cold sweat, hard as rock thinking about the hot sex between him and his wife.

Her smooth perfect body fit him like a glove. Her tight canal drove him insane; he remembered how she milked him when she came. Shit, he needed her. He'd gotten himself off many times from the memory of their bath and bed play from that fateful night.

Turning on the water, the ringtone of his cell interrupted him. Flipping off the shower, he walked into the bedroom and answered. No one said anything; he looked at the number, felt his heart lurch as he spoke into the phone.

"Lynay, Lynay? Baby, how're you doing?" He needed to hear her voice with every fiber of his being. His knuckles went white from where he gripped the phone so hard.

"I'm, I'm okay. How are you?" She cleared her throat.

He closed his eyes and shuddered at the soft tone. He hadn't realized until then how starved he'd been for the sound of her voice.

"Better now." He hesitated and then plowed forward. "How's Seth?"

"He' doing fine. He's sleep. He had a long day with Rashid."

Neither spoke.

He felt himself getting anxious. "I'm glad you called. I was beginning to feel like a stalker leaving so many messages." He paused when she didn't respond. "I'm a jealous fool. I let past hurts and situations cloud my judgment, and I hurt you. Damn, baby if I could redo that night I

would. I am so sorry. I hope you can forgive me." He'd waited twelve months to come home to her and left before the sun rose the next day. Some days he barely forgave himself.

"Why do you say you're a jealous fool?"

He closed his eyes as he fell onto the bed. They'd never really got around to talking about their feelings for each other. Although he'd told his aunt, he'd never told his wife.

"Just thinking about you with another man is enough to make me want to do violence." He tried to explain the feelings trapped inside him. As a trained military weapon, he knew he was a dangerous man.

"If I'd seen that guy in the picture that night, I'd be in prison because he'd be dead." He didn't want her afraid of him, but he knew he spoke true. "Normally, I have a slow burn, but not when it comes to you. Seeing your face with someone else made me want to kill someone. It took me by surprise, and I... I flipped. I've never been jealous like that before. Shit, I never felt like that before." Shaking his head, he had to fight the rage that threatened to rise at the thought of another man with his woman. "We'd just made love and to see that fake picture right after that, I lost it. I hurt you with everything I said, and I'm so sorry." He fell silent, waiting for her to speak; praying that it wasn't too late for them.

"Why didn't you believe me when I asked you? I mean I asked to you to trust me like I trusted you. Was that asking too much? I told you before, you weren't the only one with integrity."

He flinched at the hurt in her voice. He swallowed hard. "No... It's not asking too much. To be honest, I didn't hear your request to believe you, although now I do remember that." Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes again.

"I don't know what to say baby. I messed up. I know I did. I know this doesn't make it better. Being mired in the past pulled me down. It was like déjà vu for me, and I lashed out at you. I'm so sorry."

"I got the impression that you wanted to hurt me. Not physically. The name-calling was bad enough. But, you threatened to take the kids. You went over the damn line, Tyson."

He covered his eyes in shame. "I know. But I'd never mess with the kids. You're an awesome mom. I'll be honest with you. I had just told Anne and Aunt Lilly that I was the happiest I'd ever been. I'd just promised not to mess up with you. Then when you came out, you

appeared calm. In my crazed mind that equaled you didn't care like I cared. I felt as if I was dying inside, and I wanted you to feel some pain."

"Now that's real messed up, Tyson," she snapped. "Maybe we just react to stuff differently. Maybe it took me a little longer to process what was happening. My world fell apart that night. My son was asleep down the hall, expecting to see his daddy in the morning. I have a baby in my stomach that needed me to be as calm as possible. And my husband, who'd just rocked my world a couple hours earlier, called me a bitch and a whore." Her voice rose as he attempted to interrupt and apologize.

"On top of all that, he threw me out of our home."

He heard the hurt and anger in her voice, and it tore him apart. "I'm sorry - "

"This is not about you being sorry. This is about your perception that I wasn't feeling any pain over those damn pictures. What hurt me the most... the biggest challenge I have is that you'd think so little of me. How can you be married to me this long and not know that I wouldn't cheat on you?"

"I knew it on a subconscious level. I wasn't thinking about you per se, I was thinking about the cheaters in my life overall." The rationale was lame, but it was still true.

"Well thanks so much for your concern about our marriage. I'll get back with you another time."

"Wait!" Tyson yelled. "Don't...don't hang up, it's not like what you think. I am concerned about our marriage. I think about it all the time. It's just at that particular moment, my mind flipped, shut down." He swallowed as fear rose up and gripped his throat. Sweat poured from his brow as his heart pounded. How could he make her understand?

"My therapist thinks it was my way of coping with what I couldn't handle." Praying she'd hear him out he spoke quickly into the phone. "There's so much shit going on right now. Someone is trying to get me kicked out of the Army, attempting to drive a wedge between my family and me, while attacking Blue's character." He nodded at her gasp.

"Yeah, I needed help. I can't allow the past to control my life. I've been going for the past few weeks and a lot of things are clearer for me."

"It seems I've missed a lot of stuff," she said. "What do you mean someone's trying to get you kicked out the service? Is that possible?"

"Yeah. Have you heard of don't ask, don't tell?"

"For gays in the military?"

"Yeah. Well someone placed some pictures of Blue and me fucking on a gay website. They used some older photos, but you can still tell who we are."

"What?" She squeaked. "Are you kidding me? You and Blue, gay?" He heard her laughing and it surprised him at first.

"Yeah, I'm glad you think that shit's funny. Trust me when the General called us in and showed us the website, laughing was the last thing on our mind." He still got angry when he thought about it. He intended to be involved when the person that started this whole mess talked. He'd have a long conversation, alone, with the perv.

"No, no I'm not. Well actually I am laughing, but not at you. But at the situation. Someone really knows your hot buttons don't they?"

He could tell she was trying not to laugh. "Well, pretty soon they will be pressing buttons in Leavenworth. The General's pissed and on their ass."

"What's this about therapy?" she asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Nothing much." he sighed. "If you'd asked me a month ago if my mom had influenced my life in any way, I'd probably said no. I may have admitted that her faithless actions challenged my relationships where partners were unfaithful. But as you and I both discovered that's not true. There's a lot of pent up anger. And because of my feelings for you, it exploded."

"Wait, what do you mean your feelings for me?"

"Lynay, come on. You know how much I love you. I know this isn't what we agreed, or discussed when we started out, but things changed. My feeling changed." He paused, waiting for a response. When there was none he panicked. "Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here," she whispered.

Collapsing back in the chair, he held the phone tight and thought he heard a sniff. The sound came again muffled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

He heard her voice catch. "Are you crying?"

"Don't yell at me, Tyson."

"Okay, okay. Just calm down and talk to me please," he said quickly. "Tell me what's wrong. I can't help if I don't know."

"You, you never told me you loved me before."

"Can you speak up I can't hear you." He held the phone close to his ear.

"I said you never told me you loved me before. Why now after everything that's happened?"

"There're a lot of things I've never told you before. Like for instance, the first time we talked I thought your voice felt like warm melted honey. When I was deployed and we talked it soothed and calmed me. That's why I always find a way to talk to you before a mission." He continued not allowing her to interrupt. Now was time to put it all on the line.

"I love that you took in a lonely old woman and gave her a reason to get up every morning. You took my place on her pedestal and that's major."

She laughed.

"Or how I keep your smile in my mind's eye to brighten my day when things are dark. No matter what challenge I face, I'm determined to win every battle, complete every mission, so I can come back to you and Seth. Baby, if I wasn't in love with you, I wouldn't have given a damn about the pictures." He smiled at her gasp.

"I'm flying at half mast without you. I need you to forgive me. Please give me another chance. I love you baby."

"I...I don't know what to say."

"Do you miss me? Don't you miss me at all?" His voice deepened with need. "Because I miss you."

"Yeah, but what about- "

"Now, I have one question for you. Do you love me? Even a little?" He stroked himself as he waited for her to answer.

Chapter 23

Lynay left Denver and went home. She'd decided to give Tyson a chance to make up to her. Pulling into the driveway, she smiled seeing his truck. She hadn't told him her plans, but didn't think he'd mind. Seth had been bubbling ever since he'd talked to Tyson on the phone. Both of them were homesick.

Opening the door, she noticed the darkness in the house. Checking the time, she couldn't believe it was only three in the afternoon. After stumping her toe, she opened a mini-blind to provide some much-needed light. She'd taken her hand off Seth for just a second, and he ran full tilt to the master bedroom.

"Seth," she hissed after him. He either didn't hear or ignored her, probably the latter. Moving quickly, she followed the peals of laughter in the air.

"Daddy, daddy," Seth repeated as he hugged and kissed a sleepy Tyson awake. Bare chested and dressed only in a pair of boxers, Tyson smiled and winked at her. His smoldering eyes promising her a sexy retribution.

She struggled for breath watching from the doorway. It'd been a long month and she missed him terribly. Her body reacted to his voice. Moisture pooled between her thighs, her nipples went on alert begging to be touched. Leaning against the doorframe to hide her need, she offered a feeble smile in his direction. The raspberries Tyson blew on Seth's stomach kept him from noticing her weakened state. Seth's raucous laughter erased some of her lingering doubt.

"There's my l'il man," Tyson growled and then attacked again tickling and laughing. Finally, he stopped and looked at Seth.

"Daddy missed you so much. I love you l'il man. Did you have fun in Denver?" He dropped a quick kiss on Seth's forehead before listening attentively to his chatter.

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and watched. She ignored his outstretched hand, yet didn't remove hers when he placed his over it. They both watched Seth bubble and glow about being home until he wore himself out.

Lynay's mind wandered. She glanced at Tyson's muscled chest, long legs and a longing so powerful shook her core. Looking over at him, she noticed the warm gray of his eyes. He looked so damn tasty.

She felt him squeeze her hand and looked up. He winked and leaned forward giving her the lightest kiss on her lips. The sensation went straight to her heart. His hand brushed over her mound, and she purred. No way had she made that sound. She didn't know if it was the pregnancy or what, but she needed him something fierce. Tyson pushed her back on the bed. With Seth on his chest, he embraced his family.

"Thank you God." He whispered.

Turning, she looked at him, then at Seth who had nodded off to sleep. It had been a long day and it caught up with him. Reaching out, she stroked Seth's face and then touched Tyson's mouth. His lips were so soft and full. She could feast on them all day. Leaning up on her elbow, she offered her lips for a proper kiss and he delivered.

She sank into his warmth as he stroked the inside of her mouth. It was a heady feeling being with him like this again. They both froze as Seth moved slightly and almost fell from Tyson's chest. Gently, he moved Seth to one side of the king-sized bed and settled him down. Returning to her, he pulled her upward and attacked her mouth, greedy for kisses. He nipped her neck and sucked her pebbled nipples.

"I missed you so much baby," he moaned into her mouth not allowing her a response. "I love you. Thanks for giving me another chance," he murmured in between kisses.

He set her ablaze. How did he do it so fast? The question became a fleeting thought of little consequence. His hands rubbed her extended belly as he murmured words of love.

"Baby, I'm not dreaming am I? I've thought of this for so long." He whispered holding her tight, she felt him shudder.

"It's no dream." She palmed his hardened length. Feeling him shiver provided her with a sense of awe, which morphed into passion. She craved his touch and needed all of him now. Rolling over eluding his hands, she stood and peeled away her clothes.

Trembling, she watched his eyes widen and then glaze over in lust, passion, and an unfamiliar emotion. He left the room with Seth in his arms.

Somehow, she knew this reckoning would cement their relationship. Pulling off the useless articles of clothing and tossing them with the others, she waited until he returned from Seth's

room. He strode across the room and took her in his arms, holding, squeezing and molding her to his body.

"Thank you for coming home. I love you so much," his voice hitched as he stroked her back, holding her tight.

"Love me Tyson, I missed you. Love me please," she begged. Her body ached for fulfillment only he could provide.

Gently, he lifted her and placed her onto their bed. His tongue and mouth worshipped her slowly. She panted. Her body demanded more from him.

"Tyson, you have to... I need...please," she struggled to get the words out as his mouth went to work on her clit and his fingers filled her tight sheath.

"Mmmmm," he moaned, licking and sucking as she bucked on his face.

"Tyson...oh my god, Tyson...please, so close, so close...arghhhh!" she screamed as goose bumps exploded over her skin and waves of pleasure crested and exploded through her. Her legs spasmed as he held her tight, placing gentle kisses on her clit and lips.

"You always taste so good," he whispered.

She fought to catch her breath. He sheathed himself in her before she could wrap her arms around his neck and froze at the exquisite sensation.

Slowly he stroked.

She needed him fast and hard. He pulled her legs wider, allowing room for her protruding stomach. She tightened them around his waist not wanting to miss a single thrust. "Faster, please, harder, yes Tyson, yes..." she moaned, delighted with his taking. She recognized it for what it was. He reclaimed his status in her life and her bed. Her king had returned vigorously and her body welcomed him home.

She shook at the wonderful fullness and sensations that shot up and down her body. They soon found their rhythm, her walls clenched. His back arched, as he shook. Seeing him reach his pleasure took her over the edge.

Her yell matched his.

Tyson woke up refreshed. He looked over at Lynay, then Seth. Sometime during the night, the boy woke and joined them in bed. Smiling, he reached over and patted the brown curls, as he

continued to snore lightly. Pulling Lynay closer, he inhaled her sweet scent and rubbed his face against her hair. It was soft and tickled his nose.

"Hey there," she whispered into the quiet of the room.

"Hey." He placed a kiss on her forehead. "Are you hungry?"

"No, not really. Maybe later." Rolling so she could face him, she lifted her hands and placed one on each side of his face. "We need to talk."

Nodding, they both got up quietly and strolled into the living room. She followed him on the sofa, and leaned back into his arms. In silence, he picked up her ring finger, brought it to his mouth and kissed it. He entwined their fingers and stared down at them.

"I told you before that you hurt me with your lack of trust," she said.

His eyes tracked her tongue as it licked her lips.

"Marriage requires trust to survive, and that's been broken between us. I honestly don't know if we can get it back or not. In reality, at the end of the day you are the father of my children, and we have a lot of passion and feelings between us. I don't know if that's enough for you, I'm not sure it is for me."

After a moment, he spoke into the quiet of the room as he held her hand. "I'll take whatever you're willing to give me. I want a chance to be your husband and father to my kids. I love you, and I'm not going anywhere. Someday I'll earn your trust again." He had to; living without her and his kids wasn't an option.

"We've talked about this over the phone," she said. "I know how you feel, and you know how I feel. I'm tired of talking. I'm going to take you up on your offer, but don't take this as a sign of weakness. The next time you tell me to leave, I won't talk about it, I'll be gone so fast all you'll see is smoke. We'll never get back together. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"And as long as you breathe, never call me a vulgar name in anger. Got that? You won't have a second chance. You'd be talking to the damn air. Cause I'll be gone.

She craned her neck around so he could see her face. "I mean it, disrespect me again, I'll leave your ass for good and start over. Trust me on this Tyson. I will never go through that shit again."

"Acknowledged and appreciated." He leaned down and kissed her.

She nodded and curled into him. "By the way, I love you more."

"Not possible," he murmured.

Chapter 24

Two days later, Tyson took the call he'd been waiting for. Raul and Anne were tracking the culprits. He'd requested some time off now that she felt they were close, and he intended to be involved when the job went down.

It took everything within Anne not to kick the shit out of Allison for taking them on a wild goose chase. She'd cashed in a few favors, returned to work before her requested year of maternity leave was over, just to make sure her brother and Lynay's names were cleared. After leaving Serenity with Raul's mom, the two of them had flown to Miami and headed down to Key West. After the long drive, they arrived to discover the woman had left for Pennsylvania.

Later in their room, they discovered that she'd spent some time in a treatment facility. The information could have been better, but Anne's gut told her, Allison's involvement kept the engines running in this intrigue. They were getting close she could feel it.

"Got it," Raul shouted looking diligently at the screen. Anne jumped from where she sat with her laptop.

"What you got, babe?" She rubbed his neck, enjoying the intimate contact.

"Your sister."

She hit his shoulder. "That's low. She's no sister of mine." She sat to look at the screen, eyes widening at the data shown.

"What the hell is going on? A depression center?" she murmured. "Are you sure? I mean I know she's a lying, selfish bitch with whoring tendencies, but depression?"

"According to the insurance papers, a bill was submitted for this location." He pointed to the name of the residential clinic. "They are billing for a couple of months. That's probably why she dropped off radar."

Sitting back, she was stumped. It never occurred to her that her ex-sister in law might be ill. Mental yes, requiring medicinal help - no. Contemplating their next move, she locked gazes with Raul, her perfect match. The thread of ruthlessness in him connected with her on a primal level.

They'd both been victims early on. Both had fought and won mental, emotional and physical battles. He alone knew the demons that drove her. If it had been anyone other than Lynay or Tyson, she'd probably let it go.

While on the streets years ago, she'd learned to survive. Her one legacy from her mom: women could rule if they knew how to use their assets. She'd been taught well. No man could hold her for long. If she couldn't learn something from him, she left. A previous lover had taught her computer hacking skills, another how to shoot, to maim and or kill. A drug lord had taught her how to bring an opponent down, even if he was larger.

She had taken odd jobs, reveling in her freedom. When she'd seen a hit go down, she'd been bought in for questioning regarding the situation. Her cool methodical recount of the event impressed the FBI agents who'd tried repeatedly to shake her up. About six months later she had another visit from another agency, they wanted her to do a job.

"Let's get to the bottom of this. I need to see it through." Raul turned back to the computer.

"She took a flight to Pittsburgh." Anne chuckled, pleased at finding the information so quickly.

"I'm on it. We can leave tomorrow morning at 11:30. Is that good?" Raul asked while typing.

"Hmmm, yeah," she said while making a call.

It was hot and muggy when they picked up the rental car from the airport. Later they checked into a hotel, changed and drove to the address they had discovered. The home was located in a moderate class neighborhood, not too fancy. Certainly, nothing Anne thought Allison would be interested in.

After parking curbside, they strode to the door and rung the bell. A tall, well-built man that appeared to be near Tyson's age answered the door. He waited to hear what they had to say, although his eyes said he knew they weren't as harmless as they tried to appear. "Good afternoon, Sir," Anne hesitated as she noticed a shadow near the door. "I'm here to talk to Allison, is she available?"

Silence reigned as the man looked over her and Raul with a slight curl of his lip. Moving back, he swung his arm out inviting them in. "Sure why not?"

Anne felt Raul's hand on her back offering support. Cautiously, she stepped over the threshold, surprised that he'd invited them in. Hearing the door close behind them, she moved further into the house. She took note of her surroundings, noticing the dated furnishings, the dust that lingered on the coffee and end tables. Overall, an unkempt feel to the house settled on her shoulders. Could mean a lot of things. She'd wait and see the condition of the rest of the house before making a determination. Did anyone live here? Or was this just a front?

Ahead, Allison lay on the sofa. Anne fought the over-riding desire to jerk her from her perch, and kick her ass. Raul brushed against her arm, bringing her back in focus.

"Anne, what do you want?" She leaned back and placed her hand on her rounded stomach. "Come to see how the baby and I are coming along?"

Anne and Tyson had learned a long time ago from the best - their mom- to school facial expressions. But the pregnancy had thrown her for a loop. The thought of some poor child saddled with Allison as a mom made her feel sick.

"No, I didn't know you were pregnant." Turning she watched the man who leaned indolently against a far wall. "Are congratulations in order?"

"I suppose. Although I'm not sure she knows who the father is." Anne turned back to see how the comment affected Allison. Taking in her flushed face and fisting hands, she smiled.

Oh, this is going to be good.

"My brother is out and should be back soon. That's who she's with." He walked out the room. Anne watched him leave; turning back to Allison, she started to ask her questions about the photos and websites when she felt Raul stiffen behind her. Glancing around for a threat, her eyes landed on some leaflets and pamphlets for the National Alliance. Oh, Shit.

The National Alliance was one of the most dangerous hate groups in the country. Anne had taken seminars galore and infiltrated many hate groups after training. The Alliance actually believed God made them better because they survived in cold climates and were mentally superior. It wasn't a game or act with these fools; they believed they could take the country back and create "white living spaces."

Angling her head, she read a highlighted portion of the piece: "After the sickness of "multiculturalism," which is destroying America, Britain, and every other Aryan nation, in which it is being promoted, has been swept away; we must again have a racially clean area of the earth for the further development of our people. We must have White schools, White residential

neighborhoods and recreation areas, White workplaces, White farms and countryside. We must have no non-Whites in our living space, and we must have open space around us for expansion.

"Interesting isn't it?" Allison interrupted snidely. Anne's eyes grabbed her's with a scowl.

The grin fell from her face.

"What do you know about it?" Anne's voice a low grumble. She moved closer to the scared woman.

"Not much. My boyfriend is retired military and he's a member." Allison licked her lips.

"Are you a member Allison?" This was a can of worms they hadn't anticipated. Damn, the woman screwed around with so many different men they had no clue. Anne hated walking in blind like this.

"No, my family and I are already having problems. They'd disown me if I joined something like that."

Anne knew this to be truth. Allison's people were military officers and while they may have strong racial views, they'd never flaunt it.

"This boyfriend of yours, how long has he been in this group?"

"I didn't know he was in it when we met."

"How long have you been dating him?" She watched the other woman move around on the sofa, trying to find a comfortable spot. Allison had always been self-absorbed and appeared clueless her life was about to change irrevocably.

"We met over six months ago, but I've been dating Greg for over four months. And before you ask, this is our baby. It has nothing to do with Tyson. So why are you here?"

"There have been some disturbing activities recently and we are assisting in the investigation." She nodded toward Raul. "Tell me what happened when you left Washington DC."

The woman appeared taken off guard by the change of direction in the conversation. Then her fists tightened and her complexion turned a dull red.

"I'm not telling you shit. That bastard didn't have to do what he did."

"Apparently he did. You simply wouldn't take no or back off. You knew he was married, but you kept pushing." Anne felt her good cop composure slipping. "What kind of sick bitch goes and lays in wait in another woman's husband's bed after he's told her numerous times he didn't want her!"

"She's not his wife. I am." Allison yelled attempting to jump up, but failing miserably. After she righted herself, she pointed a finger at Anne.

"That bitch tricked him some way. I'm not sure how, but I know she did." She huffed pushing her hair behind her ears.

"Oh please don't stop on my account, this is getting good. My name's Bryce by the way," the man who'd opened the front door said as he leaned against the wall.

"Fuck you, Bryce. You're just like them. You don't think I'm good enough for your brother either."

"You're not."

Laughing, she bent over. "He's a fucking NCO Anne. Can you believe it? Me, pregnant by a retired Master Sergeant. And this, this asshole," she pointed in Bryce's direction, "thinks his brother could do better." She placed her hand on the small of her back. If her eyes were lasers, he'd be dead. "I'm from a family of Generals and Admirals. All officers, my husband is an Officer you stupid dog. I don't fuck around with NCO's" she yelled.

"Then why are you here?" The quiet question came from the male standing in the doorway.

"Because of the baby," she screamed and bent over crying.

Chapter 25

Anne hadn't heard the door open and was slightly surprised at what she saw. This new threat stood around six feet and appeared to be in good shape. Where his brother hair was a dirty blond, his was jet black with a few strands of gray. The eyes seemed a similar shade of green as his brothers, but the similarities stopped there. This one was obviously gun tested hard. She recognized a kindred ruthless spirit and hoped for his sake he wasn't too steeped into the separatist bullshit.

He ignored them and zeroed in on Allison.

"So it was about the baby when you begged me to pick you up from the airport all those months ago when he tossed you over like yesterday's trash?"

Allison shook her head no.

Anne watched as he walked up to Allison and grabbed her face.

"Answer me! Was it about the baby when you begged me to use my contacts to find someone to help avenge you? Or when you went to an Alliance meeting and cried about the injustices of black women taking white men?" He dropped his hand in disgust and ran it through his hair.

"I knew you were a manipulating bitch who thought herself above everyone else, even the very people who worked like crazy to help you. But I thought there was some decency. Shit, you aren't even good enough to be shit."

He pointed his finger at her. His voice rough, he vibrated with his anger. "These people believed you'd been wronged. But I knew better. I knew you were using them and yet I let you do it anyway. I guess this is what I fucking deserve. Hell, aint no pussy worth all this."

Raul moved closer to Anne.

No one said a word. He turned and looked at his brother. "Who's this in my house?"

"I'm not sure, they asked for Allison. We haven't been introduced."

Anne waited until he looked at Allison and then over at her, raising his brow. "I'm Anne Browning and this is my husband Raul. My brother is Allison's ex."

"And you're here because...?" He crossed his arms over his barrel chest.

"My husband is a retired Ranger and I had an assignment to track down the gay website photos. The only person that had those older pictures of those Officers was Allison. We knew she was involved but wasn't acting alone. On a side note, my brother hasn't touched Allison in over three years. She lied to you, no big surprise there." Taking a deep breath, she matched his stare. "You know you can't fuck with the government like this. He's an Officer and the head of an intelligence team. They don't dismiss them without a lot more evidence than gay photos. The hell with don't ask or tell. You crossed the line by giving out his personal info - ."

"You gave out personal information of a Special Forces Officer? One that does covert ops?" he ground out incredulously as he walked back to the sofa.

Neither she nor Raul missed the look of surprise that crossed his features at her last statement. The color drained from Allison's face

"The picture of Tyson and Blue in uniform made Simms and Johns angry. He called Tyson a coon lover and wanted his information. I gave it to him. He said something about his patriotic duty of purging." Allison spoke fast while wringing her hands. He stared at her for a minute.

Anne thought for sure he'd slap the shit out of her. Silently she cheered him on.

"Greg, she's not worth it." His brother warned softly.

He turned slowly toward him and dropped into a nearby chair, holding his face with his hands.

"How much time... how much time before they get here?"

"Soon, you know a team is nearby." Anne said, not at all affected by his demeanor. You lay with a snake you get bit.

Shaking his head, he made to reach for his jacket and Raul had a gun trained on him faster than he could blink. Holding both hands up and out, he slowly lifted his pocket showing his cigarettes. Unhurriedly he placed one in his mouth, lit it and took a long drag closing his eyes.

Opening them slowly, he looked at Allison who sat perched on the sofa, his brother, then Anne and Raul. His gaze lingered on Raul whose gun was still in view.

"Allison asked me to pick her up at the airport when she returned from DC. She was a good lay, so I thought what the hell. I hadn't counted on her being a basket case. Whatever went down in DC had unnerved her. After a day or so, she told me her ex had raped her and threw her out

claiming he had remarried and no longer wanted her." There was no anger in his voice; he could have been discussing the weather.

"I have to wonder now if she deliberately picked me out. She'd been after me at the club and we had a good time. What about it Al, did you know I was in the National Alliance at the time you picked me up at the club that night?" He shrugged when she threw him the finger and hugged herself tighter.

"No matter. I'm the fool that took you up on it right?" Twisting his lips, he chuckled as he closed his eyes taking another pull from the cigarette.

"She claimed that some black woman had usurped her in her husband's life. Then she started saying shit about, blacks and their place. Stuff like it being unfair that they were moving up and someone should stop them before they took over. That kind of shit." He blew the smoke out the side of his mouth.

"Hell, she talked my kind of language. So I took her to a meeting at the Alliance, introduced her to a few people. And boy did she perform. The tears, the shaking," he shook his head.

"She had that group ready to form a lynch mob on her ex's wife. His active duty status is what saved her. So instead, they hatched a plan to tear the marriage apart.

He chuckled. "Of course, Allison knew just what would work. She made suggestions, gave over information and pictures. Hell, she even took out a credit card in his name so the bastard paid for the technical work to sabotage his own marriage."

He sucked his teeth and he looked over at her again. "What a bitch."

Allison' face turned red, stood and walked toward the kitchen. Bryce stopped her. Anne watched as he glared first and then laughed in her outraged face.

"A bitch, sounds about right," Bryce said as she stomped past him. He turned to keep an eye on her.

Anne didn't blame him a bit. The woman was mental, she'd always felt that way.

"Why did they put the pictures on the gay websites? That was overkill don't you think?" Anne wanted this done and over. She noticed he hesitated as he looked at her. Shrugging as if he'd come to some sort of decision, he put out his smoke.

"Probably. But the Alliance isn't just about our white supremacy. We don't allow Jews or homosexuals. Some of our leaders are homophobic. Obviously, this was meant to humiliate more than to cost him his commission." Glancing up at her, he smiled.

"You'd be surprised how many high ranking officials support the Alliance. There are some powerful people at the top. That's why I know there's no team nearby and this is personal for you." He stood with the intention of walking out.

The front and back doors flew in simultaneously. A furious Tyson stalked in the front and a pissed off Blue came in the back pointing guns at Greg, Bryce and Allison. Backing everyone into the den and closing the door.

"That's where you're wrong. Her team is here." Blue said, smiling as Allison fainted and hit the ground.

Chapter 26

Tyson and Blue had been in the van listening and recording the entire conversation. They'd all been caught off guard with the Skinhead affiliation. Allison would screw over anybody to get what she wanted. It never entered the equation that she'd gotten involved with a group as nasty as the Alliance.

That explained so many things. The level of expertise, the widespread sites, and the data leaks. The more he heard, the more he wanted to do her bodily harm. She'd started this ball rolling, and had no real clue to the long-reaching consequences. There were some crazy fanatics in those groups, but none crazier than a couple of Special Forces Officers whose career and personal information were jeopardized.

Impatiently they waited for Raul to give them the clear signal to come in. Hearing Lynay discussed so blithely tore at him. He intended to get names and kick ass. They'd brief the General after he did some damage. Finally, they received the signal. Now he'd see the face of the asshole that got the shit moving. Nodding at Blue, they prepared to get to work and rushed through the doors.

Ironically, no one moved to help Allison, who lay on the floor. Within moments, she sounded groggy and pushed herself up, looking around apparently confused by the action.

Anne and Raul had moved quickly to put guns on Bryce and Greg. Blue placed cuffs on Bryce while Raul cuffed Greg. Once the cuffs were on, they backed off so he could get the information they needed.

Anne smiled evilly as she walked over to Allison. Anne's eyes begged her to put up a fight, so she could kick her ass. Allison blinked several times and tried to scramble backwards.

"Wait, wait. I'm pregnant Anne," she yelped as Anne grabbed her by the arm and jerked her upward. Spinning her around, she grabbed both her arms.

"I know. But you won't be pregnant forever and I'll find you." She put cuffs on her, pulling a little harder than necessary. Then blindfolded her. "I'm going to mess you up later, bitch." Anne promised quietly as she sat her down roughly.

Allison cried, Anne took her to the kitchen.

Tyson watched Anne's eyes connect with Raul, who'd been watching her. He gave her a slight nod, and then turned to face him. He pulled up a chair and sat in front of Greg. Idly, he pulled a packet from one of his pockets. He sighed in appreciation of his knife collection. Rarely did an occasion arise for him to indulge in one of his passions.

He collected weapons.

During the years, he'd made friends with a designer from Boeker Solingen, and commissioned a special knife with a sharp titanium blade. It might be duplicated, there were plenty serious collectors like himself, but not sold on the open market.

He held the blade to the light and smiled. He pulled out a couple of Frank Beltrane's signature knives, one with an abalone handle and a Timea Combat. Reaching into another pocket, he pulled another Boker collapsible long blade knife.

Greg and Bryce watched his obvious mastery of the weapons. Blue pushed Bryce in a chair and stood behind him. He'd taken the bag from off Bryce's face and pulled out his lighter. He clicked it next to his ear.

"Who followed the woman and took her pictures?" Tyson asked in a low voice that betrayed his roiling emotions. His hands never faltered as they placed the knives within easy reach.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean -" Greg stopped at the yell coming from Bryce, whose finger tips felt the flame of Blue's lighter.

Tyson looked down at the dagger he'd pulled out and examined the blade. Looking at Greg, he raised his brow.

The man swallow hard as he heard his brother howl in pain again as his fingertips were torched.

"I'm not sure. I mean everyone went into frenzy over what she'd told them." His eyes shot darts in Allison's direction.

Tyson scooted his chair closer to Greg and casually lifted the man's booted foot. "Nice boots." Placing the titanium blade between the upper leather and the rubberized sole of the boot, he cut through the threads.

"Hey, wait, what are you doing?" He panted and tried to pull his leg back.

Tyson heard the change in the bastard's breathing as the threads gave way. He realized the importance of the visual in a situation like this, which required his opponent recognized the strength of the blade, and the mastery of the hand wielding it.

Blue placed a gag in his Bryce's mouth.

Greg quaked as the long blade sliced through his leather boots as if they were softened butter. "Look, I really don't know who took the actual pictures, but.... but I can find out. Give me a minute to make a call." He sounded a bit hysterical.

Tyson wasn't buying it. He'd read the file on this person in the van. He'd been a good soldier, solid and proficient. "Can't do that my friend." Tyson continued cutting away the boot. Raul had stepped up and held the leg still as Greg struggled.

"I'm not sure what the code here is for help, and this is a private party, so they'll be no phone calls." He turned and nodded to Anne now that the sole lay on the floor. Looking over at Greg, Tyson gripped the ankle of his foot.

"I guess the information will die with you and your brother." Raul rammed a cloth into Greg's mouth as Tyson tapped his foot with the point of the sharp Kombat knife.

"Did you know that all of your nerves end on your feet?" He asked conversationally as he slipped the point into a certain spot on Greg's foot. Raul held the man in place as he struggled to move. His eyes watered, and tears ran unchecked down his face. Tyson noticed darkening water spots on the man's jeans after he slashed and pierced certain sections of his foot.

"Now I'm a peaceful man," he said in the same tone. "But you fucked with family. That means you want your family fucked with." They both heard Bryce whimper as Blue held the flame longer on his fingertips. The acrid smell of flesh filled the room.

Greg bobbed his head vigorously. Tyson stopped and nodded to Raul who removed the gag. "Stop, please stop," he gulped. "My brother had nothing to do with this. He's, he's just visiting from-"

"South Carolina. Yeah I know. It's like I said, you fucked with family. His misfortune is his relation to you. Now since you have amnesia and can't remember the names we need. You'll need his assistance to walk soon, or maybe not." Nodding to Raul, who'd moved to replace the gag.

Greg shook his head. "Wait... Simms, Robert Simms. He headed up the operation." He breathed through his mouth, taking large gulps of air before looking sorrowfully at his brother.

"And I can find him, how?" Tyson deliberately reclaimed his attention.

"He owns a car dealership in Philly." He panted. The leg shook slightly on Tyson's knee. Greg's eyes were closed tight in his mottled face. His lips trembled and tears ran unchecked down his face. "He lives on the outskirts of town." He hung his head.

"Bet you hate you ever met that bitch," Raul murmured near his ear.

"Hell yeah." He yelled at the pain when Tyson slammed his butchered foot on the floor. Blood smeared on the carpet as he cried out.

Rage tore through Tyson. He'd been separated from his wife and son for a month because of this bullshit. He wished he could put a bullet between this bastard's eyes. He took a moment and smashed the foot on the floor to increase the agony.

"I know there will always be men and women that claim to want their rights, but don't have a problem with it costing someone else to lose theirs."

He nodded at Blue. They worked in tandem on their hand held computers, gathering data quickly. Eyeing each other they both snapped the units closed and placed them in their pockets.

"You're free to believe whatever the fuck you want." Tyson looked at Greg narrowly. "But you see that man over there?" He pointed at Blue, who stood with his arms crossed. "And this man here." He pointed at a calm Raul.

"Neither of them is white, like me, and I trust them with my life. I am committed to making sure that our children." He pointed to each man.

"Live in a country that allows them to be themselves and be with whomever they please. I know that goes against what your group believes." Cleaning his knives and placing them in their protective jackets, he continued talking to a whimpering Greg and a furious Bryce.

"No man is superior to the other because of what's on the outside you asshole. Your military experience should've taught you that truth. Someone who wasn't white covered your pale ass at some point, so you could be sitting here today. You must've forgotten, cause if you hadn't, your brother wouldn't be suffering right now, and your stupid ass wouldn't be stuck with a suicidal bitch."

Tyson snatched his cell, punched in a couple of numbers, and watched as Anne shepherded Allison back into the room. She folded onto the sofa and wept silently. Tyson rolled his eyes at her pathetic behavior. He could tell it took everything in his sister to keep her from putting her foot up his ex-wife's ass.

Checking his gun and wishing he could use it, he returned it to its holster. "I hate to leave." He looked at Greg. "I had quite a few more blades that I would have loved to try out on you. Maybe you'll come looking for me." He got up in Greg's face. "Please do. I guarantee I will accommodate you." His eyes locked with Greg's for a moment until the other man looked away. He knew the man saw the promise of his death in his eyes.

Checking around to make sure everyone was ready to move, he snatched Greg's arms and signaled for the cuffs to come off.

"General, your men can come in and pick them up." His searched the room again. "There's three, Sir, although I think the brother's just unlucky to get caught in the crossfire." He paused, and then smiled. "Yes sir, I'll be happy to do that."

Clicking off, he watched with satisfaction the paled complexions of the onlookers as the Special Investigators walked in, and placed cuffs on both Greg and Bryce. These were not local cops. They were Federal and things were about to get hot. It had gotten dark, so they replaced the gags to mute the pained screams as the men hobbled to the van. Tyson, Blue, Anne and Raul looked at Allison, who'd blanched when she saw the men taken.

Tyson punched in another number, someone answered on the second ring. "General Scent, this is Tyson," he said. Allison tried to run. Anne blocked her before she could move.

"Yes Sir, I'm fine. I hate to bother you, but General Jenkins thought I should call you personally before your grand-daughter goes to jail." His eyes lit in amusement at the remarks coming from the other end of the phone.

"Well, you see, Sir, Allison says she's pregnant for retired Master Sergeant Greg Brady. However, he's knee deep in skinhead madness and is a member of the National Alliance. She used them to run a smear campaign against me and my wife." He smiled wickedly as Allison shook uncontrollably.

"The real problem, Sir is that she provided them with classified information about me and the team. They placed that information on a website. The General grounded our team until it's safe for us to go out again." He held the phone away from his ear as her grandfather yelled about the foolishness of women.

Everyone in the room looked at Allison, who simply stared at the phone. When her grandfather calmed down, he apologized and said he would contact General Jenkins personally.

He also thought it'd be a good idea for his granddaughter to spend a little time behind bars, suffer the consequences of her actions, which surprised the hell out of him.

After they hung up, he looked at a pale and shaking Allison. He felt nothing but contempt for the woman that used people for her own ends without thought for anyone else. He punched in another number.

"I need one more pick up," he told the operator. No one spoke as the agent came in and escorted a hysterical Allison to the van and then to jail.

Chapter 27

Tyson and Blue stayed in the area to see the mission to its completion. Anne and Raul left after Allison went into custody. They watched Robert Simms all day. He was a thin balding man who appeared to be going through a mid life crisis. Simms interacted amicably with a variety of non-whites, and he had all of them eating out the palm of his hand. There was no outward demonstration of his hatred. It was only after you read his file that you realized he excelled at lying, which made him extremely dangerous.

"I wish the General would let us talk to him for a few minutes." Tyson eyed the man with disgust.

"He doesn't trust us. Not after you crippled that fool and I lit up his brother. Hell, I don't trust us around that one." He nodded in Simms direction. "He's too slick; the type that'll make you hurt him."

"Yeah. Let's get moving. They should be picking him up soon. I want a good seat for the interrogation."

Simms would feel the blade of justice. Unfortunately, it wouldn't come directly from his hand. Everyone involved would feel the General's fury. He had to be satisfied with that promise and wait.

"Here they come," Blue said as he shifted in his seat behind the two-way mirror. Two Federal agents sat and questioned Simms. The man sweated as facts about his involvement in the Alliance were brought into the open. It soon became obvious to him that Simms would sing, and sing loudly.

"Two hours," Blue snorted. "I give him another ten minutes before he begs for a deal."

"He's crossed and mixed his stories, and straight out lied so many times, I give him five." Tyson nodded at the reddened man who dripped with sweat. There was a wild gleam in Simm's eye as if he knew it was over for him.

"You won." Blue chuckled. "He got the deal in five. Sorry bastard."

The deal was simple, if he told them information they could use, he would be free to go. Simms gave the names of the techies that breached government security, and who placed information on untraced sites.

He named Skinheads that murdered locals and the places they buried the bodies. That information would reopen many cold cases, and bring closure for many families.

Simms even told of upcoming hits, and the masterminds behind them. The amount of information surprised Tyson. He sold out his comrades so quick and in such detail that he was disgusted.

"They're done." The agents had taped the entire conversation. While they verified the information, they put Simms up in a luxurious hotel out of town. The next few days provided a beehive of activity in the Pittsburg area. Exhumed bodies from the area Simms mentioned made national news. DNA matches solidified arrests of known skinhead operatives. No one knew that this site had been an unofficial graveyard of sorts.

Over 50 buried bodies were recovered, a sad day for the city. The techies involved turned out to be newly recruited young college students. They cooperated with the Feds, and tracked down all the sites and data placed online.

They also turned in pending sites that targeted well-known politicians and business owners. Their co-operation helped to minimize their sentences. The bust included Federal, State and local authorities. Although Tyson and Blue preferred a more hands on approach in retracting payment for the harm done to them and their families, the jail sentences went a long way in soothing their ire.

Allison spent one night in jail before her family bailed her out. While awaiting trial she tried to run away, slipped and fell, and lost the baby. The last Tyson heard she was in a psychiatric ward receiving treatment.

After a week, the Feds released Simms. "Permission to talk with Simms, Sir." Tyson was furious the man who'd been instrumental in destroying so many lives would walk away. He wanted an hour alone with him.

The General sighed. "Permission denied."

His jaw tightened.

"Walk with me." General Jenkins moved away from the conference room where they'd been in briefings. The two men walked in silence down the hall. The General opened another door and walked in.

"I know you want to mete out your own justice, Major. But, I can't allow another incident to happen like before. It could get out of control."

"Yes sir." His jaw felt like cracking under the pressure that it took to keep from speaking out. He put his life on the line every day for his country, and to receive the unwarranted treatment in the manner he had, was a slap in the face.

He couldn't let it pass.

"Listen, you weren't supposed to know this, but I can't risk you going after that miscreant and ruining your career." General Jenkins sat on the side of the desk swinging one leg.

Tyson met his stare, willing him to get on with it.

"You and the Captain were not the only ones watching Simms performance that night. In another room, Greg Brady, his brother, three Skinheads and another Alliance official watched as he sold them out. Two of the skinheads in the room had been on the FBI's list and were suspects in recent murders. Simms had unknowingly called their names specifically. They were arrested immediately, pending an investigation. The bodies they'd disposed were buried at the site. The DA didn't need Simms's testimony. The evidence, including the DNA results was overwhelming."

Tyson nodded. "I understand, the Feds kept their promise and let him go. But, the Alliance might not punish him." At least not in the way that'd atone for the damage he'd caused.

The General waved down his concern. "We've been doing this a long time, Major. Simms went home last night. There was a group of men waiting for him. Last our men saw, they were taking him out for a ride."

"Nice night for a drive, Sir."

"Yeah. I think they took Brady and his brother as well. We can't find them."

"Pity." He'd planned to monitor Brady on general principle. He didn't like others taking out his trash, but he'd have to let it go.

General Jenkins stared at him. "Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good, let's get back to the meeting."

Months Later...

Lynay screamed through another contraction. Tyson wiped her brow and prayed this would be over soon. He made all types of promises he couldn't keep.

He would definitely touch her again. They'd decided they wanted more children. But seeing her agony pained him.

"Can't you give her something?" He asked the doctor.

"Not now, the baby is coming." She pointed downward at Lynay. "Come see Major."

He shook his head. "I'll stay up here with my wife. Let me know when to cut the cord." His face and neck heated. His hand went numb from the pressure of her hard squeezing.

"Come on Lynay. Give us one more push. The little one is ready to see her mommy and daddy," the doctor encouraged.

"Uggghhhhh Ah!" She screamed as she pushed then sagged against the pillows. Turning her head in Tyson's direction, she smiled slightly against his hand. Gently, he wiped her forehead, and pushed the hair out of her face. He bent and placed a whisper of a kiss on her lips. They both startled at the shrill cry of the baby. Gazing at each other, they smiled tiredly.

"Thank you," he said quietly, and then kissed the palm of her hand. Releasing it, he moved to the end of the bed to cut the cord. Despite his shaking hand, he got the job done and watched his baby girl in awe. She waved her arms and kicked her little feet, making her displeasure known for the rude expulsion from her warm haven.

The nurse took the babe to the side for a few minutes and then returned her to him and Lynay. Both parents stared in silence at the miracle their love created. Hearing a slight knock, they looked up as Aunt Lilly, Seth and Anne walked into the birthing room.

"Seth, I'm going to need your help," Tyson spoke gravely, catching his attention immediately.

"What you need daddy?" He took the thumb from his mouth and looked up at him expectantly.

"Well, you have a little sister now, and I'm going to need some help watching over her. You know, make sure she has everything she needs. Keep her safe. Things like that. Will you help me?"

Seth looked at his dad, then his mom. Finally, he walked over to the bed and watched the baby for a minute.

"What's her name, mommy?"

"She doesn't have one yet. Can you help us with that? What do you want to call your little sister?" She asked. Her eyes were suspiciously bright with unshed tears.

"Hmmm, is her name gonna be Bradford like mine?"

"Yep, sure is son." Tyson squeezed Lynay's hand.

"I love Aunty Anne and Aunty Lilly." He pointed at each aunt. "So we can call her Brandilly. That's all the names put together." He decided as he leaned over and talked to the baby.

"Hi Brandilly, I'm your big brother Seth. If you need help with anything, I'll... I'll help. I'm older now, so I can help." He sounded so serious, the adults turned their heads, so he didn't see the grins on their faces.

"Well, Brandilly it is," Tyson proclaimed. Smiling proudly at his son, he reached out to stroke his face. "Thanks Tiger, I knew I could count on you."

Everyone crowded around the bed to see the newest addition to the family: Precious LillyAnn Bradford. AKA: Brandilly.

The end

This has been a publication of Sitting Bull Publishers. We hope you enjoyed the romantic tale of Tyson and Lynay. Erosa Knowles is a talented up and coming author. Visit her webpage for a view of her new titles.

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