

# **NO DEAL**

by

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**WHISKEY CREEK PRESS**

[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Published by  
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS  
Whiskey Creek Press  
PO Box 51052  
Casper, WY 82605-1052  
[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

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ISBN 978-1-60313-675-4

### **Credits**

Cover Artist: Vinessa Riley  
Editor: Chere Gruver

Printed in the United States of America

**Other Books by Author Available at  
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An angel of mercy tries to heal wounded soldiers.

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Will his addiction to Cyn be enough for both of them?

### ***SCARLET LOVE***

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She's fleeing Yankee soldiers.

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How much will their scarlet love heat up?

### ***AT CROSS ENDS***

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Mark Kincaid owes Graham Cross for two years of his life.

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How long will they be at cross ends?

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Whiskey Creek Press February 2007

Craig fights fires on a huge scale while trying to help save a colleague's company.

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Will the blow out from the past burn them or fuel their love?

### ***THE BEST OF CHRISTY POFF***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid (print) April 2007

Rachel needs to redefine her life, finding Rafe the perfect man to help her.

Melanie needs to redefine her love life though Dante has different long-lasting plans.

Jasmyne finds life in a different world, Yasir at her side.

Love in different worlds is still one thing—love.

***INTERNET BONDS SERIES BOOK 6: THIS JUST IN...***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid June 2007

When a television reporter does an expose on the BDSM scene, he angers many. He looks for answers to learn the truth but will he hold onto the one woman whose lifestyle makes him whole or will their enemies silence them before their life together gets started? This just in...

***DARK ILLUSIONS***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid August 2007

A beautiful heiress with a wild side wants to enjoy life. Sephora meets the man of her dreams when Nigel Shelton walks into it from the shadows. Will their dark illusions give them what they need or will they be torn apart by greed?

***BIRD IN A GILDED CAGE: THE MYTH OF MIRABELLA***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid September 2007

Mira lives on the edge of the fashion world in more ways than one.

Max seeks a killer who paints his victims in 24K gold.

Will Mira be his bird in a gilded cage before Max solves the case?

***THE JOYS OF LOVE***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid November 2007

Ryan and Kendall must fight a looming threat in order to find happiness.

Cody and Savannah go up against the morals of 1927 Tennessee.

Can they find the joys of love or will it be lost to them forever?

***LOST LOVE***



Whiskey Creek Press Torrid November 2007

***THE JOYS OF LOVE (TT #41)***

A Philadelphia cop on the biggest case of his career.

His wife fears the future.

Can a lost love be revived or will it be lost once more?

***LABOR OF LOVE***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid November 2007 in *The Joys of Love*

Savannah has lived alone for years, afraid of getting close to anyone.

Cody comes to work for her but learns more than he intended.

Will their labor of love prove she can find love?

***YULE LOVES: NOELLE'S ELF/HIS CHRISTMAS CAROLE***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid December 2007

***NOELLE'S ELF***

Noelle wishes on a star for the perfect gift—a man.

Dan tries his best to fulfill this for her.

Will Noelle's elf make her dreams come true?

***HIS CHRISTMAS CAROLE***

Kris faced an unhappy holiday thanks to his ex-wife.

Carole experienced the romance of Hawaii by herself for the same reason.

Will he enjoy his Christmas Carole or will his past get in their way?

***DESIRES: DESIRES UNDER THE FALLS/DESIRE IN THE SNOW***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid January 2008

***DESIRE UNDER THE FALLS***

Having too many curves could destroy a career as Penelope learned.

Having too many curves drove Thorne crazy.

Could they find Desire under the Falls?

### ***DESIRE IN THE SNOW***

Layla leaves Los Angeles for a short vacation heading for the mountains.

Mac shares his life with Cash but is looking for a good woman to spend it with.

Will undue forces create Desire in the Snow for this hot couple?

### ***INTERNET BONDS SERIES BOOK 7: BLACK LACE***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid March 2008

Chelsea Strawbridge falls hard for a firefighter but she lives in a world that doesn't accept her desires. Reed Carrington fights fires and finds he ignites one in a society spitfire. Will another snuff that fire before black lace becomes his—totally?

***MASKED DESIRES*** a part of ***A TORRID CELEBRATION***  
(WCP's anniversary anthology)

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid March 2008

Ava's invitation to the company's annual costume ball sends her reeling.

Matthew wants to make her the one of his dreams.

Will Mardi Gras' masked desires bring these two together or hide the truth?

### ***A MATTER OF DECEPTION***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid April 2008

Seneca believed he had everything—a good life, wealth and Adrienne, the love of his life. Adrienne couldn't wait to become his wife but what happened on the eve of their wedding changed them both forever. Will another man's evil and a matter of deception make her forget Seneca or will they find their way back to each other before it's too late?

### ***MIDNIGHT ECSTASIES***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid June 2008

Carl and Cassie Sandeford have a huge interest in *Midnight Ecstasies*.

A serial killer has an even bigger interest in them.  
Who will survive?

***DARK & DEVIOUS***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid July 2008

Jeremy Payne escapes to the quiet of the Pacific Northwest—his past haunting him.

Sapphire Knight is running from hers. Can love and honesty overcome the dark & devious sides of their lives?

***EYES OF DARKNESS #5: WHITE ICE***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid December 2008

Damon wants to get away and relax—his life in turmoil.

Sascha has secrets only he can help her with.

Will white ice melt a dark heart?

***INTERNET BONDS #8: AFTER GLOW***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid March 2009

Brock Sanders has always been a strong man no matter what he did but...

Dominique Ashcroft has an extremely dominating personality.

Will they bask in the after glow of heated romance or will their pasts darken it?

***THE HASTINGS SAGA #2: DEATH OF AN ANGEL—JESSIE***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid June 2009

Andrew thought the Civil War had left him alone until it came screaming back into his life, his angel—Jessie—suffering the revenge of one man's evil. Can their love survive or will he mourn the death of an angel—Jessie?

***SUNDAY MONEY***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid August 2009

Derek Manville races open-wheeled cars or anything with a motor as a hobby. Shelby Holland is desperately trying to hold onto her race team and her financial legacy. Together, can they win Sunday Money while keeping their unique bond from crashing?

***THE HASTINGS SAGA #3: WINDS OF LIFE—ALEXA***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid September 2009

Andrew believed love came to a man once in a lifetime until Alexa comes out of his past to prove him wrong. She asks for his help to settle a deadly range war unaware of his grief for his first wife. Will the evil be deadly or will the winds of like—Alexa—save them both?

***DARKNESS INTO LIGHT***

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid October 2009

A night of passion brings Emily together with the man of her dreams only she loses him seconds later.

A night of passion shows Seth he can have a life with someone only she disappears as quickly as she appeared.

One night—will it survive and bring them both from darkness into light?

***DESIRE 2—HART'S DESIRE & YULE DESIRES***

November 2009

***Hart's Desire***

Addington Hart knew in high school what he desired in a woman.

Cory Phelps knew as well, both enjoying their senior year.

When he made the decision to split up before college, he found out that his Hart's Desire meant more to him than doing the right thing.

***Yule Desires***

Mara wanted one thing for Christmas—Jared.

Jared had to get his life straightened out before he could give himself to her.

Will St. Nicholas give them the gifts they want?

## **EYES OF DARKNESS MEGABOOK**

Whiskey Creek Press Torrid December 2009

Sean deals with a new life while chasing a killer—can Rhian-non help him?

Madison finds love with a dark gentleman—will love hurt?

Valeria discovers a new facet to her life but can Gabriel handle her?

## **Dedication**

To my son—the hardcore hockey fanatic  
I went to for answers to questions about the game.  
Go Flyers!



## Prologue

Walking into the huge Beacon Hill mansion of Lohan Billings did not have the required effect on Blake Atherton that it did on others who walked around gaping at old Boston money and what it had bought over the years. Having grown up in the same affluent area of Boston, this house just showed how ostentatious some of the residents' lives had become. The holiday décor didn't help either.

"Atherton, how are you?" a voice called as it came nearer.

"Good, George, and you?"

"Wishing I could get away with your life," George Carson replied. He and Blake had been friends for years but while Blake enjoyed life, George lived a very controlled, keeping-up-appearances one. Both men sat on several corporate boards and took part in various charity functions but that's where the similarities ended.

"You could always join us," Blake said, referring to the minor league hockey team he played on.

"Yeah, and my wife would shoot me before I ever made it to the ice," George stated. "You know that."

Blake nodded, grateful he'd been strong enough to know what he wanted from life and able to get it without pissing anyone off.

"I keep telling you..."

"I know, I know..."

"So what's on tonight's agenda?"

"Charity auction—you know how he runs things."



"Refresh my memory," Blake said. "Remember, I spent last year on the road with away games."

"Lohan Billings has things donated for his auction—weekend getaways, intimate dinners, the like—and ends the evening by auctioning off several gorgeous women for the evening or whatever the bidder who wins wants to do with them. The grand finale comes when he puts his own wife up only no one ever outbids him so he spends a lot of money, his marriage remains safe and everyone's happy."

"And how does his wife feel about this?"

"I don't think she has much of a choice. In his way of thinking, his word is final and she'll go along with it without question."

"Hell of a way to live," Blake muttered.

"Tell me about it. It would be one thing if she looked like an ugly broad but this woman is gorgeous. She has a quiet elegance about her but the marriage had been arranged by their parents so she's had nothing to say about how her life runs. Old world, old money, old morals..."

"Barbaric," Blake said, shaking his head and hating that the world had moved into the twenty-first century yet he stood in the home of a man who still lived in the Victorian era. *That sucks...*

The guests made their way into the ballroom where a huge sit-down dinner waited for them. Blake and George found seats in the back of the room then watched the evening unfold.

\* \* \* \*

Lohan Billings fixed his bow tie then turned to find the jacket to his tuxedo. At six foot three, he had the ability to cast an intimidating shadow on those he dealt with and usually walked away with what he wanted or more. Gray-haired and handsome, his looks belied his ruthlessness though those close to him knew he could be meaner than a snake.

He went across the hall to his wife's room to check on her.

"Alicia, it's time to greet our guests."

"I'm just finishing up," she replied from her dressing room.

"Let me see what you're wearing," he quietly commanded.

"After all, the sexier you look, the more money we raise."

"Do we have to go through with my part in the auction?"

"Yes."

"It's humiliating being *sold* like a piece of meat."

"You know you're safe," he reminded her. "After all, who always makes the highest bid?"

"That's not the point. I don't like it."

"It doesn't matter what you like, now does it? You are my wife and this is how we run the annual charity auction."

"Surely you can find someone else with more assets to get you the top bids..." she stated.

"You bring elegance to the evening. Every man in the room wants what I have and for a few moments, one comes close but fails to outbid me."

Alicia emerged from her dressing room wearing a classic black haltered gown.

"Change into something else," he ordered.

"Lohan, please..." she begged, this scene having played out many times before.

She watched him go into her dressing room, one she thought to be her private space until she learned about his cameras, and come out with one of her designer gowns. A regal blue *Tadashi*, the sequined bodice showed off her figure. Soft and high-waisted, the extremely voluminous skirt gracefully fell from her hips training around her feet.

"There and make sure you wear something underneath to accentuate your cleavage."

"I feel like a whore doing this."

"Darling, just do as you're told and you might walk away from this unscathed."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm tired of going through this every time we are supposed to appear in public or the annual auction. Keep pushing and I'll find someone who'll gladly replace you."

"Then divorce me and get it over with."

"Oh, no, my darling wife, I'll kill you before another man ever touches you or your money."

"Then just get it over with. I hate my life and I hate you. We've never been happy..."

"If I had someone else to replace you at the end of this, I'd beat you senseless for your insolence."

He went to her, ripping the dress she wore from her.

"Get dressed," he muttered as she grabbed at the black gown to cover herself.

Billings threw the blue gown at her and went back to his room to get ready for the evening as if nothing happened. He could see her glaring at him in the mirror and smiled as he watched her take the blue dress into her dressing room, close the door and lock it. Checking his watch, he turned back to the mirror.

"Five minutes, darling."

\* \* \* \*

Alicia Billings hated her life and the feelings deepened every moment she had to spend with Lohan Billings, her husband of almost twenty-five years. Though in his sixties, Billings didn't look it while Alicia's beauty hid her age of forty-five extremely well. They appeared to be the perfect couple though no one had a clue what really went on behind the closed doors of their Beacon Hill mansion.

In an Old World move, Lohan had gone to her father and proposed a deal in order to marry her and gain whatever inheritance her wealthy Boston family had. Unable to refuse Billings' offer or his parents, her father agreed to the marriage over her protests. *If they hadn't blackmailed Daddy...*

Her parents gone, Lohan forbid her to see her siblings or anyone else he did not approve of and virtually trapped her in his idea of a perfect world. She hadn't been shopping in the city at *Jordan Marsh* or *Filene's* (both now *Macy's*) in years because he would have his secretary go to the stores, bring clothes home for his approval and that would be the end of it. She'd forgotten how it felt to shop. While most women wouldn't mind a personal shopper, she resented his taking away her freedom of choice. *So much for the Constitution...*

If he allowed her out of the house by herself, his bodyguard accompanied her. She honestly could not remember the last time she'd had a moment to herself to actually breathe without being dictated to. Now, she had to dress like a damned *Barbie* doll to please him when all she wanted to do meant a permanent solution to her unhappy situation. *If he wants to kill me, why should I fight it? It beats this hell...*

"Five minutes, darling."

His voice echoed in her mind sending chills down her spine. She prayed he would have already gone downstairs but she knew him well enough to know he expected her on his arm to make their grand entrance—the multimillionaire and his trophy wife. *God, I hate my life...*

"Alicia!"

Taking a deep breath, she unlocked the door and joined him.

"Much better but before the auction, you will come back up here and cover that growing red mark on your neck."

"Maybe you should be more careful..."

"Don't push this, Alicia. If you'd put the right gown on to start with..."

"That's it—blame everyone else," she stated, a hint of strength in her voice.

"Watch your tone with me, sweetheart—you know what I can do."

"It doesn't matter anymore because every day with you, a little more of me dies. I have no identity other than being Mrs. Lohan Billings. To the outside world, I don't exist."

"And that's how I want to keep it."

"What are you afraid of?" she asked though he ignored her.

Placing his hand at the small of her back, he walked her to the top of the grand staircase of the old mansion and waited for his personal assistant to announce their presence—their grand entrance. Descending the stairs, Alicia glanced around seeing all the old familiar faces who usually attended their galas and a few new ones—specifically an athletic-looking gentleman who had a gentle compassionate face. She couldn't see anything more but from what she could, she liked him. *I'd never be that lucky to meet someone like him.*

At the base of the stairs, Billings shook hands as if campaigning for office while she looked on wanting to hide. It had come to the point where she hated these parties but unfortunately, she had no choice but to abide by his wishes in order to keep the peace.

"Mrs. Billings, how are you?"

"You're looking beautiful as ever."

Mechanically, she smiled and nodded.

When he finally allowed her to circulate on her own—his reasoning to show off what every man wanted for a better auction—Alicia headed toward one of the smaller rooms off the main ballroom. Feeling the need to catch her breath, she went to the buffet

and poured herself a shot of whiskey, downed it and poured another.

"Liquid strength?" a strange voice asked.

"Shall I pour you one as well?" she asked in return though not looking up.

"Thank you," he said.

Handing him the glass she'd just filled, she finally noticed the man as the one she'd seen from the stairs. Her heart skipped a beat, Alicia wondering what it meant.

"Blake Atherton," he said, introducing himself. "Thanks."

"Alicia Billings," she said. "It's a pleasure."

"I agree," he said, taking her hand. "You're very beautiful."

"Thank you."

Alicia jolted seconds before she pulled her hand back hoping she had not been obvious with her slight discomfort. *What the hell is...* Unfortunately, she failed to hide her reaction.

"Are you all right?" he asked, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before he released it.

"Yes," she quickly said, regaining her composure. "I'm sorry, I..."

"Don't be," he told her. "Not only did it feel good but it looked good on you."

"I don't know what to say," she said. "I usually don't..."

"When have you felt like this recently?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, realizing he'd been able to read her like a book.

"I imagine living here in this mausoleum and with him is hard."

"I think you're overstepping..."

"Not really. I saw the look on your face at the top of the staircase. You don't want to be here."

“No, I don’t,” she admitted. “I guess I need to start hiding my feelings better.”

“Don’t,” Blake said. “Life looks glorious on you. I’ll have the memory of it for the rest of my life.”

“Then you need to...”

“Mrs. Billings, your husband is looking for you.”

“Thank you,” Alicia said.

As soon as the maid left, Alicia Billings poured another shot of whiskey, downed it and turned to leave.

“It’s been...interesting,” she said before she left him.

“Indeed it has.”

“Then leave now—for your own safety,” she warned as she quickly swept from the room and disappeared.

## **Chapter 1**

"You've been ignoring our guests," Lohan Billings chastised his wife.

"They're your guests and they don't care."

"The maid said she found you with a man."

"My God, Lohan, get over yourself. Do you think I would give you any reason to punish me? Especially in this... this mausoleum?"  
*My God, he's right...*

"You watch your..."

"Lohan, I'm tired of this. The only reason you haven't done anything drastic is because I refuse to sign my family's money over to you. Do you think I'm not fully aware of what will happen to me once I do?"

"Such insolence," he accused. "Where is all this coming from?"

"It's me, Lohan—if you'd ever taken a moment to notice."

"I'll deal with you later," Lohan threatened. "Now go put something on your neck. It's becoming obvious."

"What, that I'm damaged goods? Used and..."

"If we didn't have guests, I'd..."

"Do that and you definitely won't get what you want from me."

Alicia pulled away from him and disappeared into the crowd of guests trying to find the perfect spot for the auction. When she returned, she noticed Blake Atherton standing off to the side with a



man she recognized but, at the moment, his name escaped her. *Why did he stay?*

"It's about time you returned," Billings hissed under his breath as he sported a fake smile. "You've been holding up the night's festivities." Her husband firmly gripped her upper arm while pushing her to the front of the ballroom to a platform set up for the auction. As always, Lohan expected his wife to stand next to him throughout the evening's charitable portion of the party but tonight, he got strange vibes from her he didn't like. At the moment though, he had to take care of the auction.

After an hour passed, the auction had raised seventy-five thousand dollars from the first several items. Pleased, Billings knew exactly what his guests waited for and purposely hurried through the proceedings. When the highpoint of the event came up, he drew each deal out trying to get his friends to part with a small portion of their wealth.

The grand finale of the evening quickly came. He turned to his wife and said one word.

"Behave."

Turning back to his guests, he took her hand and pulled her up front to appear as the ever-loving husband and philanthropist—an act he'd perfected over the years. The buxom blonde who looked like Pamela Anderson and a redhead lightened their winners by twenty-five grand each. A brunette left with a guy who handed over forty thousand for her and several others matched this or offered more. At this point, he could start the bidding on his wife at seventy-five and easily get it or more. *Easy to match and raise a dollar...*

"Now, for the final offering of this very successful evening," he announced, pulling Alicia closer. "I'll start the bidding at seventy-five thousand."

"One hundred thousand," a voice from the side of the room toward the rear called.

The crowd gasped then went silent.

"I have a bid of one hundred thousand dollars—do I hear a higher bid?"

"What are you bidding, Billings? After all, she is your wife."

Laughter filled the room though Lohan Billings didn't appreciate it being at his expense.

"I'll raise it by a thousand," he stated.

"One hundred and twenty-five," the voice from the rear called.

"One hundred twenty-six," Billings said.

"One hundred fifty thousand."

Obviously unnerved by the way the auction went and knowing his bank account would be taking a hit, he gazed around the room then looked at his wife with suspicion.

"One hundred fifty-one," he said trying to remain composed.

"One hundred seventy-five thousand."

"And I raise that by one thousand," he bid, hoping that would end it.

The crowd gasped then silence filled the room.

"Do I have another bid?"

No one said a word.

"Then going once...twice...three times..."

"One million dollars."

"Sold," Billings stated, unable to stop himself from accepting the last and final bid. "For one hundred seventy-six thousand..."

"No, Billings, the bid reached one million before you said *sold*. You have to award him the winning bid."

"But..."

"Too late, Billings, someone wants her more than you do."

The crowd laughed and with the auction over, some began to say their good-byes thanking Lohan Billings for a wonderful and interesting evening.

Billings turned away from the crowd to regroup, seeing Alicia standing before him.

“What the hell have you done?”

“Me? This has always been your idea and now, somebody’s trumped you.”

“There’s no way he can afford his bid...” he said, trying to reason out his next move.

“Mister Billings, I’d like to settle up with you.”

“Excuse me,” Billings said, turning around. “You want to what?”

“Who do I make the check out to?”

“Check?” Billings asked, suddenly unable to think.

“To cover my bid for an evening with the lady. I don’t want the check going to the wrong people.”

“Your bid?”

“A cool million.”

“Uh, can we talk?” Billings said, drawing the man off to the side. “Alicia, go see to our guests.”

“No, I think I need to hear this. After all, I *am* the one involved.”

“Alicia,” he hissed.

“I’d like the lady to stay as well.”

“Suit yourself,” Billings muttered.

“Mrs. Billings,” the man said, motioning to a chair. “You look like you need to sit down.”

“Yes, thank you,” she said as the stranger held the chair for her.

“Now, about my bid...”

\* \* \* \*

“One million dollars.”

“Sold...”

“Blake, do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

“Donated to charity—why?”

“Let me explain something—again,” Blake’s friend George Carson said. “Lohan Billings puts his wife up for auction every year and his bid is always the winning one.”

“So...”

“By outbidding him the way you did, there is no way he can top your bid and look good at the same time while his wife remains protected with their marriage intact.”

“She needs protection from him,” Blake stated.

“What?”

“I saw the proof on her neck and I’ve seen her unease. She took three shots of whiskey just before the auction began.”

“That may be true but he’s an enemy you don’t want.”

“Tell me more about him.”

“He’s Old Boston money though from the ill-gotten gains’ side of the register. He’s ruthless and gets what he wants no matter what it takes. He plays dirty, Blake.”

“And his wife?”

“Legitimate old money only rumor has it she won’t sign over her family’s fortune to him which would help make him more welcome in some of the inner circles.”

“He could always go to court for it.”

“And then he’d be admitting to the fact he’s in a bad marriage. He needs her money and the association to her family without tarnish.”

“Smart lady,” Blake commented.

"And you may have placed her in danger. He doesn't like losing, especially in front of this crowd."

"So you think I should withdraw the bid?"

"Yes, then give it anonymously later."

"I appreciate the information and the advice but I intend to get what I've paid for."

"Then let me take a good look at you because, my friend, I'm looking at a dead man."

"Gee, George, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Sorry, man, but I think you've made a huge mistake this time."

"Won't be the first or the last," Blake said.

"Blake..."

Taking a deep breath, Blake Atherton looked toward the stage.

"Wish me luck."

"You got it because you're sure as hell going to need it."

Blake nodded then headed to the front of the room where Lohan Billings stood, horror-struck at what had just happened.

"Mister Billings, I'd like to settle up with you."

"Excuse me," Billings said, turning around. "You want to what?"

"Who do I make the check out to?"

"Check?" Billings asked, obviously unable to think.

"To cover my bid for an evening with the lady. I don't want the check going to the wrong people."

"Your bid?"

"A cool million."

"Uh, can we talk?" Billings said, drawing Blake off to the side.

"Alicia, go see to our guests."

"No, I think I need to hear this. After all, I *am* the one involved."

"Alicia," he hissed.

"I'd like the lady to stay as well."

"Suit yourself," Billings muttered.

"Mrs. Billings," Blake said, motioning to a chair. "You look like you need to sit down."

"Yes, thank you," she said as he held the chair for her.

"Now, about my bid..."

\* \* \* \*

Alicia Billings witnessed the auction in shock. Never had it turned out the way this one had but for the first time since they'd been hosting the charity gala, Lohan Billings had been outbid and substantially.

Feeling light-headed, she refused to show her reaction though the same man she'd met in the small anteroom earlier saw right through her. *Does he honestly know what he's done?*

"I'd like the lady to stay as well."

He held a chair for her which she gladly took, her hand grabbing the top of it for support.

"Now, about my bid," the man said.

"Can we discuss this?" Lohan Billings asked. "You see, I'm always the one who makes the final bid of the auction thereby *winning* my wife. I can't even begin to top your bid but I'm willing to let it go if you are."

"Which I'm not," the man stated.

"But, as a gentleman..."

"What kind of gentleman auctions his beautiful wife off like a piece of artwork?"

"It's for charity..."

“And I’ve offered to give your charity one million dollars. I’m quite sure they would be extremely disappointed to learn that you are trying to deny them the funds they need.”

“It’s not that but I refuse to allow you to spend the night with Alicia. She’s not like the others who went up for bid before her.”

“I’m sorry, but no deal. I’m not asking to spend the night with her but I think my money can at least buy dinner with the lady.”

“But I’m giving you a way out.”

“One I didn’t ask for.”

“My wife is not for sale.”

“Then you should never have allowed her to participate.”

“Why can’t I convince you to do the right thing and withdraw your bid?”

“Because I made it in good faith and I expect the same.”

“But...”

“While we stand here discussing this, have you even thought to ask your wife how she feels.”

“Alicia will agree with what I decide.”

“No, Lohan, I won’t. He’s right,” Alicia said. “He’s made a very generous bid which is why we do this every year. He’s already stated his intentions for dinner and not what you assumed. You have no choice but to agree to the outcome of the auction.”

“But you can’t... How would it look?”

“Like I’m honoring a very generous donation by having dinner with the donor.”

“You can’t be serious, Alicia.”

“I am,” she said. “You’re in way over your head on this one. Mister...” *Please don’t admit to earlier...*

“Atherton, Blake Atherton and it will be my pleasure to take you to dinner one night this week.”

“It should be very interesting,” she commented.

“Atherton,” Billings said. “I’m not familiar with your name. Are you sure you’re able to back the check?”

“Mister Billings, I resent your implication. If I hadn’t been able to, I would never have made the bid.”

“Lohan, give up,” Alicia sighed. “You’ve lost to a very worthy opponent. I look forward to our next meeting.”

Billings obviously resented her siding with the stranger but with several of his associates lingering nearby, he couldn’t very well push the matter any further. Alicia knew it and appreciated that her husband’s survival instincts remained in place though she knew that somewhere down the road, he would get even with Blake Atherton, a man who’d kept their prior meeting to himself. *Thank God but how do I warn him?*

Both men shook hands, a gentlemen’s agreement in place.

\* \* \* \*

Once he wrote the check and handed it to the treasurer of the evening’s event, Blake left the Billings’ Beacon Hill home determined to do something to help Alicia Billings out of her predicament—namely, her marriage. Clearly ill at ease with the man and a victim of his abusive personality, Blake could tell she wanted out but had no way of doing so. *Maybe I can help...*

On the way to his car, he pulled out his cell phone and called a friend of his. Patrick Fox and he had been friends since their teens and when each got their degrees at Harvard, they returned to Boston and settled into business. While Blake took over the generations’ old *Revere Waverly*, a business started in the seventeen hundreds by his mother’s ancestors, Patrick went into security consultation and investigations. They’d worked together off and on over the years, their friendship tight.

“Fox.”



"Hey, it's me. I need some information on Lohan Billings, his wife Alicia and his business interests. Also, see what you can find out about her family's fortune."

"And you want this yesterday, I assume?"

"Something like that."

"Come on over for a drink and explain this to me."

"What about Claire?"

"She and her mother went to Nantucket for the weekend. Got the house to myself."

"On my way and thanks."

"Anytime plus you'll get my bill."

Both men snickered as Blake ended the call and got into his 2008 Jaguar XJ8L. Parked in the shadows, the indigo color almost made the car disappear. After getting behind the wheel, he started it and drove off. Checking his mirrors from habit, he noticed a car had appeared behind him and followed him for several miles. Speeding up then turning down a darkened alley, he quickly shut off the lights and waited, watching the mirrors to see his tail slowly pass by where he hid.

Satisfied he'd eluded his new *friend*, he drove down the alley then turned onto another street before taking a circuitous route to get to Patrick's. After he pulled into the gated property and parked, he walked over to the house then knocked.

"It's open," a voice called.

Though being the same age as Blake, Patrick looked several years younger thanks to his extremely active lifestyle. When not playing hockey with Blake, he vigorously worked out every day. They made a good pair.

Blake went inside, meeting his friend in the entry. Patrick handed him an old-fashioned glass filled with several shots of Jack Daniels.

"Damn, this tastes better than that fancy shit at Billings' party. I tried getting a beer but all they served seemed to be champagne and not the best I've ever tasted."

"Figures. From my prelim on him, he appears to be a man who is trying desperately to fit into a world he obviously doesn't belong in. What's the deal?"

"I bought his wife," Blake said calmly.

"You did what?"

"His profile should mention an annual gala he and his wife host every year. They hold an auction before the end of the evening with the last item, so to speak, being Alicia Billings. He usually makes the winning bid but this year he couldn't surpass mine."

"For?"

"One million."

"What the hell have you gotten us into?"

Blake laughed at his use of the word *us*.

"I'm not exactly sure but it should be interesting."

Blake told Patrick about the evening up to and including the confrontation after the auction and the tail he'd picked up once he left Beacon Hill.

"This guy is not one to fuck with, my friend."

"So I've heard but if you had seen her reaction to their grand entrance then throughout the night, you'd understand. I personally witnessed her taking three very healthy shots of whiskey to steel herself for the auction. When I saw her before it, her neck showed the beginnings of a wicked brush burn as if someone had ripped something from her. At the auction, it didn't show but I saw its shadow when we spoke afterwards."

"So you think he's abusing her?"

"In one way or another—yes. He treats her like a child, ordering her about as if she has no brains. He lives in the Victorian Era

and it's a shame because I think she's trapped in that mausoleum of a house."

"Might I remind you that she's married?"

"I know but I held her hand momentarily when we introduced ourselves and I felt something I've never experienced before. She felt it, too but a maid came into the room before we could say anything."

"From what I could find out about him, he grew up on the lower end of Beacon Hill. His family had a moderate fortune but not enough for Lohan. The main reason the marriage between him and Alicia had been arranged came about as a deal between two very old friends—his father and hers after he went to see her old man. The marriage gave him the *inroads* he needed into the financial world while she would come into a huge fortune from both sides of her family—one she has to freely sign over to him which obviously she has yet to do."

"George told me he refuses to take her to court over it because he will not admit that the marriage is a sham."

"In essence—yes. You know how gossipy some of those old biddies are and if they ever have daughters, it would hurt their debuts."

"Lovely," Blake commented before taking another sip from his drink. "Just how much is the lady worth?"

"Suffice it to say she's on a par with you."

"That much? Why haven't I heard about her before?"

"I think you've been checked too much and have ice for a brain."

"More than likely," Blake said then snickered.

"Do you want the guys and if so, how many?" Fox asked, referring to several of their teammates from their hockey team. A minor league affiliate of the Boston Bruins, the team had come to-

gether as friends from college hockey and continued playing. Several had played well enough to be called up to the NHL but mainly, this team did it for fun and love of the sport.

“Yeah, and about half the team.”

“It’s a good thing we’re home for the next few games.”

“That it is and one thing,” Blake said, his tone serious. “If anyone gets hurt in this, the bills are on me.”

Patrick nodded, knowing Blake Atherton would look after his friends so they would have no worries if anything went wrong.

“Any plans yet?”

“Just one.”

“Which is?”

“After Alicia and I enjoy dinner, I’m taking her to the rink.”

“But her profile mentions a bodyguard.”

“I think I’ve got that one figured out though I’ll have to make sure before I do anything.”

“Lovely.”

“You love the adventure,” Blake said.

“Honestly?” Patrick asked. “Yeah, I do.”

## **Chapter 2**

“Get me everything you can on Atherton,” Lohan Billings demanded once he recovered from the end of the auction.

“Yes, sir,” Bruno said.

“Once you do, your sole job is Mrs. Billings. Outside of this house, do not let her out of your sight.”

“Yes, sir,” the tall husky man said. Bald, Bruno made an intimidating picture when he entered a room. His history didn’t hurt either since Billings found him on the job as a bouncer in one of Boston’s hottest bars. The fact he’d been undefeated in cage fighting events for three years running made Billings want him more.

After seeing the last of his guests leave, he closed the front door to the mansion then sought out his wife. When he found her, he immediately flew into a fit of rage.

“Who the hell is he, Alicia?”

“I have no clue.”

“The maid said she found you with him in one of the smaller rooms.”

“She did but we didn’t introduce ourselves. He wanted something stronger than champagne and...”

“You needed several shots for strength—as usual,” he accused.

“And I guarantee you’d want the same in my position. I’m tired of being a trophy wife and I detest being auctioned off like a steer going to slaughter. I hated tonight with a passion.”

"We go through this every year and you will do this again next year and the years afterward."

"Why, Lohan? Why, when someone literally sunk your ship and got away with it? Half your friends wanted to be in what's his name's place tonight. They laughed at you, too."

"Shut up!"

"Truth hurts, doesn't it?"

"Shut up, I said," Lohan screamed moments before he slapped her.

Alicia Billings looked at her husband then ran from the room. As soon as she got upstairs, he heard her slam the door to the master suite of rooms and cursed. Sleeping in a guestroom across the hall from their room had been the norm for years and though he didn't like being locked out, their situation had its advantages.

The more the evening drew on, the worse it became and the more control over his life he lost. The thought of one man trumping him angered him added to the fact his wife had suddenly found some strength only made him madder.

"Who the fuck are you, Atherton?"

\* \* \* \*

Locked behind the safety of a set of solid oak doors—she hoped—Alicia Billings slid down to the floor crying. Her face stung where Lohan's hand had made contact and she could feel it swelling. From previous experience, she knew she'd be hiding a black eye in the morning.

"Damn you!" she cursed.

Getting up, she crossed the room stripping out of the designer gown as she walked. When it had been bought, she loved the dress but now it brought back bad memories—all but one. Blake Atherton's image appeared in her mind, Alicia grateful for his tact and compassion—a true gentleman. Then again, if he'd admitted to

knowing her, he'd be endangering himself so it could've been self-preservation. She liked her first thoughts more, pushing the selfish ones out of her mind.

Grabbing a satin dressing gown, she pulled the robe around her as she went into the bathroom to assess the inflicted damage to her face. Alicia Billings groaned when she saw the trickle of blood hating her so-called husband even more than ever. Cold compresses helped and it seemed the bloody wound would prove superficial but the black eye would overwhelm it so what did it matter? Lohan had done it again only his attacks seemed to be more violent each time.

Ruing the fact she remained in the marriage, she remembered the few attempts she'd made to escape him only each time, Lohan showed up and dragged her back. Her only advantage—she refused to sign her fortune over to him and he refused to go to court. *Thank God for small blessings...*

Thinking back to the evening's end, she tried to figure out how to warn Atherton off but if she made any calls to him, Lohan would take it out on her again and she couldn't trust the servants since they knew who paid them—their loyalty obvious. Going to the window, she gazed out at the wintry sky—another unhappy Yuletide.

The next morning, she applied more cold compresses then dressed and went downstairs to breakfast. Lohan sat at the table reading the morning edition of the *Globe*—business section, of course.

"Ah, Alicia, how did you sleep?" he asked without looking up, as if last night had not happened.

"As well as could be expected," she answered as a maid poured her coffee.

Lohan put the paper down, looking at his wife.

"Make sure you put some make-up on. I don't want the servants talking."

"What difference does it make? Your true colors came out."

"That's exactly it, Alicia, and it's your fault."

"Wonderful," she muttered as she sipped her coffee.

"What?"

"Nothing," she answered as she waved off the maid's offer of a plate of food.

"I just want to let you know that I've assigned Bruno to be your exclusive bodyguard. If this Atherton still expects you to join him for dinner, I want you under constant watch so nothing gets started."

"You're crazy," she accused. "No one wants to even talk to me because of you. I doubt Atherton will and if he does, he more than likely knows you by reputation, which should be enough to scare him off."

"Don't get flip with me."

"Get over yourself, Lohan," she said bored by the constant repeat of the conversation he insisted on having.

"I might break down and take you to court anyway. I can't stand being with you," he said, figuring she might change her tune.

"Do it, Lohan," she said matter-of-factly. "It's the only way I'll sign it over to you."

"What kind of a man leaves a fortune the way this one's been left?"

"A smart one. My grandfather knew I'd either make a stupid mistake and sign it all away like a fool or I'd be his granddaughter and be smart."

"You bitch!"



"That's right, Lohan. That money is mine and I intend to keep it. If I want to leave it to some homeless stray, I will because I will never freely sign it over to you."

Alicia got up and started to leave the room, the phone ringing stopping her.

"Billings' residence...one moment, please."

The maid walked the phone over to Alicia, handing it to her.

"It's for you, ma'am," she said, backing away.

From the maid's quick movement, Alicia knew who waited for her to answer the call. She took a deep breath then walked to the window knowing Lohan wanted to know who she spoke with.

"Hello... Ah, Mister Atherton, I didn't expect to hear from you... Ah, the dinner you bid on... Yes, that would be very nice... No, I'll meet you there at eight... Good-bye."

Alicia ended the call, putting the phone on the table.

"Well?"

"I will be meeting Blake Atherton at eight tonight."

"Where?" Lohan demanded to know.

"*Locke-Ober*," she said. "Seems he can do something you can't."

"What's that?"

"He's booked the *JFK Room*," she said, relishing her husband's reaction. The restaurant Atherton had chosen had received extremely good reviews and the room she referred to topped the list of the hardest reservations to get in the city. Supposedly, Lohan had tried but couldn't seem to get the much sought after seats. Atherton had on less than twenty-four hours' notice.

While her husband fumed, Alicia Billings left the room and went upstairs to choose something to wear to dinner while she placed more compresses on her face. *This will prove to be an interesting evening—to say the least.*

\* \* \* \*

Hanging up the phone, Blake Atherton sat back willing his body to calm down. It amazed him what the sound of her voice could do to him but at the moment, he had to be wary of anything he said or did when it came to Alicia Billings.

Thinking back over their short conversation, Blake noticed the hint of amazement in her voice when he mentioned where they would be eating. He grinned, grateful for his forethought in becoming one of the restaurant's usual customers. He ate there at least once a week and usually walked out after paying a hefty tab because he never ate alone. This also told him she either didn't eat there often or had never been there, meaning her husband did not have clout when it came to Boston eateries.

Before he'd called Alicia, he read the report he'd received on Lohan Billings coming away from it with a bad taste in his mouth. His business practices questionable at best, Blake realized why the man wanted—no, needed—Alicia's fortune. With it came the respectability he craved to be successful in Boston's financial circles—ones Blake could make sure he'd never enter.

Now, he read Alicia's bio, impressed with her strength and her intelligence. Her grandfather had left her several million dollars which in the past several years of being invested had increased to somewhere between ten and twelve. She'd employed his advisors which had been one of the smartest moves she could've ever made—the second being her refusal to give it over to Billings.

The phone ringing brought him back to reality.

"Atherton."

"Someone's been trying to find you," Patrick Fox said.

"Talk to me."

"There have been several requests searching for you and your business interests all coming from a computer in his home."

"I'm not going to ask how you found this out."

“Good, what you don’t know won’t hurt me later,” Fox said before laughing.

“Did he have any success?”

“You’re still in the wind. He might hit on *Atherton Sports Group* but that’s so off the radar with Boston money that he may ignore it.”

“If only he knew...”

When Blake created *Atherton Sports Group*, it had been as part of a college project—one that turned a profit. Able to outfit his team at a cheaper cost than going through anyone else, he saved them money that they put into other things like insurance and ice time. Over the years, he’d picked up several lucrative contracts for area teams and one major league ball club which made him a tidy sum that he literally used as walk around money.

Blake Atherton’s real wealth came from the family business his maternal grandparents had left him. They’d followed the example set by the duPont family with each generation leaving their money to their grandchildren instead of their children. Learning Alicia’s grandfather had virtually done the same spoke volumes to him.

One good thing about the way *Revere Waverly* had been set up, his grandmother still remained listed as president and chief executive officer. The original papers of incorporation had stipulated that a Revere or Waverly would hold the title until their death, even if another family member ran the business. Because marriage united the families, Leighton Revere Waverly changed the stipulation several years after Blake’s taking over the reins of the company and the papers had been amended to state that upon her death, her heir would be named officially as president and CEO, thereby resolving the name issue. Until then, though, anyone looking into Blake would find nothing about him in the family business except as a facilitator of successful deals on behalf of the family, Leighton Wa-

verly the final word. At a young ninety-three, she had no plans of going anywhere much to Blake's relief.

He picked up the phone and called his grandmother.

"And how's my favorite grandson?" her voice answered.

"Your only grandson is fine," he said, before snickering at their private joke.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of hearing from you?" she asked, always straight to the point.

"I wanted to let you know there may be inquiries about me and the company."

"Why?"

Blake explained what had been going on, Leighton listening quietly while letting him know she did.

"And so this upstart is going after you because you made him look bad?"

"Partly," Blake said. "I figured he would want to know who he is up against because you know me, I won't back down."

"You've learned well," she agreed.

"You also taught me to be prepared which brings me to the second reason I called."

"And?"

"Can you open the house in Newport as well as get me a top-notch medical staff? I have a gut feeling this is going to get violent and the less people who know what's going on, the better."

"Patrick?"

"Yes, he's in on this and he sends his love as always."

"My love to him and Claire," she said. "The house is not a problem—I'll see to it myself. I need specifics on the other request."

Blake grinned as they discussed the medical team and the quiet private hospital near the family's mansion in Newport, Rhode Island.

"I will let you know when I get things set up."

"Thanks," he said, grateful for having her in his life.

"One question..."

"What?"

"Is she worth it?"

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell have you found out about Atherton?"

"The only Atherton we've been able to locate owns *Atherton Sports Group* in Winthrop."

"Value?"

"A few million," Bruno stated.

"It can't be him then. If that's all he's worth, he can't afford the million he dropped last night then dinner at *Locke-Ober*. Keep digging."

"Yes, sir," Bruno said.

Once Bruno left him alone, Billings sat back and considered Blake Atherton. He couldn't understand why they'd been having trouble getting a handle on his adversary. No way could a few million sustain the lifestyle this guy seemed to be living. Something didn't add up.

Going upstairs, he went to the master suite and then inside, deliberately not announcing his presence.

"I want to see what you plan to wear tonight."

"Lohan, leave me alone. I think I'm quite capable of dressing down so you have no competition."

"Watch your mouth, Alicia, or..."

"Or you'll what? Hit me? I don't think so because you don't want anyone to know how you actually treat your wife. It's bad enough I have to cover up the black eye from last night."

"Why do you push me?" he asked.

"Why won't you give up? We're not happy at all. Neither one of us wants this marriage."

"You keep telling yourself that," he said, grabbing her upper arm. "But remember—I will not divorce you—ever!"

"And I'll never sign my inheritance over to you either."

"Bitch," he hissed, throwing her back.

"Leave me alone," she said, backing away from him.

"Not before I tell you what I expect from you. You will go to dinner and find out everything you can about him."

"Why, so you can destroy him? No, Lohan, that's your department. I plan to enjoy a quiet evening away from you and this house. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get dressed in peace."

Billings went to the door, opening it before stopping.

"Take care in what you say and do, Alicia," he warned. "You know what I'm capable of."

"Unfortunately, I do," she said. "Now, get out."

Fuming, he slammed the door calling for Bruno.

"Sir?"

"Don't let her out of your sight."

\* \* \* \*

Once he'd left her alone, Alicia went back to getting ready for a night out with Blake Atherton. Opting for an elegant black pin-stripe pants suit with a lilac silk blouse, she dressed then carefully applied foundation to hide the black eye Lohan had given her earlier.

When she liked what she saw in the mirror, she slipped her feet into a black pair of heels, touched up her hair thanks to an un-

ruly lock and then picked up her clutch knowing her husband would find something wrong with her. *I don't care...*

"You're not serious," Lohan accused, meeting her at the bottom of the grand staircase.

"I'm very serious," she said. "Business casual is fine—dressy yet not overboard for the restaurant."

"But..."

"Get over it, Lohan."

"We'll talk later, Alicia."

"There's nothing more to discuss," she told him as she pulled away from him.

"Bruno will be keeping an eye on you so nothing happens," he advised her as she reached for the doorknob. She stopped then turned.

"Lohan, my dear greedy husband, if you continue with this, you'll never see a penny of my money—remember that."

"Don't threaten me, Alicia."

"Then leave me alone."

"Bruno will be driving you..."

"Wonderful," she muttered as she left the house.

Outside, Bruno waited by the open door to Lohan's Mercedes-Benz limo. Once she got settled inside, he closed the door then slid behind the wheel of her husband's expensive showpiece. She sat back, gazing out the window while trying to ignore the intimidating man in the front of the car.

"I realize Mister Billings has issued his orders about this evening but I have one or two of my own. I don't want to see you anywhere near where I'm eating dinner. Do you understand me?"

"I don't take orders from you, Mrs. Billings. He gave me strict instructions."

"Figures," she said under her breath. "Then never mind."

Watching what they passed, she let herself drift away in thought as they passed one of the many waterways in and around Boston. Memories from her childhood quickly flashed back taking her by surprise. *Happy ones but why after all these years?*

One in particular overwhelmed her. She'd been in her early teens when the *USS John F. Kennedy* docked at a pier in Boston Harbor, the size of it overpowering the *USS Constitution—Old Ironsides*. How American naval vessels had evolved over the years amazed her. With some other family members, they cruised near the ship—the aircraft carrier huge compared to their small wooden speedboat.

Then—another came to her. At the same time, transatlantic flights from Boston to London and London to Boston drew crowds to Logan International Airport to see the huge jumbo jet as passengers boarded the nighttime departing flight. She laughed at some of the memories though it bothered her as to why they'd come back to her at this point in time.

"We've arrived, Mrs. Billings," Bruno announced, putting emphasis on *Mrs. Billings*.

Alicia nodded then took a deep breath while saying a quick prayer that the evening would be uneventful. With her *watchdog* shadowing her, she had to make sure nothing happened that could get back to Lohan to make either her life painful or Atherton's. But then again, his million-dollar bid had deftly taken care of that already.

A valet opened the limo's door for her then, after she'd gotten out of the car, she went inside while Bruno parked. *I hope he gets lost...* Standing in front of the renowned restaurant, she gazed up at the beautiful architecture of the building. *Amazing...*

"Welcome to *Locke-Ober*," the host said as she entered.

"Thank you," Alicia said. "I'm meeting Mister Atherton."



"He's waiting for you in the *JFK Room*. This way."

She followed the tall thin man upstairs to the exclusive room then to the table where Blake Atherton waited. Atherton stood when she arrived, his hand extended.

"Thank you," she said to the host. "Oh, there's a tall bald man who is of the opinion he'll be joining us. He has no reservation so if you could possibly..."

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

She smiled then sat down, Blake sitting across from her. While settling into a comfortable position, she looked down at her plate and spoke.

"My husband seems to think I need a watchdog and sent his man to keep an eye on us. If we could keep this..." she said, trailing off. "For both our sakes, if you catch my drift."

"I understand and, if need be, I can use some of my own tricks."

"Please don't do anything..."

"Relax," he said, reassuring her.

"Why do I think I can relax with you?"

"My charming personality?" he deadpanned.

Alicia grinned, something she'd not been able to do for a while. Her body calmed and she gazed at the man sitting across from her.

"Tell me about Blake Atherton..."

\* \* \* \*

Blake had chosen a black Armani suit with a burgundy silk shirt and deeper burgundy tie. Once he dressed, he grabbed his cell phone and wallet and headed downstairs to grab his overcoat which he'd left draped across the banister at the bottom of the staircase.

Blake Atherton lived in a grand old mansion overlooking the harbor—one he'd been told dated back to the Revolution or be-

fore. Leighton had given him the keys to it when she chose to move into a condo in the heart of Boston and near the Common where she loved to walk and enjoy the park. Blake had not changed too much in the house though he'd added a gym plus one of the rarely used guestrooms had been turned into a trophy room for awards from school to business to sports.

While he'd consistently lettered in soccer, lacrosse and ice hockey, hockey had always been his true love prompting his creation of *Atherton Sports Group*. Knowing from an early age that he'd one day take over *Revere Waverly*, he'd decided early on how he'd run his life and so far, he'd stuck with his plan. At least until he met Alicia Billings.

Meeting Alicia had added a spark to his carefully orchestrated life. Though he enjoyed the spontaneity of hockey and getting deep into heated negotiations, he'd missed being with a beautiful woman. Never one to be able to open up to a woman—his grandmother definitely the exception—he sank himself into other things that made him happy. Alicia Billings made him happy and he knew he had to have her but her husband would be a problem—obviously.

Usually, if Blake saw someone who piqued his interest, he backed off once he learned her marital status. Alicia's touch, though brief, told him a lot in a moment because he could instantly tell she didn't want to be married to Billings. Watching her after their meeting in the anteroom then as she and her husband hosted their gala fundraiser convinced him of her unhappiness and possible desire to change her life, though Billings made it abundantly clear he had no intention of releasing her from the bondage of her vows.

If what he'd learned proved true, Alicia's withholding of her family's fortune could turn deadly if Billings chose to try to get the money after her death by probating her will. Blake feared what could happen and wanted to help her in any way he could but he al-

so knew he had to be careful. The last thing they needed would be drawing undue attention to anything they did and having it get back to Billings.

Draping his coat over his arm, he went out to where his Jag waited, started the sleek car and drove into the city to his eight o'clock dinner engagement. The more he thought about her, the more his body craved her touch. Their momentary one when they first met had sent an unfamiliar heat through him and he desperately wanted to explore it, though at the moment, thoughts of her aroused other parts of his body that he knew he'd better calm before he arrived at the restaurant.

Arriving at the restaurant, he parked across the street since Blake refused to allow valets to park the Jag. He'd learned early on that most valets got off on driving expensive cars but had no clue about caring for them or for other people's property. Once he had, he got out of the car, locked it and walked toward the front of the restaurant. Inside, the host greeted him and immediately escorted him to his table, the same one he always sat at.

"I'm expecting Mrs. Alicia Billings in a short bit. If you'd make sure she's brought up as soon as she arrives..."

"Very good, sir," the host said. "Your waiter will be with you in a minute."

"Thank you," Blake said as he got comfortable. A few moments later, the waiter arrived with a rum and Coke placing it on the table.

"When you're ready, sir..."

Blake nodded and waited. Checking his watch, he saw that he'd arrived early and had a short time to wait. He enjoyed his drink and signaled for another one. Worried she might not show, he sipped from his second drink and glanced toward the door.

Following the host, Blake saw a vision in black pinstripe and lilac—elegance personified. As they neared the table, Blake stood and extended his hand welcoming her.

“Thank you,” she said to the host. “Oh, there’s a tall bald man who is of the opinion he’ll be joining us. He has no reservation so if you could possibly...”

“I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

As if embarrassed, she dropped her eyes to the table as she explained what she’d discussed with their host.

“My husband seems to think I need a watchdog and sent his man to keep an eye on us. If we could keep this...” she said, trailing off. “For both our sakes, if you catch my drift.”

“I understand and, if need be, I can use some of my own tricks.”

“Please don’t do anything...”

“Relax,” he said, reassuring her.

“Why do I think I can?”

“My charming personality?” he deadpanned.

Alicia grinned, smoothing her napkin on her lap.

“What are you drinking?” she asked.

“Rum and Coke.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Blake signaled the waiter for another drink. When it arrived, she nodded before taking a sip then looked at him.

“Tell me about Blake Atherton...”

### **Chapter 3**

Not expecting her question, Blake Atherton sat back and thought.

“What?” she asked.

“No one’s ever asked me to do that.”

“Well? Tell me then,” she coaxed. “I’m curious about the man who paid one million dollars in order to be here at this place in time.”

Blake took a deep breath then told her a little about himself. Memories came back, some he’d buried years before though he felt perfectly comfortable telling her about them.

“Why hockey, lacrosse and soccer? Why not football?”

“In football, there are too many rules whether college versus professional, in the divisions or whatever. In soccer and hockey, the games are played today pretty much like they’ve always been. I like physical sports but I prefer ones that don’t have egos involved.”

“What about professional hockey—aren’t egos involved there? Soccer?”

“Seldom,” he answered. “Even Beckham—as famous as he is—is down to earth. I’ve met several of the *superstars* of hockey and none of them cut the attitudes like pro-ball or the other major sports.”

“Who have you met?”

“Wayne Gretsky, Mario Lemieux, Jaromir Jgar...”

"I'm sorry to say those names mean nothing to me. I've read about Beckham but I don't follow soccer or hockey or any sport, for that fact. He doesn't consider it appropriate..."

"It's a shame," Blake lamented. "I had thoughts of inviting you to either a game or one of our practices."

"Interesting," she commented. "Maybe you'll reconsider."

"Maybe."

"May I take your orders?" their waiter asked.

"I'd like the center cut filet, medium rare," Alicia said.

"I'll take the swordfish," Blake said.

"Very good," the waiter said. "Your salads will be out in a few moments."

Blake nodded then waited for the waiter to leave them alone.

"How did he know about the salads?"

"This is my regular table. Usually when I order the swordfish, I get the same meal. If I order steak, then I might order the clams or the scallops."

"How often do you eat here?"

"A couple times a week. I don't believe I remember seeing you here."

"I've never been here. He's said he can't get reservations but I think it might be something else."

"What's that?"

"My husband has a habit of really pissing off the wrong people. As a result, we've ended up being blacklisted from several restaurants, some A-listed parties—you know the rest. You should have seen his face when I told him you had the reservation for this room."

"I'm sorry I missed it."

"It made my day though I couldn't openly admit it."

"Forgive me for prying but I get the strong impression you're not happy."

"I'm not," she said. "I hate him and everything he stands for, plus last night I realized—thanks to you—that I hate living in a mausoleum. My parents arranged this marriage with his family and here I am—unhappy and unloved."

"I'd like to change that," Blake found himself actually saying.

"I'm scared for you. You've really riled him, especially when you refused to take back your bid. He's been angry ever since."

"My apologies," Blake said. "If I'd known..."

"Don't worry about it—just be careful. Don't let your guard down—ever!"

\* \* \* \*

Bruno made a commotion at the entrance to the restaurant and finally bullied his way inside. Heading straight to the *JFK Room*, he walked in and stood in a corner searching for Mrs. Billings. When he finally laid eyes on her, he found her seated at a table with Blake Atherton and she seemed to be enjoying dinner.

"Sir, may I help you?"

"I'm working," he stated flatly, obviously insulted that someone dared to question him. A former wrestler, he liked to throw his weight around and expected everyone to know him from his days in the *World Wrestling Federation*. In this restaurant, it didn't work.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm on the job, now beat it."

"I'm sorry, sir, but you cannot stand here. Do you have a reservation?"

"No, I do not and if you don't leave me alone..."

The room's host signaled to several waiters who came to stand behind him.

“Sir, I’m trying to be nice about this. Will you leave in a peaceful manner or must I have you escorted out?”

“I’m not leaving,” Bruno stated.

“Very well,” the host said. “Gentlemen?”

Bruno thought better of making a scene and left the room. Escorted downstairs to the bar, the host informed him he could remain there until his *job* left the restaurant.

A few moments later, several Boston patrolmen entered the lobby and spoke briefly with the host meeting them at the front door. Bruno watched their conversation and then saw the officers walking in his direction.

“Sir, there’s been complaints from several patrons that you’ve been creating a disturbance.”

“They’re full of it,” Bruno stated. “Who made a complaint? I have the right to know.”

“Right now, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used...”

“What the...”

“You are under arrest for trespassing and disturbing the peace.”

Bruno’s hands cuffed behind him, the officers escorted him outside and into a waiting police van without incident. While inside the van, Bruno’s anger got the better of him and by the time they arrived at police headquarters, he’d put several dents into the metal.

“Wow, now we get to add destruction of police property to the list of charges. Get ready for a long evening,” the arresting officer said.

Bruno snapped and tried to attack the officer but another one used a Taser on him to subdue him. He faced an even longer evening now.



\* \* \* \*

While Alicia and Blake enjoyed their meal, they took little notice of the commotion near the door. Only when a waiter came to the table and bent to whisper something to Blake did what happened become known to them.

"Thank you," Blake said, slipping the waiter a twenty.

"What's that all about?" Alicia asked once the waiter had left them.

"It seems your watchdog is on his way to police headquarters and night court to be arraigned on several charges stemming from a small altercation at the door a few moments ago followed by a heated argument in the bar."

"Are you serious?" she asked amused.

"Very," he said. "You can relax now—no one will be spying on you at least for the rest of the evening."

She signaled to the waiter and requested another round of drinks, this time Blake amused.

"I think the news deserves a celebration though my reprieve will be brief."

"What do you mean?" Blake asked, having an awful feeling he knew what she would tell him.

"His *one call* will go directly to my husband. Lohan will immediately come after me and..."

Blake pulled out his cell phone and made a quick call to a number he had on speed dial.

"John...it's Blake... Yes, she's fine. I'll tell her you asked. Can you do me a favor? ...Your men are bringing in a somewhat unsavory sort from *Locke-Ober*. Could you make sure he gets his one phone call only stall it? ...That's perfect... I owe you," Blake said, grinning.

"What? Who?"

"My friend is Chief of Ds and it seems his men are a bit upset at the way the arrest went down."

"Why?"

"Your watchdog resisted arrest then turned around and put several dents into city property. My friend's planning to keep him on ice for a few hours until he calms down."

"How long is he planning?" she asked nervously.

"Several hours, at least—why?" Blake asked.

"I need to get out of here," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not," Blake assured her, signaling for their check. As soon as he took care of the bill, Blake escorted her out of the restaurant.

Once outside, Alicia took a deep breath and let it out slowly as if savoring each second.

"Alicia?"

"The smell of freedom is wonderful."

"Then tell me what you want to do."

"Let's walk and see where it takes us."

"Your wish..." he said. "I have just the place."

Placing his hand gently on the small of her back, Blake crossed the street with her. He felt a faint hint of the same heat he'd felt the night before at the party but didn't say anything knowing Alicia needed her space. Heading toward the Jag, he again asked her desires and once she decided, they settled into the car before heading toward the harbor.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome, I hope."

"Blake, you've given me a beautiful evening which is something I haven't been able to enjoy in years. I truly appreciate this."

"Anytime."

After he parked, they took a walk along the walkway parallel to the sea wall. Waves crashed against it, the roar overwhelming though not in a bad way.

"I remember sitting out here with my high school girlfriend."

"Sounds romantic."

"Not at the time."

"Why?"

"Every time I went to say something, the roar of the breakers drowned me out. She thought I made lame excuses and that ended it all."

"Her loss."

"Hopefully."

"What did you say?"

"Look, you and I both felt the electricity between us the other night and I've felt it tonight as well. I don't want to miss out on something..."

"You do remember there's a husband involved..."

"I'll help you get away from him."

"He can buy anything or anyone."

"Not me."

"How can you be so damned sure?"

"Ever hear of *Revere Waverly*?"

"Yes," she answered. "Leighton Waverly is worth billions and..."

"She's my grandmother."

"Tell me you're joking."

"I'm not and she'd slap me silly if I ever did."

"But..."

"Hold on a second," Blake said, pulling out his cell phone and pressing another number stored in his speed dial. As soon as the

call connected, he handed the phone to Alicia. Moments later, her eyes opened wide.

“And what does my favorite grandson want?”

“Uh, I’m...” Alicia tried to say.

“Hello?”

Blake took the phone.

“I’m here. The lady I’m with needed convincing.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“She wants to talk to you,” Blake said, handing the phone back to Alicia.

“Hello?”

“This is Leighton Waverly. Who is my grandson trying to convince about his family ties?”

“Alicia Billings, Mrs. Waverly. I’m...”

“I knew your grandparents—lovely people. Your grandfather proved to be extremely shrewd in business.”

“Yes, ma’am, so I’ve been told.”

“Have Blake bring you over. I’d love to meet you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alicia said. “Thank you.”

Dumbfounded, Alicia handed the phone back to Blake.

“Blake?”

“Yes?”

“Good luck but be careful.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Putting his cell phone into his pocket, Blake looked at Alicia.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I just spoke with the most powerful woman in New England and she wants you to bring me over to see her. Leighton Waverly wants to meet me.”

"Alicia—breathe," Blake said, pulling her into his arms. Running his hand up and down her back relaxed her though his mere touch set both of them off. Alicia looked at him, questions in her eyes.

With his hands framing her face, Blake pulled her into a kiss, Alicia putting up a half-hearted fight.

"This is wrong," she said, their lips barely brushing together.

"I totally disagree," he said before kissing her again.

Alicia melted to his touch, the laws of nature taking over. Her hands gripped his lapels needing something to support her considering her legs wanted to fail her.

"We can't..."

"I'll find a way," he assured her.

"Lohan will hunt you down and kill you."

"You let me worry about things. When I saw you last night, I knew I had to do something—I mean the feelings that..."

"Blake, he rarely lets me out of the house unless he sends somebody to keep an eye on me. I have no real freedom. I can't meet you without him knowing."

"Leave it to me," he said. "Just be ready for the invitations."

"What do you mean?"

"My grandmother to start with—no one in his right mind refuses an audience with Leighton Waverly. We have the rink..."

"The rink?"

"I told you I play hockey. I want you to see that part of my life."

"But..."

"We always invite potential sponsors to visit the club and then there are the charity games to discuss. I can think of numerous ways of getting you out of that mausoleum."

"He'll never let me go. It's not fair to you..."

"I'll take my chances."

"Even right now?"

"Yes, even now."

"How long until Bruno gets his phone call?"

"After midnight," Blake answered.

"Then take me to bed, Mister Atherton. If we're going to have a clandestine affair, I don't believe we should waste any time."

Momentarily shocked by her request, Blake quickly recovered and kissed her again.

"Anything for you, baby. Anything you want..."

"It doesn't shock you?"

"At this point, nothing does but I need to say something."

"What?"

"I have a pretty good idea how I feel about you. I've already told you I'd help you get away from him but if you're planning to use me, tell me now so I can walk away in one piece."

"Blake, I understand feelings. There is something going on between us that can't be ignored. It's something I've never felt with any other man and I think I've known from the moment we met that we'd be together. I want this more than anything—I want us—even though it's only been twenty-four hours or so. Blake Atherton, I want to be with you any way I can."

\* \* \* \*

Once they returned to the car, Blake drove back into the city and headed toward *Locke-Ober*. Passing the street they would have turned down, he drove instead to the *Hyatt Regency Boston* on the Avenue de Lafayette. Parking the Jag himself, he then escorted her into the lobby of the luxurious hotel.

"Yes, sir?" the clerk asked as they came up to the counter.

"We'd like a room for the night—king bed, non-smoking..."

"Yes, sir, we have one on the fifth floor."

"That's fine," Blake said as he pulled out his billfold and removed enough cash to cover the bill.

"Will there be anything else..." she asked as he signed the receipt, "Mister...Bond..."

"Maybe later," he said as he smiled. Taking the keycard, he escorted Alicia to the elevator where they waited for what felt like an eternity.

"You've done this before, James?" she asked amused.

"Spur of the moment but I figured if your husband decided to check around for you, he'd never find us since I paid cash and used an assumed name. Trust me, I can play the game as well as he can."

"I'm impressed," she said as they entered the elevator, the doors closing behind them.

Blake pulled her into a kiss, Alicia immediately responding.

"Damn, I couldn't wait any longer," he gasped.

"Neither could I."

"I'm asking one last time—are you sure about this?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. "Yes, I am—more than anything in a very long time."

"Good," Blake said then kissed her as the bell signaled they'd reached their floor. "Good."

\* \* \* \*

Once off the elevator, they quickly found their room though impatience set in as he fumbled with the keycard. Blake kicked the door closed behind them as they feverishly fought to get each other's clothes off.

Before they knew what had happened, Blake laid on top of Alicia pinning her to the floor. Tracing her body with his tongue, he refused to let her move. The more he did to her, the more she pressed her body against him. Feeling her naked skin next to his drove Blake insane but he held back.

"Don't," she whispered.

"What?" he asked as he traced her nipple seconds before he took it between his teeth and brushed his tongue over it.

"Don't hold back," she gasped. "We don't have the time."

"I don't want this to be *hit and run*," he said. "I..."

"Neither do I but we have to worry about our time. If Lohan..."

His lips covered hers as he kissed her wanting to take away her concerns but knowing she'd been right. They didn't have the luxury of time—at least not yet.

Still refusing to let go of her hands, he maneuvered his cock to her pussy and pressed it against her velvety entrance. He tried to ease in, Alicia's body tight.

"Relax, babe," he said. "You're so tight..."

"It's been a while," Alicia stated. "He hasn't touched me in ages."

"I'll make it as easy as possible," he assured her, Alicia nodding.

Blake tried again, knowing what he would do—slow and easy yet with gentle force. He thrust into her, his cock disappearing a little way into her heated body. Another slow thrust and she gasped.

"Alicia?"

"My God, it feels amazing."

Another thrust and she gasped again, the same happening over and over until he'd buried himself deep within her. He gazed at her, Alicia Billings literally glowing with passion. Of course, the moonlight streaming in their window didn't hurt either.

"You look like an angel."

"Then take this angel and be devilish about it."



Her words brought a groan from him as he obeyed her command and fucked her in the moonlight bathing Boston. Her gasps changed to cries of passion and screams for more. After his initial entry, Blake took her several times, each time harder than previously and Alicia wanted more.

Lying on top of her again, he pulled her hands between them and kissed each finger. When he got to her ring finger and the wedding set sitting there, he gently took it into his mouth suckling it.

“I will replace this with one celebrating our marriage.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I intend to keep this one. Somehow, I will find a way to rescue you from your life and bring you into ours.”

“My knight in armor?”

“More like a hockey player in pads—it’s a little more down to earth.”

“Blake?”

“Yes,” he said, his cock swelling inside her again from Alicia saying his name.

“Fuck me again,” she whispered. “I need what only you can do to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he rolled to his back taking Alicia with him. “This time, I want to see your body move as I take you.”

Alicia loomed over him, her blonde hair a mess from the static electricity in the carpet. She brushed it back, jolting when he took her breasts in his hands and squeezed.

“I don’t understand this heat—it’s coursing through me like out an out-of-control fire.”

“It’s us and only you and I together can make it. I’ve never felt anything like it before and I don’t want to lose you or it. I love you, Alicia, if that’s possible this soon.”

“Answer me one question, Mister Atherton...”

“Oops, the lady’s getting formal...”

“The lady wants to know if she’s worth the million you paid for her.”

“A million times over,” he said moments before he thrust his cock into her. Groaning from the sensations overwhelming him, Blake knew what he had to do in order to keep her in his life. He knew it would be difficult but Alicia would be worth it.

As she moved with his thrusts, he watched the natural movement of her body and wanted more. Her arms raised while still holding her hair back, her breasts gently bouncing driving him more. Pulling her down to him, he wrapped his body around hers and filled her with an explosion that startled even him. His lips covering hers, he took her cries within him, refusing to allow any space between them.

Her fist pounding the carpet next to his ear pleased him as it told him more than any words ever could.

“Mine,” he whispered.

“Yours,” she said before she called his name.

\* \* \* \*

On the way up to their room, Alicia studied Blake Atherton when his hot lips did not cover hers. Once inside their room, the heat of the moment literally took over as they stripped each other of all clothing.

Pinned to the thick carpet, Alicia languished in the heat their union brought out in them, amazed at how wonderful Blake made her feel. Passing time scared her and she begged him not to be easy with her though the feel of his tongue tracing the length of her body made her have second thoughts—especially when he teased her nipples. *What more can he do?*

When he pressed his cock against her, Alicia jolted. Never had she ever felt sensations like that and now she finally knew the true meaning of satisfaction—at least until Blake thrust into her and took her. She felt her body react to his as she craved more of him and what he did to her—not once or twice but numerous times. *I want more...*

As if reading her thoughts, Blake took her over the edge only this time, he held her as if she floated on air before she jolted again when he exploded into her. Her fist pounded the carpet needing some release from the heated pressure building in her body.

Momentary relief set in when she thanked Lohan for his foresight in forcing her to take the pill since he never wanted children. At least they didn't have to worry about that coming into their lives—the last thing they needed—for now.

The idea of marrying Blake Atherton sent heat racing through her, every nerve ending in her body tingling. She finally had someone she could believe in.

"Mine," he whispered.

"Yours," she said before she called his name.

\* \* \* \*

Checking Blake's Rolex, Alicia saw how quickly time had passed and raced into the bathroom to wash up before dressing.

"I'll take you home..."

"No," she said emphatically. "You driving me home will raise questions I don't want to answer and trust me, you don't want to confront him. I'll take a taxi."

"Are you sure?" Blake asked, not happy with the woman he loved taking a long cab ride to Beacon Hill.

"I am and as much as I would love to be with you, the need to protect you is my main concern."

"Alicia, I can..."

"Not yet, my love," she said before she brushed her lips over his. "You checked in under an assumed name for the same reason. We've just found each other and I don't want to lose what we've discovered."

"I don't like it..."

"Neither do I but this is how it has to be for now. You don't know him like I do."

"Alicia," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I don't want you going back there."

"I don't either but for now I have to. Please, let me do this for us."

Blake pulled her into a deeply passionate kiss, Alicia melting in his arms. She stepped back, took one last long look at the naked man standing in front of her as if committing the image to memory then left the room where they'd spent several hours in sheer ecstasy.

After she left the elevator, she went to the concierge and asked him to call her a cab.

"I can hail one for you."

"Thank you," she said as she followed him outside to the front of the lobby.

A few moments later, the concierge closed the door of the cab and she started enduring the time she'd be away from the most amazing man she'd ever met.

"Where have you been all my life?"

"Ma'am?" the driver asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I'm talking to myself."

The driver left her alone the rest of the trip until he slowed to find the house. She pointed it out, then paid the fare after he pulled up to the main entry. As expected, Lohan rushed out to meet

them, rage all over his face. She took a deep breath, thanked the driver and got out of the car.

“Where the hell is Bruno?”

“How should I know? We finished our dinner then, when I couldn’t find him, I took a walk and caught a cab.”

“From where?”

“The Hyatt,” she answered while she watched him pick up the phone to make a call. As she suspected, he called the cab company to inquire about her ride home.

“Thank you,” he said before hanging up.

“Satisfied?”

“The driver said he saw you coming out of the hotel...”

“Of course he did. I went inside to ask them to call me one but...”

“You look different...” he accused.

“The brisk evening air tends to do that,” she said quietly.

“Why don’t you come out and ask the question bugging you?”

“All right...did you sleep with him?”

“No,” she denied, “I did not though I wanted to. Unlike you, he’s too much of a gentleman to do something like that.”

“Then why did he not bring you home?”

“I wanted to avoid this. Lohan, you have a dirty mind and it’s annoying. If you question anyone, try Bruno—after all, where is he?”

“I think you know.”

“No, I don’t. I only know that he couldn’t be found when I went to leave. For whatever reason, he disappeared. He did me a favor because I enjoyed some momentary freedom—something you refuse to let me have.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

"I want to go out. Hell, how many invitations have you intercepted? I sat there tonight with all those people and enjoyed a quiet dinner—no glad handing or one-upmanship—a joy."

"You don't need to socialize."

"Do you realize how much you may have lost financially by cutting me off from Boston society? After all, I came to this marriage with the social status you wanted to climb the ladder but instead, you keep me a prisoner in this ungodly old house that wallows in something you're not. What's the use? I'm going to bed."

"Don't walk away from me," he commanded. "We're not done yet."

"Yes, we are and we have been for years."

\* \* \* \*

Had the phone not interrupted them, Lohan would have followed his wife upstairs and probably done something stupid. Tired of her impertinence, he wanted to knock some sense into her but now he had time to think about what he needed to do. Unfortunately, what she'd said had a ring of truth to it.

If he'd not kept her close to home, would he be running in the circles he'd fought so long to enter though he'd been denied every time he'd taken steps toward what he thought would be success? Constantly denied on various levels of the old money society, he'd never thought his wife's activities would make a difference. *What if they had? Could Alicia truly be of use to me?*

Answering the phone, he literally growled at his caller.

"Mister Billings, it's Bruno. I'm at the police station heading for arraignment before the night court judge."

"For what reason?"

"They're planning to charge me with several things including disturbing the peace and destruction of city property."

"What the fuck did you do?"

Bruno proceeded to explain what had happened, Billings madder as his employee went on with the story.

"I'll make some calls," Billings said before hanging up. *He should stay there and rot for being stupid...*

Fifteen minutes later, his attorney had received instructions to handle the situation.

Billings sat back deep in thought. *What if she's right?*

\* \* \* \*

A towel wrapped around his waist, Blake went to the window just in time to see Alicia getting into a taxi. Watching it pull away from the front of the hotel, he felt an unfamiliar emptiness in his soul. The fact they'd connected the way they had still amazed him but right now, he felt a new emotion in his life—loneliness. Seeing the cab drive away then disappear from sight didn't help either.

After taking a shower, Blake decided to take advantage of the room and slipped his naked body between the covers. Once he'd left a request for an early wake-up call, he turned on the television then turned out the light. Surfing channels, he found a late night rebroadcast of the local news. One story piqued his interest.

*A man is being held without bail after his arrest for disturbing the peace at one of the city's five star restaurants. By the time police transported the man who goes only by Bruno to their station, he'd put several dents into the city's vehicle up-grading his charges...*

Blake snickered knowing Alicia's husband had to be angry though the thought suddenly sobered him. *What if Billings takes it out on her?*

Staring at the ceiling, Blake said a quick prayer for Alicia's safety. After a restless start, he finally fell asleep with visions of Alicia overtaking his dreams. The next thing he remembered—the wake-up call he'd requested.





## **Chapter 4**

Over the next several days, Alicia Billings did her best to avoid her foul-tempered husband. Since Bruno's arrest, Lohan had been a bear, growling at anyone who dared speak to him.

Bruno spent two days in jail, returning to the mansion after Billings' attorney swore his client wouldn't leave the city and he surrendered Bruno's passport. With his return, Alicia's freedom again vanished because he seemed to be everywhere prompting her to stay in her room—her only piece of peace.

"Mrs. Billings, you have a visitor," one of the maids announced one morning toward the end of her first week away from Blake Atherton. Her only saving grace had been her thoughts of him and the night they shared. Worried, she unlocked the door.

"Who is it?" she asked as she opened the door.

"A messenger from Mrs. Leighton Waverly with strict instructions to speak to you directly."

"I'll be down in a few moments."

"Yes, ma'am."

Alicia closed the door and leaned against it for support, her heart beating very fast. Taking several deep breaths, she crossed the room to check herself in the mirror. Running a comb through her hair, she made sure her slacks had no wrinkles. Her sweater perfect, she shook her head—her nerves on edge.

Taking another deep breath, she left her room and slowly yet gracefully descended the grand staircase, her hand tightly gripping the banister.

At the bottom of the stairs stood a tall elegant blond-haired man wearing a gray Brooks Brothers suit with black shirt and tie. He turned and stepped back after offering his hand to her once she stepped onto the marbled floor.

"Mrs. Billings, my name is Anthony Farrell, Leighton Waverly's personal assistant. I've been instructed to hand deliver her invitation to lunch at her condo tomorrow."

Before Alicia could answer, Lohan Billings strode into the foyer suspiciously eying the man with his wife.

"Who the hell is this fruitcake?" he demanded to know.

"Lohan Billings, Anthony Farrell," she introduced. "He is Leighton Waverly's personal assistant."

"Impossible! Why would she be interested in you?"

Hurt by his comment, Alicia refused to let him have any satisfaction.

"Mister Farrell, you started to explain..." she started.

"Mrs. Waverly has invited Mrs. Billings to luncheon tomorrow at her condo. She'd like to discuss some ideas with her about..."

"You're joking—right? No one has ever wanted my wife's opinions on anything. Why now?"

"I can't answer that. She sent me with the invitation and I am to wait until I get Mrs. Billings' answer."

"Tell your high-and-mighty boss that my wife will..."

"...Be more than happy to join her," Alicia finished.

"Very good, ma'am," Farrell said. "Her driver will pick you up at eleven thirty."

"That will be fine," Alicia said as she walked the man to the door. "Thank you."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Billings."

Farrell left, Alicia closing the door behind him. Turning, she glared at her husband.

"How dare you embarrass me that way? Leighton Revere Waverly is not someone to blow off."

"Why now?" he asked again. "What is so important that she calls you all of a sudden and out of the blue?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Alicia stated flatly.

"Well then you had better look your best and be on your best behavior. I will not have you embarrassing me and ruining any contacts I may have."

"Lohan, I'm quite sure you can and have done that on your own. I would think you'd be looking at this as a good thing—another stepping stone to what you really want but I guess you're too arrogant for that, aren't you?"

"I should..."

"Should what—hit me? Go ahead but you still won't get what you want," she said as she went up the stairs to her safe haven. *How much longer can I use the money to keep him away?*

From the corner of her eye, she could see him watching her every move while fuming about their latest confrontation. Alicia knew something had to change and soon or she wouldn't see a life with Blake Atherton. At that moment, Alicia Billings knew exactly what she had to do and prayed she could pull it off.

Once in her room, she locked the door and started preparing for lunch with Leighton Waverly. Hoping she'd see Blake, she refused to get her hopes up just to have them dashed. *I have to take this one step at a time and the first one will be tomorrow.*

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, ma'am," Blake said when he answered his cell phone grinning with the knowledge his grandmother had good news for him.

"She will be here after eleven thirty. Anthony told me he met the husband who immediately called the dear boy a *fruitcake*."

"Damn, the guy's crude. What else happened?"

"It seems Miss Alicia has backbone. Evidently Billings decided he'd make the decision for her but she cut him off and accepted. Anthony did notice she's a bundle of nerves. Before Billings joined them, she acted with grace and elegance but after he showed up, she took on an edge."

"She did the same thing at the gala. I felt like I'd met two different women in one person though being with that man for a few minutes made me feel edgy which I'm usually not. I can't imagine being married to him."

"Are you truly sure about her? She could be using you to get away from him. She could leave you cold once she accomplished that."

"I don't think so though the thought had crossed my mind the other night after she left me."

"But..."

"Gran, she's different. She makes me feel alive like no other. One night with her and I felt like a whole entity. As soon as she left, I learned the true meaning of loneliness—what it feels like to be empty. I can't explain it but..."

"I understand what you're trying to say. Your grandfather made me feel the exact same way. The day he died, part of me died with him. It's a special love not everyone finds. I worry about the husband though."

Blake snickered at Leighton's refusal to call Billings anything but *the husband*.

"I think she's worth it and once you meet her, you'll agree with me."

"I don't doubt it but, as your grandmother and the one who raised you, I'd be remiss if I didn't voice my opinions and concern."

"And I love you for it."

Blake's parents died several months after he turned four. Leighton and his grandfather Jonas immediately stepped in, raising Blake. Devastated when Jonas died, Blake grew extremely close to his grandmother and it terrified him to ever begin to contemplate what he would do if he lost her—an event he knew would happen sooner or later though he prayed he'd never have to experience it.

Known as a hard yet fair businesswoman, Blake knew her softer side until he began working with her. Discovering this side of his grandmother served to deepen his feelings for her. He learned a great deal from her though he knew he had not learned everything. No matter what, he loved her and respected her as the matriarch of his family, the pillar of business and as the best friend he'd ever have.

"So when should I expect to see you?" she asked, bringing Blake back to their conversation.

"How about I come by around nine for coffee?"

"Sounds good. I'll have Jemma prepare your favorite pastry."

"You know I've got a game tomorrow night..."

"One pastry won't hurt you. Besides, if I know you..."

"Don't even start..."

"See you in the morning. If you have practice today, be careful."

"Yes, ma'am, I will," he said. "Oh and, Gran?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

“Love you, too.”

Blake held the phone against his cheek several minutes after their call had ended. Leighton Waverly meant everything in the world to him and he appreciated her help in getting him together with Alicia. Knowing in part what he would be facing with Billings, he relaxed knowing his grandmother would help him in any way possible.

Opening the house in Newport and getting her friend at a private clinic on the coast involved had just been the start of things. Openly courting Alicia with luncheon invitations had been her idea but considering his involvement with *Revere Waverly* had been on a need-to-know basis instead of common knowledge gave them the distance they needed until Billings got smart enough to put the pieces together. By that time, Blake hoped to have Lohan Billings legally taken care of and out of their lives for good.

Blake hung up then checked the latest figures for both *Atherton Sports Group* and *Revere Waverly*. Despite the trying economic times, both had continued to hold their own in the market. While *Atherton Sports Group* remained profitable, he continued to look for other avenues to keep him in business. On the other hand, *Revere Waverly* had numerous stockholders they had to answer to but in their line of business, they remained one of those either breaking even or making profits—usually the latter.

Leighton had seen what lay on the economic horizon and took steps early on to cut back without hurting those who needed the company the most. She'd told her upper level staff members that there would be no bonuses for the current fiscal year though once things started leveling off and showed an upswing, she'd reconsider. Her board of directors took the news better than they expected but then again, most of them remembered back to several times in the company's history when the stakes had been higher. Leighton

Waverly always looked out for her employees—at any level—and she would not forsake them now.

Pleased with what he saw, Blake then checked several other companies they dealt with to make sure he kept up on their current status in case something happened. After that, he decided to do a thorough public investigation into Lohan Billings. Signing onto the computer using a fictitious name—one used for just such purposes—he accessed the public financial records of Billings’ so-called financial empire. What he learned concerned him.

Billings had several mid-range businesses which remained in the black but not by much. Running things on a virtual shoestring, Billings seemed to be basing all his deals on a certain amount of money he couldn’t touch—Alicia’s inheritance. With her family’s money in the mix, he could get the loans he wanted. Paying them back appeared to be a problem which explained Billings’ face when he couldn’t top the million-dollar bid. For all his bravado, Lohan Billings had nothing to back him and Alicia’s continuing refusal to give him what he wanted made matters worse. *How much longer can she hold out?*

Picking up the phone, he called one of the financial advisors who had worked with his grandmother for years. The soul of discretion, Gary Orbison would be able to get the information Blake wanted without raising any questions.

“Gary, good morning,” Blake said.

“Blake, how’s the hockey team doing?”

“Not bad though we could be a little higher in the standings.”

“I’ll be at the game tonight,” Gary stated.

“Good, come back to the locker room afterwards and we’ll go out for a beer.”

“You’re on—now, what’s up?”

"I need you to get me the portfolios for all of Lohan Billings' businesses, property listings and investments."

"He's a slimeball, Blake. Why do you want to deal with him?"

"Suffice it to say, it's personal but if things go right, I'm putting him out of business."

"I'll get you what I can but a word of caution—he plays dirty. He thinks he can play in the big leagues but he doesn't have the clout or the money he needs."

"I know he's borrowing heavily against his wife's inheritance. From what I've heard, she refuses to sign it over to him but he goes on as if it's his money."

"If she did that, he'd be solvent. If she doesn't, he'll be ruined or damned close."

"Exactly how much is this inheritance worth?"

"I've heard several million though it's probably more by now. The figure's always been kept private."

"Hmmm..."

"Blake, talk to me. What's going on?"

"The other night, I outbid him for his wife at his own charity event. He literally went white when it happened. She's an amazing woman but she's running scared. She's holding out for a reason and I'm afraid the longer she does, the less desirable the outcome for her."

"I'll get you what I can but you don't want to tangle with him. He's ruthless and will do whatever he has to in order to get what he wants."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"The man's been suspected of dealing with several who evidently refused to do business with him. Because they had what he wanted, he finagled things to the point that when they turned up dead or mysteriously disappeared, he got everything. Boaters found



one guy floating in the harbor while two others went missing and have never turned up.”

“Fuck!”

“Exactly, my friend. Be careful,” Gary warned.

“I will and thanks for the insight.”

“I’ll get that information to you as soon as I can.”

“Thanks.”

Blake sat back, Orbison confirming what he’d suspected. A slow cautious plan might wind up being thrown to the wind for an immediate resolution of the entire situation. Going by what he’d just learned, Blake knew Alicia’s life became shorter the longer she refused to give in to her husband. Absently, he started making notes though he wrote them in his own special code—if anyone ever found them, they’d appear to be doodles of some sort. It had worked several times before and would be a necessity this time.

“Damn it!” he cursed. “What the hell am I getting myself into?”

\* \* \* \*

Lohan Billings went to his computer and did some background research on Leighton Waverly. He’d heard about her over the years though knowing her by reputation only. Seeing her financial biography piqued his interest. *If I can...*

Puzzled by the reason behind the sudden invitation to his wife, he tried to probe into her family history but the woman had kept that part of her life private. Every angle he tried came up with nothing.

Making a quick phone call, he asked his attorney what he knew about her.

“She’s above reproach,” the man said. “Firm hand in business and nearly every deal is a moneymaker.”

“Does she have anyone working closely with her?”

“Not on the surface though she does have a myriad of advisors. She’s an amazing woman.”

“Any idea why she might be interested in my wife?”

“Leighton Waverly prefers to spread the wealth, so to speak. Maybe she heard of the remarkable donation coming out of your annual gala and figured your wife could help her out. It’s not out of the ordinary for her to do that.”

After he asked a few more questions, Billings sat back, grateful Alicia had accepted the invitation. Realizing he could be screwing up the potential for him to move up in the Boston business community, Billings tried to figure out how to insinuate himself into the woman’s circle of friends. *Alicia better behave...*

“Alicia!”

\* \* \* \*

After Leighton Waverly’s assistant departed, Alicia went back to her room and locked herself in. The last one she wanted to deal with, Alicia dreaded the moment when Lohan figured things out.

Alicia groaned when it hit her that Lohan would more than likely try to move in on Leighton Waverly but if her reputation proved true, her husband had met his match. Formidable in the boardroom and during negotiations, the woman got what she wanted and walked away without any carnage—unlike Alicia’s husband.

Images of Blake Atherton breezed through her mind, Alicia hoping she’d see him when she met with his grandmother though she refused to let her hopes get out of hand. The man had promised miracles but this soon? *I doubt it.*

Sitting in a chair near the window, she stared outside fantasizing about Blake.

“Alicia!”

Her husband's voice shattered her dream and she dreaded seeing him. Having a strange feeling it had to do with Blake's grandmother, she tried to ignore him until he banged on her door.

"Alicia, open the door. We need to talk."

"Later," she said, trying to act like he'd awakened her.

"No, Alicia—now!"

"Damn it," she cursed under her breath. "Lohan, I'm half asleep. Later."

Silence followed and she listened until she heard him stomp off. Breathing a sigh of relief, she stretched out and pulled an afghan over her. Seeing visions of Blake Atherton once more, Alicia Billings fell asleep. *Tomorrow can't come soon enough...*

\* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, Alicia woke then showered. While she relaxed afterwards, she decided what to wear for her luncheon date with Leighton Waverly, opting for a tailored black suit, gray vest, white blouse and a burgundy tie. Choosing her accessories next, she went with subtle instead of overbearing. As she put things in her clutch, she noticed her wedding set wishing she could leave it home but she knew it would raise suspicions—something she could not afford.

Once she dressed, she put her hair up wanting a professional air to her appearance. Checking her make-up, she added a dab of *Chanel #5* behind each ear then turned, grabbing a black trench coat. Throwing it over her arm, she picked up her clutch and slipped her feet into a pair of black pumps before she left the room.

As expected, Lohan waited at the bottom of the staircase pacing while Bruno stood off to the side.

"Bruno will accompany you..."

"No, he will not."

"It's what I want."

"Let's get something straight," she said. "I am having lunch with the wealthiest woman in New England. Having *Him* there would be considered an insult to her and her circle as they would take it to mean that I feel I'm better than they are which I sure as hell am not."

"I insist."

"And so do I," she said, glaring at him. "If you expect to better your position in the city, I suggest you reconsider."

"You'd better not screw up."

"Don't threaten me, Lohan."

"You've changed," he accused.

"No, I finally saw you for what you are. You're in this for the money and that's it. You've never loved me because to you, a wife is a possession."

"You have a good life here—a roof over your head..."

"But I know nothing about computers meaning I have no way to use the Internet or email. I don't have a cell phone either and you don't let me out of this mausoleum. Do you see where this is going? God forbid you let me have contact with the outside world and then when I do, you want Bruno with me. I don't need a body-guard..."

"You've been acting irrationally, Alicia."

"Only one to blame there," she stated. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Don't be too long."

"I'll be home when I come home. I'm capable of going out and coming home—despite what you think."

"Alicia, if..."

"Lohan, go to hell."

With that, she left the house slamming the heavy front door behind her. Leighton Waverly's driver waited by the open rear

door of a silver storm Bentley Arnage limousine. Somehow, she felt safe in the car especially because of the deep tinted windows. *Why?*

Once the driver slipped behind the wheel, he eased the car out of the driveway and into traffic.

"My name is Edward, Mrs. Billings. If you need anything, let me know."

"Thank you," she said, refusing to admit that she felt overwhelmed. *My God, I hope I don't screw up...*

\* \* \* \*

Lohan Billings watched his wife get into the late model Bentley, his hands clenched while he cursed Alicia under his breath.

"Bruno!"

"Sir?"

"Go to Waverly's building and watch it. I want to know if my wife leaves there at any time. The minute she does, report in then follow her. I want to know everything."

Without a word, the muscle-bound *watchdog* left the house then tore out of the driveway, his tires screeching as he accelerated on the highway.

"You won't get away with this, Alicia, I swear."

\* \* \* \*

Blake arrived at Leighton's early so they could enjoy their morning coffee together. As promised, a plate of his favorite pastries waited for him. Afterwards, Leighton went into her den to make some phone calls while Blake checked the morning financial figures on his laptop though he barely saw them. Blake Atherton could only concentrate on one thing—Alicia Billings.

The mere thought of her made his body react sending ecstatic heat coursing through him. Standing up, he went to the buffet and poured a glass of ice water hoping it might help—it didn't.

"Mister Atherton, you have a guest," Leighton's butler announced.

"Who, Briggs?"

"Mister Patrick Fox."

"Send him in," Blake said. "Thanks."

"Sir," Briggs said, effectively speaking to both men at the same time before he left them.

Patrick Fox entered the room, Blake greeting him.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"I went by your place and your housekeeper told me."

"Ah," Blake said. "So what's up?"

"I figured you'd want to hear this in person."

"What," Blake asked worried.

"Lohan Billings is—on the surface—a mediocre businessman. It's what he does unofficially that makes him money plus some other *perks*."

"Go on..."

"He and two other guys operate fight clubs. Billings has one in Boston while the other guys have two in New York."

"Sounds like franchising."

"Exactly. I've found several others on the West Coast as well. The kicker is this—the owner of the franchise rarely shows himself at the events which are held in a different location each time."

"How do the members find out where?"

"It's all done by text message. From what I can gather, the only thing that gets sent is a location, date and time. Usually, it's sent day of so there's no need for a date."

"Who the hell would join one of these things?"

"You'd be surprised. So far, I've got a few doctors, lawyers, politicians and even some detectives here in the city. I guess they help keep the department away."

"Can the news get any better?"

"Good question," Pat said. "Now you know why I came in person."

"Good idea," Blake agreed. "Is there any evidence Alicia's involved?"

"None and I checked knowing you'd ask. In my honest opinion—she's not."

"Good."

"There's one thing you need to know."

"What?"

"The Feds are looking into this."

"Which means we have to get Alicia out of this as soon as we can. We both know how quickly they work once they get the evidence they need and act on it."

"Let me see what I can learn. I know a guy who can find out for me."

"Thanks," Blake said, his relief obvious.

"Blake, in all seriousness, are you sure about this?"

"More than anything. We have something between us that neither one of us wants to lose. It's unique, just as she is."

"But he's so damned volatile."

"I know and, at least now, I have an idea what I'm up against."

"And if she's involved?"

"If she is, I honestly don't know."

"Do I hear Patrick's voice?" Leighton Waverly said as she entered the room.

"Yes, ma'am," Patrick said, giving her a hug.

"It's good to know you'll have his back in this."

"Hopefully, I won't let you down."

"You won't," she stated with a knowing smile.

\* \* \* \*

At eleven forty-five, Briggs announced the arrival of Mrs. Alicia Billings. Slightly overwhelmed, Alicia slowly entered the living room of the huge condo overlooking Boston Common. Briggs took her coat and quietly left her alone.

"Alicia, my dear, it's good to finally meet you. Blake's told me a lot about you."

"I have to apologize for the other night. When he told me about you then put us on the phone, I..."

"It's all right, dear. We're used to it."

"But why keep it a secret?"

"With Blake using his name, he can negotiate deals for me without the intimidation of the *Revere Waverly* name. Thanks to him, I've signed off on some amazing acquisitions at a lower price because they thought they'd dealt with *Atherton Sports Group* instead of me. He's amazing."

"Gran, you're biased," a voice said as two men entered the room.

Alicia gasped at the sight of the man she loved, her reaction not lost on the others in the room with her.

"Alicia, Patrick Fox, my closest friend."

"Pleasure," Patrick said. "I can see why Blake's so adamant about you."

"Adamant? Why?"

"I want to get Billings out of your life."

"I'd like that, too, but..."

"Dear, if my grandson wants something, he usually gets it."

"But..."

"Alicia, we'll find a way."

"Blake, let me speak with Alicia for a few moments then she's all yours."



Blake had quietly come to stand next to Alicia, his hand on her back. She felt the heat rising between them, her body on fire for him.

“For you, anything but don’t take too long.”

“We won’t.”

“I’ll see you in a few minutes,” Blake said before giving her a quick kiss.

Alicia nodded, feeling lost when he left her side. She watched him kiss his grandmother before he and his friend left them. Once they’d gone, Leighton invited her to sit down on the couch near the window.

“Blake’s told me about you and I’ve decided to play matchmaker though in order for this to work, we honestly have to work on a charity event.”

“I don’t really know what to say—or do.”

“Don’t worry about a thing. Blake’s hockey team usually plays one game each season and donates the proceeds to one of the city’s children’s charities. I thought several meetings and a practice or two would be a good start.”

“Mrs. Waverly, I...”

“Leighton, please.”

Alicia nodded and smiled, realizing the privilege she’d just been afforded.

“Leighton, I appreciate this but Lohan can be unpredictable. If he finds out that you and Blake are related, he’ll...”

“We can handle him,” Leighton averred. “We’re worried about you. New information has evidently surfaced which concerns the boys.”

“What new information?”

“I don’t know but I could tell from their faces it’s not good.”

Alicia reached for her clutch and started to stand up.

"I can't let him hurt either one of you. You don't know what he can do," she began, stammering her words.

Leighton's hand went to Alicia's stopping her.

"Alicia, dear, we are here to help. My grandson loves you and I can honestly see why."

"But..."

"Give Blake a chance. I've never seen him like this and to tell you the truth, I don't want to see him lose you."

"But the risk..."

"Is what I live for," a voice said. "Sorry, Gran, I couldn't stay away from this gorgeous woman one second longer."

"Then I'll take that as my cue. The condo's yours for the afternoon—use it wisely."

"You are devilish, Gran."

"I know," she said, smiling. "I know true love and I see it with you two. Now, I will gracefully leave. Alicia, I'll be in touch."

"Yes, ma'am," Alicia stammered. "Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome."

Leighton Waverly left the room. A few moments later, they heard the front door close.

"Oh, my God, stop her! Lohan has Bruno watching me."

"Gran will take the limo, leaving the Bentley out front. Trust me, she's very careful."

"But if he sees her in the car, he'll be up here in a flash."

"Her limo is also deep tinted like the Bentley. Alicia, believe me, it'll be all right."

"Blake, I don't want anyone hurt because of me. He'll do it..."

"Relax," Blake said. "We know what we're doing. Now, we have a few hours to ourselves. What can we do?"

Alicia looked at Blake somehow believing what he said. After all, they stood together in his grandmother's condo, no one wiser—so far.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Picking up where we left off the other night."

"Then I am yours, Blake, though part of me says run."

"It will be all right," he assured her, cautiously unbuttoning her jacket.

"Why is it so easy to believe you?"

"Because I love you, Alicia, and I can't lie to you."

\* \* \* \*

Blake could no longer take their separation knowing Alicia sat in the next room. Only a few feet away, the distance seemed abysmal. Finally, he went into the living room joining Leighton and Alicia.

"But the risk..."

"Is what I live for," he said as he joined them. "Sorry, Gran, I couldn't stay away from this gorgeous woman one second longer."

"Then I'll take that as my cue. The condo's yours for the afternoon—use it wisely."

"You are devilish, Gran."

As Leighton took her leave, Blake went to Alicia. He could see her nervousness and desperately felt the need to calm her. When he finally did, he cautiously unbuttoned her jacket.

"Why is it so easy to believe you?"

"Because I love you, Alicia, and I can't lie to you. I won't lie to you."

Blake slid her jacket off and laid it over her clutch. Framing her face with his hands, he drew her into a kiss—one Alicia returned hungrily. Pulling her tight against him, he refused to let any more space—even the most infinitesimal—separate them.

Pulling away just a little, Alicia gasped.

"I can't breathe," she said.

Without a word, Blake picked her up then carried her out of the room and up the grand staircase to the second floor of the gorgeous condominium. Once inside a huge bedroom, Blake gently put her down though still refusing to lose contact with her.

"Why all the damned clothes?"

"The main reason had been to get out of the house but now I'm figuring on seduction."

"More like torture," he groaned as he quickly removed his polo shirt.

Alicia loosened the tie she'd been wearing then slipped the loop over his head sliding it down to his shoulders. The chill of the burgundy satin did nothing to cool the rising heat in his body.

"Alicia, I..." he started to say but stopped as he watched her drop to her knees and unbuckle his belt followed by pulling his pants off his hips.

"I love black silk," she murmured, "but not now."

Blake stepped out of his clothes after kicking his Dockers off, naked save her tie. The feel of her gorgeous lips around his shaft made him swell more. Standing before her, he could only let Alicia do what she wanted, Blake unable to move.

Her lips like velvet, he felt their softness as she took him, each time deeper into her throat until they brushed his balls. With Alicia moving back then forth on him, Blake managed to finally move his hand to the back of her head pressing her closer.

"Alicia, I..."

Seconds later, she took his hot essence as he exploded into her, Alicia making sure she took everything she could. Never had any woman gone down on him to the point his legs could no longer

support him. Dropping to his knees, he kissed her, their tongues dancing. He drew back a little.

"Alicia, get the clothes off or I'll send you home in only your coat since everything else will be shredded."

Alicia leaned closer, their kiss passionately brutal. While she kissed him, she quickly removed her clothes throwing them haphazardly out of their way.

"Better?"

"Much," he said, pulling her tight against him. Feeling her naked breasts against his chest drove him insane with desire. Refusing to release her, his hand slid down her back and parted her legs from the rear. Her jolt against him followed by her body fusing against his pleased him. Somehow, she moved herself into the perfect position then guided his cock to her pussy.

Without a word, Blake laid her back then thrust his cock into her wet heat. Her legs encircled his hips, her hands reaching for him. Without warning, he pinned them to the floor and thrust into her, his cock pounding her velvet heat without mercy.

Nearing the edge, his body covered hers needing complete contact between them. His lips met hers, their tongues dancing until the moment his release exploded inside her. Her body tensed seconds before her sated screams filled him. With slow determined thrusts, he made sure he filled her totally. Laving his way down her neck while she caught her breath, Blake found her nipple and suckled it, wanting her to remain on edge. The feel of her body arching against him sent heat coursing through him, his cock swelling inside her.

"Blake, please..."

"Please, what?"

"Do it now," she begged. "I'll never doubt us or you again. My God, Blake..."

Blake thrust into her, this time holding them together while the tip of his cock touched a new spot of arousal. Shaking underneath him, Alicia fought to free her hands though he refused to release them. Her legs wrapped around his while she sought out his lips needing to kiss him.

“Open your eyes and look at me, Alicia.”

Slowly she opened them, their eyes meeting. Shivers ran through her as the last remaining remnants of their orgasm coursed through her body. Amazed by the gentle intensity of her eyes, Blake smiled.

“What?”

“You’re beautiful.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

He moved a little, just enough to make her body jolt, Alicia’s contented moans music to his ears.

\* \* \* \*

After several magical and heat-filled hours, Alicia slipped from Blake’s side to take a quick shower. Putting her hair up again, she stepped into the relaxing heat—one that only enhanced her passion-filled soreness. Startled by the man she loved joining her, she faced the shower wall bracing herself for whatever Blake wanted to do.

Her body tensed when he parted her legs and slid his hand between them while his other one massaged her breast.

“Blake, we can’t...”

“We can,” he said, pulling her against him. “I don’t want to waste the short time we have being away from you.”

“Neither do I but it’s getting late. Your grandmother should be coming back soon if she’s not home already and then there’s...”

“Don’t say his name when we’re together.”

“Anything,” she said as he took her to the edge. “I...”

"I love you, Alicia."

Overwhelmed by the moment, she allowed him control over her. Overheated between the water temperature and the heat coursing through her, she felt faint but didn't worry knowing Blake would take care of her.

Suddenly, he turned her around and lifted her onto his cock. Sandwiched between his body and the wall, she went with the rising sensations as Blake fucked her. His strong thrusts continually touched new places within her, tearing away her sanity. When she cried out his name, only Blake heard her as the shower drowned out the sounds of ecstasy.

"Blake, please..."

"Please, what..."

"My God, I don't know," she cried out.

"Alicia..."

"Save me..." she screamed seconds before his lips covered hers. Their tongues danced as desperation took over.

"Tell me how."

"Never stop loving me."

"Never," he gasped, taking her again.

By the time they relaxed, the heat of the shower had gone as cold water ran over their heated bodies. They stepped out of the shower, Blake quickly wrapping her in a thick terry robe to stop her shivering. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he followed her into the bedroom then lay across the bed watching her dress.

The room became quiet, both noticing the change.

"Blake, Leighton said some new information surfaced. What is it?"

Blake took a deep breath, got off the bed and went to her.

"It's not good. It seems the man whose name is not to be mentioned is into fight clubs. He owns one here in Boston."

"But, how? He never leaves the house."

"He doesn't have to. From what Pat found out, the actual owners never show up at the events while reaping the benefits of a profitable enterprise."

"But that means he's sanctioning unmitigated cruelty."

Blake watched her body language seeing that the news came as a true shock to her. Hating that he'd doubted her, he felt relief surge through him.

"I'm sorry to be the one breaking the news to you."

"I'm glad you did," she said. "How much does he make from this venture?"

"I don't have the figures but I understand it's a lot."

"Damn him, and he still wants more," she cursed. "Do you think Leighton is back yet?"

"She might be," Blake answered. "Hold on a sec."

Blake picked up the phone near the bed and pressed one button, evidently for an in-house line.

"Briggs, is my grandmother in yet?"

"She's walking in the door as we speak."

"Thanks." Hanging up, he turned to Alicia. "She's just now coming in."

"Good, you get dressed while I go talk with her."

"Alicia, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you when you come downstairs," she said before giving him a kiss.

"I'll hold you to it."

"I know."

\* \* \* \*

Blake watched her leave the room wondering what she had up her sleeve. He went to his closet and pulled out a pair of khakis and a white shirt. After he dressed, he walked to the stairs seeking out



the two women in his life wondering what one had to discuss with the other.

“Oh, my God,” he gasped as it hit him.

Barefoot, he raced downstairs.

“It’s a deal,” his grandmother said, “but only if you’re absolutely sure.”

“I am, Leighton, and thank you. I have to do something and I think this is for the best.”

“Alicia, what the hell have you done?” Blake heard himself asking.

“Blake, I’ve finally freed myself.”

“How?”

“After some discussion with a very smart woman, I have decided to turn my grandfather’s fortune over to her. As soon as our lawyers arrive, we’ll sign the paperwork and I’ll be free of at least one burden in my life.”

“But do you realize that once he finds out, your life will no longer be worth anything to him?”

“It’s a secret I intend to keep until the most opportune moment. As long as he thinks he still has a chance at it, he’ll continue to make my life hell only I will know different. Not only that, I can’t let the family inheritance fund something I find disgusting. I knew he could be sleazy but this pushed the limits.”

“Alicia, I...”

“Blake, she hasn’t told you everything. The money is to be held in trust for Alicia and will be returned to her once she no longer feels threatened by him. I will not take her money to finance any *Revere Waverly* deals—it wouldn’t be ethical. As soon as she can walk away from him without feeling threatened, the money will be hers as originally intended.”

"The risk to Alicia has just compounded but have you thought about what this guy won't hesitate to do to you once he finds out you're standing in his way?"

"Blake, unless there is a leak somewhere, no one will know. I trust my attorney..."

"What about you, Alicia—do you trust yours?"

"The man's hatred of the unmentionable man is equal to yours. He refuses to deal with him which is one of the reasons I've been able to hold out this long."

Blake Atherton began pacing. Bad enough Alicia had to live with this guy and faced the danger on a daily basis but to draw Leighton into the situation unnerved him.

"I'm sorry," Alicia apologized. "I didn't think I'd cause this much trouble. If you could have your driver take me home, I'll be out of your lives. Mrs. Waverly, it's been an honor and a pleasure and I thank you for all you've done. I'm sorry..."

"Alicia, don't go," Leighton pleaded. "Blake has always been protective of me. He'll come around."

"He's right—I can't open you up to my problems. I didn't think this through before I came down here. I'm not being fair."

"Alicia, you presented a sound idea to me. All you're doing is safeguarding your money until your situation is resolved."

"But obviously Blake sees something wrong with my proposal. He's right, I didn't consider the ramifications and seeing as I seem to be an albatross around good people's necks, I should walk away and make a clean break. Again, I thank you for everything and good luck with the charity event. I wish I could be a part of it but obviously, it wouldn't be a good idea."

Alicia turned to go, the realization that she could be the cause of someone being hurt overwhelming her. As much as she loved

Blake Atherton, she couldn't live with herself if something happened to either him or Leighton. *What the hell possessed me to...*

Leaving the room, she headed to the elevator which would take her away from the one true love of her life but he had to be protected. If Lohan owned a fight club, he could use it against Blake and his friend. She understood Blake's feelings but it hurt seeing his anger though he had every right to be angry considering the fact that her simple request endangered an amazing woman—one she admired very much.

Reaching for the down button, she froze when she heard Blake call her name.

"Alicia, please, don't! I'm sorry for what happened with Gran. It's just that..."

"I know and it made me see the truth. I can't be with anyone until that man is dead and I don't see that happening in the near future."

Again she reached to press the button only this time Blake took her hands and held them.

"Alicia, I can't live without you or Gran. The thought of anything happening to either one of you terrifies me but she made me see that her agreement with your idea is for the best."

"She's good but..."

"You have to get to know her better," he said. "She has a way about her that a look can speak volumes. I know better than to doubt her intentions which I did and she's not happy about it. Please, don't leave. Come back and we'll wait for the attorneys."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I in love with you?"

"I'm not sure—are you?"

Blake pulled her into a kiss, Alicia melting in his arms.

"Well?"

"I believe..."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, both attorneys shook hands then left. Alicia's family lawyer looked as if ten years had been added to his life thanks to the knowledge the family fortune would be safeguarded. It had taken him a few minutes to finally understand how Alicia had come to know Leighton Waverly but once he did, he wholeheartedly agreed it would be the best for Alicia and the family.

"Your grandparents never accepted your father's decision to push you into a marriage with Billings but they didn't have a lot to say about it. You know how your father acted when he got hooked up in something."

"I know they tried to change his mind and that's why the financial arrangement came about."

"Your grandfather would be pleased. You've got a good head on your shoulders."

"One day he took me aside and told me it would either be an intelligent decision or the stupidest one I'd ever make."

"Mrs. Waverly, it's been an honor to finally meet you. I've followed you in the business world for years."

"It's been a pleasure. Arthur, as always..."

The men left the condo, Alicia nearly collapsing with relief.

"Alicia?"

"I'm fine. I just never expected to be free of such a virtual weight on my shoulders."

"You're amazing," Blake said as he came around the door from the next room where he'd listened to the entire meeting. "I feel a little left out."

"Never," Leighton said. "I knew if you suspected something adverse about to happen, you would have been in here in a second."

"You know me so well."

"I should," she said. "Now, seeing as the luncheon should have been over a while ago, I suggest that Alicia leave so she doesn't draw any more suspicion. If her husband is having her watched, he'll know her family's lawyer has been somewhere in the building and more than likely here if he recognizes Arthur."

"My God, I forgot about Bruno," Alicia gasped. "I'd better get going."

"One thing before you leave, my dear. I bought you this..." Leighton said, handing a small cell phone to Alicia. "It'll make things easier when I need to contact you for a meeting or what not. We should have several more plus some time to look at the arena and so on," she added, giving Blake a knowing wink.

"I don't know what to say."

"It's set on vibrate so keep it in your pocket. I'll text you about times unless I send Edward over with a personal invitation."

"Thank you so much. I just hope I can figure it out."

"It's simple and I had the man write down the directions on how to use it. Going on my own experience with these things—I figured it might be easiest."

"I haven't a clue. I'm not allowed near the computers in the house, have no clue about the Internet and a cell phone has been out of the question."

"If you're asked about it, just say I wanted you to have one so I could deal with you as things came up. Oh, and I will understand if you do not get back to me right away."

Alicia nodded as Leighton Waverly rose to leave the room.

"I'm advising Edward to get the car ready. He'll be waiting out front so you can make a public exit."

"Thanks, Gran," Blake said. Turning to Alicia, he marveled at the innocent child in a woman's body who stood before him. "Forgive me?"

"What?" she asked. "Oh, my God, yes—always."

"Good," he said. "Now, may I have the phone for a moment?"

She handed it to him, obviously curious. She watched him as he added something to the phone, his fingers gliding over the small keyboard.

"What..."

"I've just added my cell number to Gran's. It's under *The Doctor*."

"Okay but who..."

"Exactly. *Doctor Who* is one of my favorites plus if anyone asks, you can always tell them you're seeing an allergist or something."

"Blake, I'm..."

"Call me anytime you need to. Text me if you have to, I'll be here for you and if you need me..."

Suddenly, Alicia threw her arms around Blake's neck, pressing herself against him.

"I don't know how to thank you..."

"For what?"

"Letting me feel like someone loves me and that I'm actually a human being."

"You're more than that, trust me. You are going to be my wife so what can I say other than I love you?"

\* \* \* \*

Blake walked her to the elevator, ruining the moment the doors closed and she disappeared from his sight. Rejoining his grandmother, he poured them both brandies, handed her a snifter then sat down on the couch across from her.

"I'm asking for the last time—are you sure about this? I know you've signed the papers and you are extremely careful and astute but going against Billings could be dangerous."

"What new information do you have on him?"

"He's in business on the side and owns an illegal fight club. Patrick found out about his nefarious dealings by accident and dug deeper. It's not good."

"Does she know?"

"Yes but only because I told her a few hours ago."

"And how did she take the news?"

"If you mean do I think she lied to me about her knowledge about the clubs—no, she didn't. Alicia might hide things from her husband but I can tell if someone's lying to me and she didn't. She went white when I mentioned it and declared her disgust for it."

"When I went out, I went into the office and had my investigator look into things and he learned some disturbing figures on the legitimate side of the man's finances. From what we could tell, if she doesn't give him the money, he will be bankrupt in a few months if not sooner. He's hanging on a very thin rope and more than likely is becoming desperate—not a good combination. Whatever your plans are, they'd better have the capability of moving fast and without notice."

"Forgive me for doubting you?"

"Of course," she said. "I would have been extremely surprised then disappointed if you hadn't questioned it, although you scared the shit out of poor Alicia with your vehemence."

"For that I'm sorry but you know how I feel about you. Gut reactions took over when I heard her idea because I refuse to allow anything to happen to you—and now her."

"You needn't worry. When you walked her out, I called Arthur and had him set up a numbered Swiss account in Alicia's

name. I will hold onto the number and pass code until she's ready to take full control of her inheritance."

"Sly as a fox still, I see."

"It keeps me young, sweetheart."

"I don't care what does as long as you're in my life."

"I plan to be around for a long time," she assured him.

"I'll hold you to that, Gran."



## **Chapter 5**

Lohan Billings waited for Alicia to return home. The later the time, the angrier he became. Having her away from him so long in one outing worried him since he had no clue what she might be doing though one thing eased his mind—Bruno had not called in meaning his upstart wife had remained in one place the entire afternoon.

Being involved in some of the businesses he'd bought into over the recent past, the last thing he needed would be her exposing him. Since the auction, Alicia had changed and become someone he could no longer control as he had. Her continued refusal to sign over her inheritance to him enraged him because he needed the money and his time to save his legitimate businesses quickly ran out.

Hearing what sounded like a car driving up to the house, he stopped his pacing and waited. Moments later, he heard a car door close then a second one before the front door of the house opened and Alicia walked in.

"What the hell took so damned long?"

"Don't tell me you missed me?"

"Don't get smart, Alicia," he stated as he circled her. "Lunch does not take that long."

"If you must know, we've been working on a charity event and since I'm not allowed out in the world, Mrs. Waverly spent a great deal of time teaching and explaining things to me."

"Why would she waste her time?" he muttered.

"Are you implying I'm stupid?" she challenged.

"Of late, yes," he answered. "Ever since the auction..."

"Finding out you're worth one million dollars tends to be a heady experience."

"You had your dinner and night out—get over it."

"Are we jealous?" she taunted.

"No, angry that you're making it a Federal case."

"Me? I'm not the one who had to bail out Bruno. Speaking of which, where is the watchdog—caught in traffic trying to follow me?"

"Alicia, don't push me," he warned.

"Or what? You'll slap me around again like the other night?"

"If I have to..."

"Remember the money you want?" she asked, again challenging her husband. Quickly taking her chance, she went upstairs to her room.

"This isn't over, Alicia."

"Yes, it is," she said. "Oh, and by the way, Leighton has several more meetings scheduled so get used to my going out."

"Leighton, is it? How the hell..."

Alicia disappeared from sight, Lohan Billings madder than hell at her.

"Bruno!"

\* \* \* \*

Locking the bedroom door behind her, Alicia took several deep breaths once she got into her room—her safe haven. *But for how long?*

She'd pushed Lohan feeling a new strength thanks to Blake and his grandmother plus the knowledge the family fortune had been safeguarded. Her heart racing after their confrontation, she crossed

the room and sat down in a chair by the window. Once she calmed, she changed her clothes wrapping herself in a satin robe.

Remembering the cell phone, she quickly removed it from her jacket pocket and slipped it into one in her dressing gown. Then she went to her clutch and pulled out the instructions before hiding them in a dark corner of her dressing room closet. Long ago, Lohan had a safe installed in the room so she could store her jewelry in it only she rarely used it for anything else since he still had the combination. Then came the security cameras. It bothered her to know he had access to her privacy so she'd resorted to hiding her personal valuables elsewhere and praying. So far, she'd been successful but how long could she continue to be lucky?

"Mrs. Billings, dinner will be served at seven," one of the maids told her through the door.

"Please send a tray up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you," Alicia said, praying Lohan wouldn't demand to know why.

Ten minutes later, he threatened to break the door down.

"Why, Alicia?" he demanded to know.

"I'm tired, Lohan."

"From what?"

"My busy day, the ongoing confrontations with you..."

"I expect you at dinner."

"You'll be waiting for a while because I plan to go to bed. I'm tired, Lohan. Just leave it at that."

"Then you won't need a tray."

"Whatever," she said, realizing he thought it would lure her out of her room.

Hearing his footsteps as he stomped away, she sighed, startled a few seconds later.

"You will come downstairs if you expect to eat—no special treatment."

She opened the door.

"I wouldn't go that route, if I were you."

"Why?"

"If you don't want to draw attention to yourself, you'll take care in how you treat me. You do not want to risk Leighton's questions because you know as well as I do the kind of power she wields in this city. One word from her and..."

"You could always back out..."

"No one backs out on Leighton Waverly."

Lohan mumbled, Alicia knowing she'd hit a nerve.

"Alicia, you're pushing things..."

"And you are making rash decisions that could ultimately bite you in the ass later. If you ever want to enlist her in a deal, you'd better play nice now. The old adage is true—you get more with honey than vinegar."

Lohan mumbled a curse under his breath then turned to leave her alone. As she began to close the door, he stopped and glared at her.

"You have until the charity event is over then everything changes around here."

His threat leveled, he went downstairs. Alicia quietly fled into her room and relocked the door trembling. Lohan Billings meant business and she knew exactly what he meant. *Blake, I hope you can pull something out of your hat or I'm dead.*

\* \* \* \*

Lohan Billings answered a phone in his office, a private line he'd had installed a few years before and one Alicia had no clue about.

"Yes?"

"The evening receipts look very good, sir."

Billings grinned knowing the gate fee for his mobile franchise. At five hundred each, he easily made ten grand in one night.

"How many attended?"

"Fifty showed up and several went to hospital—one may be critical."

"Thank you," he said, grinning when he hung up.

As per the agreements each participant signed, if they sought medical treatment for any reason, they could not tell how or where the injuries had been incurred. That way, if the authorities ever questioned them, they had to lie about what happened though if they slipped and named the location, it didn't matter.

Each event took place in a different location, usually empty warehouses or abandoned buildings. The equipment spent most of its time in the trailer of a semi and could easily be moved in a short period of time. While his take from one evening turned out to be extremely substantial, he still had to worry about paying the half a dozen men who worked for him but since he paid them under the table and in cash, he could withhold money and there would be no questions. After all, who would they complain to if they didn't want to be jailed for tax evasion and other summary offenses?

The way he'd set everything up, his manager would deliver the receipts to Bruno who would then give them to Lohan. By the next event, the six men would have their money—in cash and with no paperwork. While Billings took seventy-five percent or more, the remainder would be split between payroll and any other expenses involved.

The next day, Bruno would deposit the money into a bank account under the name of *Alicia Billings*, his name never on anything. At this point, if the franchise went south, she'd go with it and he'd be in the clear.

He sat back and considered the problem his wife presented.  
*What the hell do I do with her and more importantly—when?*

\* \* \* \*

Blake escorted Leighton Waverly to an early dinner at her favorite restaurant overlooking Boston Harbor. After they ate, they walked along the harbor enjoying the unusually warm weather.

“Are you ready for tonight’s game?” Leighton asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “Are you going to be there?”

“Of course, I love watching you.”

“And you’re biased.”

“That, too.”

They settled into the rear of her limousine thanks to Edward following them at a discreet distance. As soon as they left the harbor, Edward headed toward Blake’s home to pick up his hockey gear. As soon as he did, they headed to the arena where Leighton settled into her private box while he went to the locker room.

“Hey, Atherton, I see you came in the high-priced ride,” one of the other players said.

“What can I say?”

“Must be nice,” the guy said, walking to his locker.

“It is,” Blake agreed. “It sure as hell is.”

Blake changed into his uniform making sure he looked neat. After the team meeting, he grabbed his helmet from the shelf above him then walked out of the locker room with the rest of the team. Wearing skates second nature to him, he felt natural walking on the thin blade.

The announcer introduced both starting lines before the game began with the opening face-off at center ice. Concentrating on the game, he waited until the coach called for a line change. He and Patrick entered the game, moves intricately coordinated so they wouldn’t garner a penalty for too many players on the ice.

By the end of the second period, they led by two goals though the other team refused to ease up—a good thing. At the start of the third, Patrick took the face-off with the opposing player, Blake easily catching the puck off the drop. He skated down the ice then passed it to another player who passed it back to him.

Seeing the other goalie trying to read their play, he shot the puck to Patrick who broke away and took it in toward the goal. A quick drop back to Blake and he slapped it into the net. The team congratulated each other then went back to position for the face-off at center ice. By the end of the period, they remained on top three goals to one, winning the game.

In the locker room, Blake eased into the whirlpool to get some immediate heat on his back. Taking hard hits over the years had given him constant back pain—something only he and the team doctor knew about. The movement of the hot water relieved the pain though each time made him wonder if he should let the younger guys take over and quietly step back. *No way...*

“Good game, guys,” the coach said. “See you at practice.”

After that, the other players filtered out leaving Blake and Patrick to lock up.

“How’s your back?” Patrick asked.

“Fine,” Blake replied.

“Good, now tell me the truth.”

“What?”

“I’ve suspected for a while. In fact a couple of the guys have as well but we figured you’d talk about it when you felt ready however...”

“I’ve taken some hard hits and the checks aren’t getting any easier. Those young guys don’t know their own strength.”

“Who knows?”

“Until now—me and the team doctor,” Blake said. “Now you and...”

“You haven’t told your grandmother?”

“No,” Blake said. “You know how she’d worry.”

“Look, far be it for me to tell you what to do but if you intend on going up against a guy who owns a no-holds-barred fight club, you can’t afford to keep this a secret.”

Blake realized Patrick cared a great deal or his friend wouldn’t have confronted him about something like this—especially now. They both knew when the other wanted privacy. For Patrick to push like this spoke volumes.

“You’re right,” Blake admitted. “Until now, it hasn’t been an issue.”

“What does Ryan say?”

“He wants me to get a neurosurgeon to look at it.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Once we take care of Billings. After what I’ve learned today, Alicia’s life could be hanging by a proverbial thread.”

“Why?”

“She signed over her entire inheritance to Gran.”

“Are you serious?”

“Very,” Blake stated. “I damned near lost the best thing in my life because I went off the handle about it. I worried about what Billings would do to Gran and Alicia immediately withdrew her idea and proceeded to try leaving.”

“It sounds like Alicia reset her priorities—strong woman.”

“Yeah, one who is living in fear and is afraid to let anyone know it. I dread what he’ll do to her once he finds out about the money.”

“I see what you mean. Let’s go get some beers and start setting strategy.”



“Good, I’ll get Gran to drop me off at the bar and if you don’t mind...”

“Sure.”

“Usual place?”

“Of course.”

“You know what to get me.”

“Gotcha.”

\* \* \* \*

Leighton Waverly sat in the private luxury box at the arena where Blake’s team played their home games. Looking at the sleek, freshly smoothed ice without players or fans in the seats, she felt the calm after the proverbial storm. *It’s amazing...*

“Gran?”

“Blake, good game,” she said, hugging her grandson.

“Thanks,” he said. “They’re a good team. I like the ones that keep us on our toes.”

“I don’t like seeing you in the penalty box.”

“If I hadn’t forced it, we may not have scored the second goal.”

“But fighting?” she asked, amusement in her eyes.

“All in the spirit of the game of hockey,” he said. “Must I remind you about the Broad Street Bullies?”

Leighton laughed, the memory of flying to Philadelphia to watch Bobby Orr and the Boston Bruins go head to head against the Flyers—hockey at its best.

“We did have fun then, didn’t we?”

“And you’re one of the reasons I love the game.”

They left the box and headed for the exit, one of the security guards meeting them. Walking them to the door, he locked up behind them. Once outside, Blake held the door of the limousine waiting for his grandmother to get in before he followed.

“Gran, I’m meeting Patrick at *The Pub*. Do you mind dropping me off?”

“Of course not,” she said before advising Edward.

“Thanks.”

A short time later, Blake kissed Leighton good night before exiting the car.

“Good night, Gran.”

“Good night, Blake,” she said. “We’ll speak tomorrow.”

“Definitely.”

The limo drove off taking Leighton home to her condo. Tired, she’d enjoyed the game—the time spent with Blake cherished. *I pray he gets what he wants. Please, Lord, take care of him...*

\* \* \* \*

*The Pub* had always been one of Blake’s favorite bars. An Irish pub, its décor paid homage to *The Quiet Man* with a full wall mural of John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara as well as scenes from the movie. He and Patrick had been going there regularly for almost twenty years, maybe longer.

When Blake arrived, he found Patrick sitting in a booth at the rear of the dining area, their ales waiting.

“Just in time—food’s on its way.”

“Good, the game made me hungry.”

“Even after dinner with your grandmother?”

“Yep.”

The two friends laughed enjoying the downtime following a good game. Their waitress set two pilsners in front of them before pouring their ale from the pitcher she’d leave on the table.

“To a good game and good friends,” Blake said.

“Hear, hear,” Patrick said before taking a swig. “Now, enlighten me about the back.”

"It's really nothing," Blake said, trying to downplay the subject. "Several years ago, one of the guys from Philly slammed into me. My upper right rib caught the crossbar on the net since I did my job and backed our goalie. Bryan figured I'd bruised it pretty bad until we learned more."

"And?"

"Remember when I went on vacation several weeks after the playoffs? I actually saw a doctor who treated me for a broken rib. Every time I get hit on that side or a certain way, the pain radiates and I ache for a while. The whirlpool eases a lot of the pain."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Patrick asked, hurt evident in his voice.

"I didn't want you to accidentally slip and spill it to Gran. You know how she can get anything she wants to know out of you. I figured it'd be easier that way."

"True and I appreciate it. I mean the woman could get the worst of criminals to 'fess up but I'm glad I found out so I can make sure we're prepared."

"What..."

"If I can find out your weaknesses by accident, what will happen if somebody else decides to dig deeper on purpose?"

"I'll be fine."

"And if he decides to use you as the main bout for one of his events?"

Blake fell silent, knowing Patrick's concern ran in the right direction. He took another swig from his pilsner and refilled their glasses, signaling for another pitcher.

"Blake, I know you know I'm right."

"You are and I really hate what my privacy could be used for. I don't want to..."

"I know you don't and you won't be. I can figure all the different scenarios out from different angles and maybe get ahead of him."

"Gran's opening the house in Nantucket and she's got the family doctor setting up a private clinic if we need it."

"What the hell do you know?"

"When I made the arrangements—nothing. I went on gut instinct."

"I'm glad we're on the same side."

Blake grinned, lifting his pilsner.

"Good friends."

"Amen."

\* \* \* \*

Since Blake's team didn't skate again until the end of the week, the team met daily for some intense practice sessions. While being in winning form against their opponents, the next several games would prove to be as tough as the NHL teams they affiliated with.

Blake didn't mind the hour-long drive to Providence since he did some of his best thinking while on the road. The Billings' problem gave him heartache because the latest information continued to get worse as they learned more. In the middle of Lohan Billings' sick scheming life—Alicia.

Once at the arena, he met up with his teammates and they hit the ice. A few hours later, he languished in the whirlpool, the team doctor telling those who asked that Blake had a pulled muscle that had taken an extra long time to heal.

"Blake, if it keeps up..."

"I know but you know us..."

"Don't say it, brother. I'm in the same class and hate admitting it, too. But seriously, the way your body is now, I'm afraid you could take a hit and be permanently disabled."

"I've had thoughts but..."

"And your grandmother will have my hide for letting you keep playing."

"That's why we won't tell her."

Both men laughed, Blake enjoying the heat.

"By the way, if anyone comes around asking about me..."

"You head up your own business and can be considered moderately wealthy. I don't have a clue about any relationship you might have with Leighton Waverly who is a gorgeous woman. How am I doing?"

"Perfect," Blake said. "Anyone else suspect?"

"No, and if they do, I'll set them straight."

Blake laughed thinking back to a character played by Slim Pickens in the beginning of John Wayne's *In Harm's Way*. *Good friends...*

On the drive back into Boston, he took the exit to his home. Once there, he parked his Chevrolet Avalanche in the garage next to his Jag then, after locking the garage, he went inside. Once in his kitchen, he dropped his gear bag on a chair then pulled a beer from the refrigerator. The red light on the answering machine caught his attention.

"Mister Atherton, it's John in the security department. We've had several inquiries into you and the company. Doesn't seem a problem but I wanted to give you a head's up."

The message ended, Blake leaning against the counter.

"So, the game's afoot, my dear Doctor Watson," he said, paraphrasing *Sherlock Holmes*.

It didn't surprise him. After all, he'd been checking out the enemy as well but something bothered him. Not knowing exactly what made his bad feelings become worse. If Patrick's ideas about Billings using the fight clubs against him proved right, Blake might not be able to fight whoever Billings sent to do his dirty work. *This had better be the worst-case scenario.*

Finishing his beer, he turned to rinse the bottle out. As he did, excruciating pain radiated up his side and across his back, the pain so strong, he dropped the bottle in the sink. *What the fuck...*

His arm numb, Blake did everything he could to feel better. As quickly as the onset hit, it left him as if nothing happened.

Again, he cursed dreading what his body had tried to tell him. *Not now, please...*

## Chapter 6

Alicia felt the cell phone vibrate just after nine. Cautiously, she took it from her pocket and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Alicia, my dear, how are you this morning?"

"Fine, and you?"

"Good," Leighton Waverly answered. "We need to meet this afternoon—if it's convenient."

"I'll think of something," Alicia said just as Lohan Billings entered the room.

Ripping the cell phone from her hand, he held the phone in his fist.

"Who the hell are you talking to?"

"Leighton Waverly," Alicia answered. "Ask her yourself."

"Who is this?" he demanded to know.

"Will you please put Alicia back on the phone? This conversation is private."

Lohan recognized the voice having heard the owner of *Revere Waverly* when interviewed on several occasions. Grumbling as he handed the phone back to Alicia, he stood in front of her while they finished their conversation.

"I guess you don't have to figure out what to tell him."

"No, I guess not," Alicia agreed. "What time should I be there?"

“Edward will pick you up at eleven. We’ll discuss the matter over lunch.”

“I’ll be waiting and thank you.” Alicia ended the call and put the phone into her pocket.

“Give it to me,” Lohan demanded.

“No, it’s not mine to give you. Leighton gave me one of her corporate phones so she could get in touch with me when needed. She also didn’t want to have to deal with you and your temper, either.”

Watching in horror as Lohan reached over and took it from her pocket, Alicia willed herself to remain calm. Lohan opened the phone going straight to the text messages, then received calls and finally her phonebook. She could tell he couldn’t find what he wanted until he stared at the list of contacts.

“Who the hell is *The Doctor*?”

“As you must be aware, Leighton is older than I am. She wanted me to have the number in case she needed him and couldn’t make the call herself.”

“Why does she trust *you* all of a sudden?”

“We’re working together on a huge project. She needs to get hold of me for meetings and other things that may need to be done. It’s easier this way plus we seem to have hit it off immediately. She mentioned another...”

“No more after this one. As soon as it’s done, you’ll return the phone or I’ll destroy it.”

“And I hope she goes after you for it.”

“And you better pray she doesn’t.”

\* \* \* \*

Billings left his wife storming out of the room and into his study. After slamming the door, he locked it. Not that she would, he didn’t need Alicia or anyone else entering his private world.



For the life of him, he couldn't understand why all of a sudden, the *Grand Dame of New England* wealth had come into their lives. The fact she'd given Alicia a cell phone thoroughly pissed him off because he felt his control over his wife had somehow been compromised.

Then the fact he couldn't have Bruno with Alicia at all times concerned him because he hated not having any clue as to what she did. He'd begun to lose control over her and instead of the situation easing, it started to mushroom toward a point of no return. *Why now?*

Legally, Alicia's association with Waverly more than likely could turn out to be a good thing. Considering his finances, any help—financially or public relations wise—would be welcome. On the other hand, while Billings legally appeared near bankruptcy, his illegal empire had taken off making him very wealthy. Waverly's people would investigate him and bring the IRS down on him for major ill-gotten gains charges.

"Now, I know what a fucking *Catch-22* is," he muttered. "Damn it!"

\* \* \* \*

At eleven, Alicia came downstairs. To her surprise, Lohan seemed to be elsewhere, a huge relief though she knew he had to be where he could watch her leave. Putting on her jacket, she grabbed her clutch and quickly left the house. The sight of Leighton's driver waiting at the rear door to the Bentley helped her relax.

"Mum," he said as she approached.

"Edward, how are you?"

"Fine, mum, thank you," he replied.

Alicia detected an accent though unsure where he might be from. Settling in the car, she relaxed behind the safety of the deep

tinted windows. A quick glance to the house and her breath caught, seeing Lohan glaring at her from a window near the door. Quickly, she looked toward the front of the car needing to get the image out of her mind.

Clutching her handbag, she felt better knowing the cell phone instructions sat safely inside. Something told her Lohan would search her room so Alicia took precautions with them and a few personal possessions she didn't want him finding. After seeing his face, she breathed a sigh of relief. *Enough of Lohan—for the moment...*

\* \* \* \*

Blake and a few of the other players took advantage of some available ice time—rare in the morning. They usually practiced in the late afternoon, early evening or sometimes in the wee hours of the morning.

Checking his watch, he told the others he had a business meeting scheduled then skated off the ice.

“Are you going to be here tonight?” Theodore, one of the alternate captains asked.

“Doubt it,” Blake answered. “I expect the meeting to take a while.”

“I'll tell Coach.”

“Great, thanks.”

Blake headed to the locker room and a hot shower instead of the whirlpool. Knowing his grandmother's schedule, he didn't have time to sit around, not when Alicia would be there. *I'm not missing time with her.*

Twenty minutes later, Blake drove the Avalanche home, dropped off his gear and grabbed the keys to the Jag. As much as he loved the truck, it wouldn't fit in the parking garage where Leighton Waverly lived. He left the house then drove to the family flor-

ist where he picked up two long-stemmed red roses—one for each woman in his life.

After that, he drove to Leighton's building and pulled into the back entrance of the parking structure. It kept inquiries down as he didn't want Billings' man discovering his presence. Parking near the limo Leighton used about as much as the Bentley, he locked it after grabbing the roses.

Waiting for her private elevator, he stepped inside once it arrived and went upstairs. *God, it'll be great once the clandestine shit is done with...*

Blake Atherton looked forward to the day when he and Alicia could finally go public but he needed to be patient for everyone involved.

Moments later, he walked out of the elevator into his grandmother's condo.

"Gran?"

"In here," she called, Blake following the sound of her voice to the living room. Handing her one of the roses, he gave her a kiss.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Good and you?"

"A little sore," he answered. "A few of us had practice this morning and it got a bit rough. You know us..."

"That I do," she said, smiling. "I just hope Alicia will..."

"We'll have to get her to a practice or two."

"You're reading my mind again, Blake."

"We're too much alike."

"So very true but we won't tell."

Blake gave Leighton a hug, holding onto her a little longer than usual.

"Blake, what's wrong?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"Nothing. I'm just sore," he said. "The boards don't get any softer."

"True," she agreed. "Just be careful. I don't want to see you getting hurt by some of the young kids who fly across the ice and check just to use another player as a cushion or stopper."

"I've given my share out there over the years."

"But I would be remiss as your grandmother if I didn't worry and voice my overprotective concerns."

Blake hugged her again.

"And I pray you never change."

Leighton gave him a kiss then pulled back to look at him. She brushed a hair off his shoulder and smiled.

"She's on her way. You might want to get ready if you have anything planned."

"Leighton Waverly, you are devilish," he softly admonished.

"It keeps me young. Besides, when I leave this earth, I want to know you're happy."

Blake hugged her again, ruing the day he would face life without her. In her early nineties, she lived an active life, not sick a day but she never took anything for granted—a lesson she instilled in Blake early in his life. She lived each day as fully as she could, Blake trying to do the same.

A bell signaled the elevator had begun its way up to the condo. Blake grinned before leaving the room to change into something more in tune with a *business luncheon* instead of the rink. *What happens later...*

\* \* \* \*

"Alicia, how are you?" Leighton enthused after Alicia stepped off the elevator.

"Fine, thanks and you?"

"Very well with two of my favorite people here."

Alicia could feel her face redden. Even though Leighton had brought her into their family despite her current situation, Alicia still felt a little intimidated by Blake's grandmother.

"We'll have lunch then a quick discussion on the latest dealing with the game then you and Blake can have the place to yourselves while I go take care of some business."

"I don't know how to thank you for everything."

"It's my pleasure. You make him happy. Just go easy."

"I..."

"He went to practice this morning and evidently took one or two hard hits. He won't admit he's in pain but I could tell."

"Then maybe I..."

"No, it's the life of a hockey player. I thank God he's in the AHL because the year he spent with the Bruins proved to be hard. Those guys check without thinking, I swear, but the younger ones on his team are starting to do the same. They see their way up to the NHL and want the chance to play in the majors. I can't blame them but I do worry about him and Patrick."

"Then why does he do it?"

"The love of the game. Blake's played hockey since he learned how to skate."

"If he's that much into it, why doesn't he own a team?"

"He has a minor interest in Phoenix."

"But why not with Boston?"

"They had no investor openings. Phoenix came up at the right time," Leighton explained. "You'll find his investments are very diverse and profitable though the team interest is purely personal."

"I don't understand."

"Minority share of the team gave him the chance to meet and deal with Wayne Gretzky, one of Blake's idols. They've talked,

Blake's gotten some pointers and in that respect, it's a very profitable venture though, as I said, purely personal."

"And who is..."

"Wayne is called *The Great One* and has more records in the sport than I can remember. He's a really nice person and gives a lot back."

"Amazing."

"What, dear?"

"I thought that kind of business deal went out years ago."

"It really hasn't. You just haven't had the chance to see it."

"True."

"Before I take too much time away from you and my grandson..."

"Never, Gran," Blake said as he entered the room. "Never."

Alicia admired the loving devotion they had for each other wishing she'd been able to experience that kind of emotion with someone else just once in her lifetime. She glanced toward the window wanting to give them their moment together but started when heat raced up her spine.

"Alicia?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to intrude."

She felt the tip of his finger tracing lazy circles at the middle of her back, a tiny thing which sent her emotions reeling.

"You aren't intruding, trust me," he said, trying to reassure her.

"I just..."

"Why don't we eat and discuss the charity event?" Leighton suggested, trying to ease the tension in the room.

"Good idea," Blake agreed. "Alicia?"

Alicia nodded. *My God, I'm in over my head...*

\* \* \* \*

After lunch, Leighton left pleased with how much they'd accomplished.

"Alicia, you're amazing. Your idea for the children's carnival during the game is perfect. I have a friend who can help us with the games and..."

"You might want to contact the Flyers organizations in Philadelphia. The wives from both teams have been holding a carnival for over thirty years and it's very successful," Blake offered.

"Both teams?" Alicia asked.

"The Flyers and the Phantoms, their affiliate."

"Then that is what I'll do this afternoon," Leighton said as she gathered her notes and placed them in her briefcase. She kissed them both good-bye and left them realizing they had no clue they'd been left alone.

"Ah, young love..."

\* \* \* \*

Contrary to what Leighton thought, Blake knew exactly when she'd left them and the condo. Counting to ten, he went to Alicia, spun her around and kissed her. Running his hand under the sweater she wore, he traced her spine with only the thin material of her blouse as a barrier.

Pulling back, he gazed at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her eyes full of worry and maybe a little fear.

"Not one damned thing. You're beautiful."

Slowly, he unbuttoned the argyle cardigan then pulled the sides apart groaning at the sight in front of him. To his surprised pleasure, she wore no bra under an extremely diaphanous blouse. The wool in the sweater had aroused her nipples, firmer now because of a cool breeze in the room. *Thank God for drafty old build-*

*ings...* He loved being able to see everything though he'd done a good share of imagining over the last week.

"I thought you might like it."

"Oh, I do," he stated. "I definitely do."

Blake cupped her breasts, brushing the pads of his thumbs over the soft material, Alicia's body responding immediately.

"The last week has been horrible," she gasped.

"I know."

Her hands went to his arms for support, Alicia fearing her legs would give out. Closing her eyes, she gave herself to him while enjoying his attention. Before she knew what he'd done, she gasped again when his hands brushed over her naked skin, their unique heat overwhelming.

The sound of her contented moans filled the room pushing Blake to go further. His lips covered hers, their tongues dancing as the simple act of his touching her firm buds brought her to climax.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Alicia leaned into him, her obvious need for Blake Atherton intensifying. Trembling, she needed more only Blake would not let her relax while keeping her on a tightrope.

"Blake," she tried to say only his exploration of her mouth caused her to mumble though he felt sure he knew what she wanted.

Suddenly, Blake swept her off her feet, carrying her up to his room where he set her down next to his bed. Quickly, she disrobed as if her clothes strangled her while Blake locked the door. Crossing the room, he shed his clothes then seconds later, he trapped his throbbing cock between them.

"Blake..."

"Shh," he said, before kissing her again.

"Don't hold back. We don't have the luxury of time."



"I swear once we're together, I will make slow lazy love..."

"Don't make promises I won't let you keep."

"What do you mean?"

"I've had your power, I won't let you deprive me of it."

Blake groaned, lifted her hips and thrust his cock into her causing her to gasp.

"Like this?"

"Only harder," she begged, nodding as she reached for him.

"I'm yours..."

Blake thrust into her again, Alicia crying out before begging him to never stop.

"I'm at your service," he stated. "I will do my very best to obey you."

"Then fuck me, Blake!" she screamed. "I need you."

"Anything for you—only you."

Blake pounded her body with his, his cock swelling more to fill her and he'd yet to release his essence into her. Her body shook as he found one erogenous spot after another, Alicia obviously in heaven. Seeing this drove him more as unbridled and brutal passion overpowered him. His thrusts harder, he didn't feel the pain in his back concentrating on the gorgeous woman impaled on his cock.

Her hands clenched his blanket, Alicia obviously on the edge.

"Alicia!"

Seconds later, he filled her, his cock exploding into her. His hips flexed as he determined to give her every drop of him he could. The mere touch of her fingertips on his balls sent heat rocketing through him driving him more. When the pain finally won out, he fell to her side, kissing her nipple as he massaged her breast. *Why now?*

Numbness overwhelmed him as his right side lost feeling. Covering for it, he tortured her with his left hand, Alicia not notic-

ing something might be wrong. While he suckled her, his hand slid to the other nipple and pinched it.

Again, as quickly as the pain came on, it left him. Blake pushed the episode to the back of his mind and went back to Alicia—his beautiful lover.

Her hand went to his face, lifting it so she could look into his eyes.

“You see what I mean?”

Unable to stop suckling her nipple, he nodded. Heat—and relief—coursed through him when she slipped her arm around him though the moment her hand brushed his bruised side, he hesitated, praying she hadn’t noticed.

“Blake, tell me about it.”

“About what?”

“I can feel something’s not right with your side. You momentarily stopped when I touched it. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I got checked a little too hard and...”

“Blake?”

“What? What’s wrong?” he asked, noticing the change in her voice.

“That is a huge bruise,” she said.

“What do you mean? I’m not...”

“Blake, I can see it. It’s almost black...”

Blake kissed her, trying to calm her down. Slipping out of bed, he went to the mirror over his dresser and winced. As she’d told him, his side had turned an ugly black shade, the bruise more evident than earlier at the rink.

“Fuck!” he cursed. “I don’t need this.”

\* \* \* \*

Fearing the worst, Alicia ran to his side.

“Where’s the phone? I’ll call nine-one-one...”

"No, don't," he said. "I'll be okay."

"No, you won't. I've never seen bruising this bad."

"Alicia, trust me, it's not the first time—it won't be the last."

"Blake, I..."

"Alicia, seriously, I didn't think the check this morning would lead to this. Hell, I've taken worse."

Alicia backed away, Blake looking at her.

"Talk to me," he said quietly.

"You need a doctor or the emergency room."

"Alicia, if I do that, I'll be off the ice."

"Good, you need time to heal."

"My God, it's part of the game. Be glad I didn't pull something I shouldn't have."

"But the pain—there has to be something to help you."

"It has to run its natural course in its own time."

"I've never seen..."

"Alicia, it's the downside of any contact sport. Be glad I wear padding and I'm not into something like boxing that has no protection at all," he said, trying to calm her and grateful he'd been able to skirt the issue of her husband's illegal activities though the thought lingered. "Right now, I can't afford to have any evident weakness. If the unmentioned one ever learned about this, he could very well use it against me."

Alicia paled, Blake immediately pulling her into his arms. She melted into him, her body literally fused to his. Tears pushed their way between them as if they tried to unsuccessfully separate them.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think," she whispered.

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I appreciate the fact that you wanted me to seek treatment."

"Why wouldn't I?"

“Another one of the defensemen had the same bruising on his body and his girlfriend took one look and ran. She broke up with him later that day as he went to get on the bus to an away game. Screwed his game to the point Coach benched him.”

“Blake, you mean more to me than anything else in this world. It scares me to think you’re so damned blasé about something that looks like it could be extremely serious.”

“I’m used to it,” he said, pressing her head against his chest. “Please, let’s not waste time on this. I’m fine.”

“I’m concerned...”

“I know which is why I want Gran to bring you to practice one day so you can see what happens. Your idea of the carnival is brilliant, you know?” he asked, hoping to get her mind off his pain.

“It is?”

“It gives you more excuses to come to the center which is where I will be and I can think of numerous places to ravage your sweet body.”

Alicia gazed at him, tears in her eyes.

Blake brushed her hair from her face, grabbing a handful and holding her in place while his lips covered hers. Their tongues danced, the kiss deeply passionate—enough that he could propel her back to bed where he took her with a fiercely brutal passion.

“Blake, please...” she cried out.

“On one condition.”

“Anything,” she gasped. “What?”

“Don’t baby me. I’m fine and can handle anything as long as I’m with you.”

Alicia melted, unable to deny Blake while realizing she would do anything she had to in order to keep the man in her life. Pulling him to her, her lips found his and suddenly she controlled the situa-

tion. Her body moved with his, exciting his cock to swell inside her. Again, he took her fiercely, Alicia's body craving more.

When Blake exploded into her, she took his cries within her, her climax coming from two directions while encompassing her heart and soul. Never had she felt like one with another person but she did with Blake and, while she felt extreme misgivings about how he handled his physical pain, she swore to never be the cause of any emotional.

"I love you, Blake," she gasped seconds before he crushed her body between his and the bed. Physically spent, he'd passed out though Alicia didn't care. She eased him to her side, making sure his cock remained embedded inside her and held him while he slept as if protecting him from the world. Having no idea what their future held, she cherished their time together knowing it could end at any time. *I need you...*

\* \* \* \*

Blake woke a short time later, his head on Alicia's breast. The gentle rise and fall of her chest had comforted him making him feel secure, a feeling he cherished. Granted, he'd always had a good life. His grandmother had raised him and he had a head for numbers which kept him financially solvent no matter what he became involved in. Everything he did, he did well whether at the board table or on the ice but when it came to his personal relationships with women, he lacked something though he never understood what and gave up on them.

Sinking himself into his strengths, he'd been happy until he met Alicia in the anteroom at the Billings' mansion. He vowed to bring her into his life and now she held him as he slept though waking to her next to him sent heat through him that no other woman had ever been able to do.

Not wanting to disturb her, he gazed down the length of her body loving her more. Slowly, he ran his fingertips along her hip tracing the curves of her lower body. More heat rose as he swore tiny bolts of electricity traveled between them.

Alicia stirred, Blake stopping. Moving his head, his eyes met hers.

“Hey,” she said, her hand massaging his neck.

“Hey, yourself,” he said, smiling as he repositioned himself. Leaning on his elbow, he traced her side with his fingertip, her body trembling.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, especially being here with you. I’ve never woken with my head on a woman’s tit before.”

“Good,” she said quickly. “I want to be the only one you do it with.”

Blake pulled her on top of him, easing her onto his cock. Without a word, Alicia slowly rode him, the sight looming over him driving him insane with desire. Their heat building, their pace intensified until Alicia cried out. Pulling her down to him, he held her tight against him while his tongue delved into her mouth. His strong arm around her, his free hand massaged her breast as Alicia responded by riding him again until he called her name.

“Stay with me,” he begged. “I’ll figure out something to keep you safe.”

“I can’t. If he has even an inkling of what’s going on, he’ll come here and kill you both. I couldn’t live with that on my conscience.”

“But what about you? At any time, he could decide to...”

“As long as I have two things he wants, he’ll bide his time.”

“You don’t know that,” Blake said, his thumb pressing against her firm bud. “You had no clue about the fight club.”

"He needs the family inheritance and he will more than likely try to use me to court your grandmother's good will. She could well be his idea of entry into the inner circles of Boston finance."

"I don't want to take that chance—not with your life."

"We have until after the charity event before he might try something. He doesn't want to chance angering Leighton by pulling me out of it—I know that much. He told me I could see the project through and then no more so..."

"Alicia, you can't trust him."

"I don't—I only trust you."

"Then, please, stay..."

Alicia kissed him, their tongues dancing as if it might be the last time. She broke away looking at him.

"Blake, do you trust me?"

"With my life."

"Then we must let this play out."

"I want you..."

"And I want you," she said, cutting him off. "I love you, Blake."

"Alicia!"

\* \* \* \*

Blake walked Alicia to the elevator holding her hand tightly. Before she could push the button, he pulled her back to him, his arms wrapping around her as if he cocooned her. His lips covering hers, he kissed her refusing to allow her to move.

Alicia succumbed to the heat building between them and the sweet taste of his mouth. Only Blake Atherton could make her body react like this and when it did, she felt helpless to do anything but fuse to him and let him do whatever he wanted.

"I still want you to stay."

“And so do I but if we do anything out of the ordinary right now, it could really screw things up. If we expect to be together, we can’t make any stupid mistakes.”

“She’s right, Blake,” Leighton said as she joined them. “Don’t give her husband any reason to become more violent. Get solid evidence against him in order to put him out of business once and for all.”

“Gran, you’re acting like Grandfather,” he softly admonished.

“Where do you think I learned how to live and work in a man’s world? Besides, Alicia’s shadow is across the street and has been all afternoon. If she remains here, you can imagine what he’d report back to...”

“God, I hate being ganged up on,” Blake stated, his frustration evident.

“Remember, Revere women are always right,” Leighton softly reminded him. “And when Alicia joins the ranks...”

Blake caught Alicia as her legs failed her, holding her tight against him. Taking in the scent of her hair and the nearness of her exquisite body, Blake wanted her more but...

“What...d-d-did...you...s-s-say?”

“Alicia, I’ve known from the moment he met you what my grandson intended to do and I’m quite pleased. You’ll make a wonderful addition to the family.”

“But...”

“No buts, dear,” she started to say. “Revere...”

“...Women are always right,” Blake finished.

“Now I feel like I’m being ganged up on.”

“Get used to it, sweetheart. It’s really not so bad.”

“Alicia, the next time we get together, we’re going to a practice session so you can see what Blake does to amuse himself. I also want to take a closer look at the layout of the center so we know



where to set up the carnival stands. Your idea of calling Philadelphia paid off, Blake. The woman I spoke with couldn't have been more helpful—a real joy.”

“Good,” he said. “I had hoped you'd be successful.”

“Edward is ready when you are, dear. I'll see you next week.”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

Leighton left them, Blake still supporting a trembling Alicia.

“And I have one request for next week's visit.”

“What?” she asked.

“Wear a skirt because the ideas I have need my being able to find your luscious pussy easily.”

“You devil.”

“It's in the blood.”

Blake pulled her into another kiss, massaging her breast as he teased her.

“I want you on a rush so you'll be able to survive the next week.”

Her contented moan and hazy eyes told him she agreed.

Once the elevator doors opened, she left him. Blake did not want her going but at the moment, they had no choice, the ladies in his life right. *Shit!*

\* \* \* \*

Across town, Lohan Billings paced while constantly checking his watch. When his phone rang, he growled into it.

“What?”

“Mrs. Billings is now leaving to return home.”

“And she didn't leave the place all day?”

“No, sir.”

“You know what to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Billings threw the phone down, angry at his steady loss of control over his wife. One decision he made—there would be no charity auction at the gala next year—if he held it.

## **Chapter 7**

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“My weekly meeting with Leighton, of course.”

A week had passed since their last meeting, one that unnerved Alicia because it had been relatively quiet—until now. Inwardly, she groaned, not wanting to deal with Lohan but knowing she’d have to say something.

“Last week, you wore casual and the week before a pantsuit. Why the skirt?”

“I’m impressed that you took notice.”

“Cut the crap, Alicia. What’s going on?”

“We have a meeting with some other women who are helping out with the event followed by another one with the management of the center where it will be held. Leighton’s a wonder with all she can get done.”

“Then why does she need you?”

“Because what we plan to do is my idea.”

“Yours?”

“Yes, Lohan, mine. Now if you’ll excuse me, Edward is waiting. We have a full schedule for today...”

“Edward?”

“Leighton’s driver. He is old and a grandfather of twelve.”

“The man who holds the door for you when she sends her car?”

"Looks are deceiving, aren't they? He's very athletic from what she tells me. Now, really, I have to get going."

Alicia grabbed her things and hurried out of the room and the house. The next sound Lohan heard after the slam of the front door had been the Bentley driving off.

"Bruno!"

\* \* \* \*

Alicia settled into the rear seat of the Bentley smoothing her skirt. As Blake requested, she wore a bright navy blue pencil skirt—professional and elegant—with a matching two-button jacket that came to just above the skirt's hem. Underneath, she chose to wear a lacy camisole of the same color though the jacket covered it—a good thing since she wore no bra. Blake wanted easy and she hoped she'd be able to please him.

"How are you, Edward?"

"Fine, thank you," he replied. "You look beautiful—if I'm being too forward..."

"Thank you," she said. "And you're not."

Alicia felt a different kind of warmth overtaking her. It'd been a long time since she'd received a compliment like his and it felt good. She smiled to herself then gazed out at the passing scenery.

Once at the entrance to Leighton's private elevator, she became impatient to get upstairs. Of course, she'd had the same feelings in the car—Edward couldn't drive fast enough, it seemed. Thoughts of seeing Blake drove her insane with desire for him as she felt her nipples pushing against the soft fabric of the camisole as well as the reactions of the rest of her body taking her to an edge she feared losing.

"Hurry up," she muttered as she tapped her foot impatiently.

Finally, she entered the elevator and immediately leaned against the wall for support while relieved for the privacy. Blake Atherton brought this out in her and she'd be eternally grateful.

On its slow ascent, she tried in vain to calm down. Feeling hot, she unbuttoned her jacket, the cool air firming her buds even more. *Blake, all I want is you...* Despite this, she still felt hot hoping it wouldn't be obvious when she finally stepped off the elevator and met Leighton.

"Alicia, come in," Leighton Waverly invited. "Blake is meeting us at the center."

"Oh," Alicia said, trying very hard to hide her disappointment.

"I thought we'd take the limo instead of the other car. My chef's been busy creating a lunch made for traveling."

"Where are we going?"

"Providence."

"Oh," she said, trying to cover her hockey naiveté.

"Alicia, don't worry about being *hockey-challenged*. Blake will definitely enjoy bringing you up to speed."

Hearing that, Alicia smiled as heat coursed through her at the mention of Blake's name. *Oh, the effect the man has on me...*

Moments later, Leighton Waverly led Alicia Billings to another elevator—one which had been installed years earlier for servants and deliveries. They took it down to the parking garage and exited it at the rear of the structure—an extremely private entry/exit for the wealthy residents as well as being out of Bruno's sight.

Leighton and Alicia both smiled at Edward as he held the door for them. Once settled in the luxuriously comfortable car, they sat back to enjoy the next hour as they dined on wine and finger foods.

"This is amazing," Alicia commented.

"You'll get used to it. Blake hasn't shown you near what he owns yet."

“What?”

“I can’t tell you. It would ruin any surprise he might have for you.”

Alicia nodded, inwardly frustrated.

“I will say this,” Leighton said. “*Atherton Sports Group* will act as one of our corporate sponsors giving him reason to be at the arena and in our meetings.”

“But...”

“If I figure things right, your husband’s man is probably at the arena as we speak or on his way there.”

Alicia started, calming when Leighton put her hand over hers.

“Trust him, he knows what he’s doing.”

\* \* \* \*

“Boss, no one has left the Waverly condo,” Bruno reported. “Her Bentley is still parked in the garage.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes, sir,” Bruno said.

Billings could tell the man lied to him as he checked his watch fuming.

“Then find out where this damned hockey team plays and go see what my wife is doing. If need be, you know what to do.”

“Yes, sir,” Bruno said before the call ended abruptly.

Lohan Billings suspected something but had yet to put his finger on what.

“When I find out, you will pay for it and pay dearly, Alicia. I swear...”

\* \* \* \*

When Blake arrived at the center, he immediately sought out the team’s doctor. Since Alicia’s discovery of the bruising, he’d been careful during practices but he’d taken a hard hit in the game the night before and wanted it checked out.

"Talk to me," Bryan said.

"What?"

"This is not getting any better."

Blake nodded, unable to argue with him.

"I periodically lose feeling in my right side."

"Explain."

Blake told him about the shooting pains and the numbness plus Alicia's discovery of the bruise.

"Look, you have nothing to prove to anyone. Coach'll understand and more than likely be relieved. He doesn't want to see you hurt unnecessarily."

"But I can't stop playing. I'll go mad if I can't play."

"I understand that but will your lady understand? Will your grandmother?"

Blake fell silent, the news overwhelming him. *What if I can't play?*

"What do you suggest?"

"Does your family still have access to the private clinic?"

"Yes."

"Go see him. He's worked wonders before, he'll..."

"He's waiting to hear from us on another case."

"Then contact him. You need treatment and soon before this leads to permanent paralysis. I don't want to see that happen."

"What about today?"

"Don't..."

"Can't. My lady's expecting to see me on the ice. So is Gran."

"You, my friend, are impossible."

For practice, Bryan taped Blake's torso making sure to pad the bruising. His hope to give Blake's body some support while keeping everything in its natural place would definitely be tested be-

cause Blake would put it all out in practice like he did in games—Blake Atherton dedicated to his *mistress*.

“By the way, if anyone strange asks—Gran and I are strangers.”

“What the hell are you into?”

“Get Patrick to explain.”

“Should I be ready as well?”

“Aren’t you always?”

“True,” Bryan said. “Go on, get out of here.”

“Thanks, friend.”

“Anytime—just remember what I said.”

\* \* \* \*

When Leighton and Alicia arrived, practice had been going on for half an hour. From the luxury box, Alicia watched the team trying to find Blake. Her breath caught when she did.

Watching him intently, she saw fluid motion as he skated—as if he’d been born with skates on.

“They’ve already done their drills so it wouldn’t surprise me if they split into teams and have at it.”

“It’s like he...”

“If my grandson could have skated first then walked, he would have. God forbid it’s ever taken from him.”

“I saw his side last week—thank you for the warning.”

“I didn’t want it shocking you to the point you left him over it.”

“It did a little but something else bothers me.”

“What?”

“He wouldn’t readily admit it but I think it’s way more serious than he wants to say.”

“What do you mean?”



"I think he felt numbness to his arm. He got up, went to the dresser and cursed saying, *Not now, I don't need this!*"

"I'll speak to him."

"Thank you," Alicia said relieved.

As Leighton predicted, the team split in half then played a short game. The action fast and furious, Alicia had trouble keeping up though Leighton explained it as best she could.

Another one of Leighton's predictions proved true when Alicia caught sight of a very familiar bald head.

"Oh, my God!"

"What?"

"Bruno's here," Alicia gasped. "He's down there on the lower level."

"Calm down," Leighton said. "I'll handle it. Andrew?"

"Yes, Mrs. Waverly?"

"I thought today's practice had been closed because of the meetings."

"That's what my boss told me. Is there a problem?"

Leighton pointed Bruno out without actually pointing a finger. Andrew left and made a phone call to security. Moments later, they watched several guards escort Bruno out of the arena.

"That should take care of that," Leighton said as Alicia let out the breath she didn't realize she held.

"Maybe I should leave...I mean with Bruno knowing we're not in Boston..."

"If you leave now, it'll give your husband reason to believe the worst plus it'll break Blake's heart."

"But..."

"Right now, he sees you here with me. Blake is on the ice practicing with his team and Bruno is being escorted out. You have nothing to worry about."

"What if Bruno gets back inside the building?"

"On his way out, he will be warned in no uncertain terms that the next time he is caught in the building without an invitation, ticket or the like, he will find himself being hauled off to jail. The owners here are very particular and will not hesitate to press charges."

"You're not an owner, are you?" Alicia asked, overwhelmed.

"No, just a good friend of..."

"Oh," Alicia said, sinking into a nearby chair.

Leighton hid her amusement as she handed Alicia a glass of water.

"Could I have something stronger?"

"What would you like?"

"Double whiskey straight up," Alicia said quickly.

Moments later, Leighton handed her a glass then watched Alicia down it.

"Feel better?"

"Some," Alicia replied. "It's funny—I met Blake doing the same thing."

"Interesting," Leighton said.

"Oh, I'm sorry... You must think the worst..."

"Dear, it's all right," Leighton said. "I've been known to do the same in my time."

Alicia breathed a sigh of relief then started when she heard a commotion below them.

"What's happening?"

"The game is over, Blake's side won by two and practice is finished. He should be up soon."

The phone rang, Andrew answering it.

"Mrs. Billings, it's for you," he said.

"Who is it?" she mouthed.

"Mister Atherton."

"Thank you," she said, taking the cordless phone from him.  
"Blake?"

\* \* \* \*

"Yeah, what?" Billings said gruffly answering the phone.

"I'm in Providence, sir."

"And?"

"Mrs. Billings is here as well with the Waverly dame."

"Doing what?"

"Last I saw—watching the team practice."

"What does that mean?"

"Several guards threw me out. I'll go to jail if I try to go inside again."

Billings grumbled, angered by Bruno's constant run-ins with some sort of law enforcement.

"You're an idiot, Bruno."

"I found out one piece of information you may be interested in."

"What?"

"Blake Atherton plays minor league hockey here. I saw him on the ice."

"Any contact with my wife?"

"Not while I watched—no. His concentration centered on the game."

"You've redeemed yourself a little. Come on back for new orders."

"Yes, sir."

Billings ended the call trying to figure out why Blake Atherton played hockey. A man of his financial well-being should be more concerned with business than pleasure. He pulled out the dossier he'd had put together and reread it. Blake Atherton proved to be a

successful businessman creating and operating *Atherton Sports Group*—a distributor and designer of innovative sports equipment holding contracts with major and minor league sports teams up and down the eastern seaboard.

He pulled out a new sheet to find updated financial information on Atherton and shook his head. Never, in all his life, had Lohan Billings figured money could actually be made in sports but the man had—Atherton's net worth alone being upwards of one hundred million dollars.

"Maybe I've been acting too hastily and should concentrate on him instead of the old lady. Of course, I can deal with both—I am, after all, multifaceted."

The sound of Lohan Billings' self-serving, sadistic laughter echoed through the mansion while everyone hearing it cringed knowing something major would happen soon and it would be hell.

\* \* \* \*

Most hockey players skate as well as or better than they walk but after a good game or hard practice, they want to remove the skates as soon as they hit the locker room. Having something more important on his mind, Blake Atherton ignored this and, after he found his blade guards, he put them on then headed upstairs to Leighton's box.

The time between leaving the locker room and heading upstairs seemed like an eternity—one Blake felt he couldn't endure much longer. Walking into the luxury suite, he saw Alicia, his body immediately reacting despite the confines of his uniform.

"Blake, I see you had a good practice," Leighton said, before giving him a kiss.

"One of the better ones though knowing I had a private audience didn't hurt either."

“Andrew, why don’t you take a walk with me while I look over the mezzanine for good stand positions for the carnival?”

“Yes, Mrs. Waverly,” he said, extending his arm for her to take.

“We’ll be back,” she said, knowing the *lovebirds* had not heard her or their departure.

No sooner had the door closed behind them then Alicia ran to his arms. Their kiss brutally passionate, it didn’t matter what stood between them.

“My, God, you’re gorgeous,” he gasped. “The moment I saw you up here, my body wanted yours.”

“I had trouble finding you but once I did, I...”

“You remembered my request, I see.”

She nodded, unable to say anything thanks to his tongue lightly tracing the length of her neck.

Blake felt her body mold to his then gently and slowly pushed her over to the wall. While out of sight from anyone working on the ice, he needed the wall to trap her against. Once he did, he ran his hands up her legs shoving her skirt up and over her hips. He could easily tell from her breathing how she felt, Blake’s body begging to get out of the pads and uniform he wore.

Alicia arched to him, Blake burying his tongue between her breasts. Suddenly, the tightness of her jacket eased as it fell open, Alicia having unbuttoned it. Groaning at the sight of her extremely aroused nipples pressing against the thin material of her top drove him crazy as he suckled one then the other leaving moist imprints on the fabric.

“Alicia, I need it out of the way,” he gasped.

Nodding, she pulled it up exposing her naked breasts to his attention. While he suckled them and teased her, his hands found

their way under her thong. While one finger went for her clit, another eased into her pussy followed by a second one.

Gasping, Alicia's body stiffened while he finger fucked her, bringing her to a climax that rocked them both.

"My, God, Blake..." she cried out.

"There's more to come. I can't wait to get you in the locker room."

"What about the guards?"

"Gran, Patrick and I have keys to lock up. It's all right."

"What about your grandmother? I should be..."

"She planned it this way so you and I have our time together while the work on the carnival gets done. She might not appear to be one but she's an old-fashioned matchmaker at heart."

Alicia cried out again as Blake took her over the edge. The feel of her hands fighting the uniform drove him more before he finally slid down to his knees and drank from her. His hands squeezing her breasts while he tongue fucked her obviously drove her as well as her body shook out of control while her hands pressed him closer.

"Alicia Atherton—it has a nice ring to it," he said as she leaned over him, her naked breasts resting on his head.

"Mrs. Alicia Atherton sounds better."

\* \* \* \*

After they made sure Alicia looked presentable, Blake led her out of the box and escorted her to the elevator which would take them down to the locker room area of the center.

"Anyone in here?" he called as he opened the door to the player's dressing room. Hearing no answer, he led her inside then locked the door behind them.

Watching her as she tried to find his locker, Blake fell more in love with her and grinned with pride when she located it and began looking at his gear.

“Alicia?”

“Yes?”

“Lose the clothes. I want you naked while you’re in here with me.”

Seductively, she removed her clothes then hung them in the vacant locker next to his. Moments later, she turned to face him wearing only her shoes, her body radiant from a few minutes earlier.

“Like I said before, you’re gorgeous.”

“Now it’s your turn—show me what’s under all that stuff you’re wearing.”

Feeling the intensity of her gaze as he stripped out of his clothes, he tried to do it slowly but his desire for her got the better of him as he yanked off his jersey. Sitting down on the bench, he toed off his socks after taking off his skates and shin guards then dropped the padded pants followed by the padded shirt he wore underneath the jersey, shoulder pads and other padding. As soon as he wore nothing but a tee shirt and boxers, she went to him and wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m not done yet.”

“I couldn’t wait,” she said as she guided his hand between her legs.

A devilish laugh echoed in the room as he grinned.

“Then what do we do about this?”

Alicia backed away then sauntered over to the bench where she stretched out. Without needing to hear words, Blake finished stripping though the bandaging remained then joined her, straddling her body and the bench she laid on.

Lowering himself down to her, he teased her with his tongue while his cock throbbed against her belly.

“Please, don’t make me wait,” she begged.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he thrust his cock into her hot wet pussy. During the first several thrusts, she felinely stretched, her arms going over her head while her hands grabbed the hard wood of the bench. Seconds later, she wrapped her legs around him while he pounded her body without mercy.

As soon as she opened her mouth to cry out, his lips covered hers as Blake took her screams inside him. Filling her with his hot essence while she drowned him with hers drove him more as Blake wanted to give her everything he could and more.

Blake’s body trembled as her cries went to contented moans. The mere touch of her hands on his back sent him over the edge taking Alicia with him. Somehow, Blake positioned them so that he sat on the bench while he pulled her against him. In the same instant, Alicia’s body caught his cue and she moved back and forth on his cock, riding him hard.

Squeezing her breasts after momentarily watching them bounce in time, Blake gently pulled her to him, holding her tight against him.

“I will make you my wife—no matter what it takes.”

“I feel like I am now,” she gasped.

“I take thee, Alicia...”

\* \* \* \*

Blake carried Alicia into the showers and turned the water on. Together, they bathed while teasing each other.

“Sorry about the shampoo not being your usual...”

“I don’t care,” she said as she soaped his chest. “Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“When we’re finally together, can we still do this?”

“What—sneaking into the locker room? Hell, yes—why not?”

“Good, I would hate to lose this feeling.”



Blake framed her face with his hands and kissed her while hot water ran over them, the heat also helping his side once he removed the bandages Bryan had applied before the game. The feel of her wet soapy skin next to his drove him insane, Blake wanting to take her again though he started when she slipped from his arms. Feeling her lips around his cock forced him to press his hands against the tiled wall of the shower room.

As soon as she set her pace, he matched it then pushed her as he pounded his cock into her mouth, Alicia hungrily taking him without hesitation while squeezing his ass when he exploded into her throat.

"My, God, woman..." he yelled, the walls shaking from the vibration of his voice.

Alicia nodded before drawing back to catch her breath. Exhausted, she slipped to the floor of the shower, her breathing heavy.

"Alicia, are you all right?" he asked, concerned with her condition.

"I've never been better," she whispered.

After reaching up to turn off the water, Blake helped Alicia to stand.

"Can you walk?"

Weakly she nodded, Blake pulling her tight against his side. Helping her to the bench, he wrapped a towel around her refusing to leave her side.

"Alicia, you're scaring me," he said. "Please, tell me you're all right."

"I've just had the man I love fill me with his soul in several ways. My God, Blake, I love you."

Blake brushed her hair from her face then lightly kissed her forehead before feathering kisses down her neck. Alicia's lips

sought his and found them, her body pressed against his. Their tongues danced, sealing the union between them. The feel of her tracing circles on his shoulders aroused his cock, its impatience evident.

“God, I want to fuck you again.”

“Anything—I’m yours, Blake. Use me...”

Blake groaned but held back.

“Once you’ve had time to recover from what just overtook you. I love you too much to hurt you more.”

“You didn’t,” she assured him. “I’ve never felt so good.”

“I’ll make a deal with you. We’ll get dressed and go meet Gran. Once we get back to the city, we’ll do whatever you want to before I have to send you back to...”

“Shh,” she said, placing her fingertip gingerly on his lips. “You said to never mention his name.”

Blake groaned, kissing her again. *Somehow...*

## Chapter 8

The minute Alicia walked in the door, she knew something would happen. The atmosphere in the house as she entered told her everything—the tension thick enough to slice with a knife. Steeling herself to what would come in the next few moments, she made a beeline to the stairs, praying she'd be able to make it upstairs to safety behind a locked door.

"It's about goddamned time, Alicia!" Lohan bellowed, the force of his voice rattling nearby windows.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" she asked, trying to keep a level tone to her voice.

"You've been meeting Atherton, haven't you?"

"Excuse me? Where the hell did that come from?" she asked, her mind fighting to remain sane. *What the hell does he know?*

"*Atherton Sports Group* is a convenient sponsor of this so-called charity event. I think it's a sham excuse."

"He plays on the team. When he heard what we had planned, he spoke to Leighton."

"And, of course, you and he are at the same place at the same time. He's been fucking you, hasn't he?"

"You're insane. Why would he after the auction? I'm surprised we still went out to dinner."

"No, you're not," he stated. "I know you're sleeping with him—I can see it on your face and I can smell him on you."

“Lohan, get real—I have no friends outside of Leighton because of you. No man in his right mind is going to sleep with the wife of someone as volatile as you. As for the smell—that’s from speaking with several of the players after their practice before they went to the locker room because we did some publicity pictures. Leighton will be more than glad to tell you what happened.”

“As if I’ll believe her. I think she’s in on this with Atherton.”

“I wouldn’t know. I only found out today that he plays hockey and where.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t believe you. Considering you had Bruno escorted out of the arena—afraid he’d learn your dirty little secrets?”

“The call came from arena security because practice had been closed to the team, Leighton, myself and some of the other sponsors.”

“Very convenient,” he muttered.

“And you’re paranoid,” she stated. “Unfortunately, I’m stuck here with you in this mausoleum.”

“You never had a problem before.”

“I’ve always hated this house...”

“Get used to it because your freedom will be more restricted if I find out you’re lying to me.”

“Remember the money at issue...”

“I’m getting to the point I don’t care,” he said, watching for her reaction.

“Then end this mockery of a marriage now,” she stated with a bored tone, knowing his answer.

“Not on your life.”

\* \* \* \*

After Alicia had left Leighton's, Blake spoke with his grandmother for a short while before taking off. On his way to his truck, he called Patrick Fox.

"Can we meet in a little bit?" he asked.

"Sure, what's up?"

"I've got a bad feeling something's going to happen and very soon."

"Where, my friend?"

"The usual place. If you get there before me, order me a steak..."

"You want to lay down strategy..."

"I think we'd better," Blake answered, the concern in his voice evident.

"If anyone else said this, I'd call them crazy but you—you're always on your game. I'm going to make some phone calls before we meet. I want the team together."

"Good," Blake said before ending the call.

Getting into the truck, he sat for a moment thinking. Despising the fact Alicia had gone back home, he feared for her safety. After Bruno's eviction from the center, Blake had a good idea Billings had begun to piece things together. *Please let Alicia be strong enough to deal with the monster...*

He pulled out his cell and called Leighton.

"Gran, we need the clinic and..."

"Got it taken care of."

"It could be at a moment's notice."

"Done plus the house in Newport is open."

"I'm meeting Patrick for dinner so we can do some planning. I think I'm going to get him to wire me."

"Blake, no...this cannot be that serious..."

"I'm afraid it is."

"Anything else I can do?"

"Call Alicia and check on her. I don't trust him."

"I'll call you back in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Gran."

"Anytime."

"Gran?"

"Blake?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"Always for you and now her."

Blake set the phone up for his Bluetooth and drove toward the Irish pub he and Patrick always met at. Dozens of things battled in his mind for attention, his present situation becoming a blur.

"Get it together or he wins and Alicia's..."

The harsh reality hit him that Billings could get away with almost anything because he had married Alicia. The issue of the money notwithstanding, Billings had the law on his side. Since Alicia had chosen to stay with him for years and present a united front at all events, public opinion would side with him and against her and that didn't include Blake's feelings. *This fucking sucks!*

At the restaurant, he sat at his usual table and ordered drinks for them. He sat with his back to the wall watching everyone and everything around him hating that distrust and suspicion had once again begun to rule his life. The feelings he thought to be long gone had only laid dormant until they found a reason to surface. With Alicia in danger, they overpowered him, Blake hating himself.

Taking a swig from the pint of Guinness he'd ordered, he waited for Patrick, his mind's activity driving him to mental exhaustion. *Why now? I don't need any of this...*

"Hey," Patrick said as he slipped into the chair across from Blake.

"Hey," Blake said, pushing a second glass across the table. "I've ordered already."

"Good. I made some calls and everybody's in unless we've got an away game though Coach told me he's playing the prospects more than us because of playoffs. He wants the ones Boston might call up ready if they need them."

"Understandable," Blake agreed. Every year, they did the same—more ice time went to anyone who might help the Bruins get to the final round for Lord Stanley's Cup. This year, Boston had a damned good chance of going to the end unless the teams behind them really poured it on in the last several games. *March madness is not just for college basketball...*

"How's your back?"

"Better but it scares me. I don't need anything happening at the wrong time."

"I hear ya there. Are you going to get it fixed?"

"After the season's over and we get this thing with Billings straightened out."

"Hopefully he won't find out."

"Tell me about it," Blake said then he finished his ale and signaled for another. When their server brought his order over, Blake requested a pitcher—it would be a long evening.

By the time dessert had been set down, Patrick had made several pages of notes with things they had to see to and people who needed to be called in for help. Patrick looked forward to telling his friend at the FBI about what they'd recently found out dealing with Billings and the fight clubs. If they could break this aspect of Billings, Alicia would have no worries—divorce would be easy and Blake and she could take off for a hopefully happy ever after ending.

"I never realized you could be such a romantic," Blake observed.

"I like the lady and I'm happy for you both. Leighton's given her blessing thinking she'll finally see grandchildren. Of course, I'm a card carrying romantic when it comes to my best friend and his family."

Blake raised his glass, Patrick joining him.

"To love and good friends."

"Amen."

After dinner, they left the pub and walked to where they had parked. Blake shook his friend's hand before they split up.

"Thanks, Pat. You being a part of this means everything."

"Hey, we've always been closer than brothers and I refuse to lose that for any reason."

"Same here," Blake agreed. "Do me a favor..."

"Sure, what?"

"If and when the shit hits the fan, get Gran to Newport. I don't trust Billings to not go after her, especially if he suspects she's had anything to do with Alicia and me getting together."

"I planned to. One of the guys who is in on this has already agreed to take care of Leighton, no matter what. If either one of you disappears or something really adverse or strange happens, he is to get her out of the city to Newport and he will stay with her for the duration."

"Who?"

"Edward."

"Her driver? Good choice."

"He's ex-RAF plus it gets him out of the line of fire, too, though I didn't say anything."

"What do you mean?"



"If Billings is a ticking bomb, so to speak, he will go after anyone involved. Edward has been the one driving Alicia back and forth to Leighton's. If I've figured right, both Billings and his lunk-head have seen Edward's face..."

"I never even considered him..."

"That's because you are way too personally involved. I'm seeing things from a different perspective."

"Thanks," Blake said quietly, ruing that his desires could hurt so many people.

"Before you start doing it—and I know you will—stop beating yourself up on this one. Who had any clue what this guy's like?"

"I feel like I should have known better."

"You're human, my friend, and affairs of the heart have a way of doing that to us. Look at the royal family—he gave up the throne for the woman he loved."

"But he didn't face an asshole like Billings. I..."

"Blake, stop it before somebody does get hurt. You need to be on your game both with her and with hockey. I don't want to see you getting caught in the neck with a blade like that guy in Florida did last season."

"Point taken," Blake said before thanking Patrick Fox again.

Blake walked away as Patrick unlocked his Lexus and slid into it. He'd parked the truck several slots down where the spots seemed to be a little wider—out of the way and not so apt to get dinged. As he approached it, he found a piece of paper underneath the windshield wiper. Checking out the cars around him, he found he'd been the only one. Pulling it out, he groaned and immediately looked up to see Patrick turning into traffic.

"Shit!"

\* \* \* \*

Bruno had followed Blake from Providence despite being told to return to the city. Learning some interesting information, he immediately called his employer.

“Why aren’t you here?”

“Because I’ve been following Atherton. After the practice and your wife’s departure, he drove another one of the players home then went to Leighton Waverly’s condo. He left about half an hour after your wife did then went to an Irish pub several blocks away.”

“Leave him a note on his windshield—*Cheers*, at eleven tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Bruno, in the meantime, get the preparations we discussed earlier taken care of. This will be dealt with tonight.”

Billings had all he needed to take care of not one, but many thorns in his side. Knowing he’d been cuckolded angered him and he refused to let it pass. Plans had been made for how Atherton would be dealt with but time had not been considered until the right one presented itself—it did now.

Bruno would take care of getting Atherton to the *party* while he would bring Alicia. After that, he’d go after Leighton Waverly for her part in this as well as her driver—anyone who had a part in his wife’s little sordid affair would be eliminated even if it meant murdering the wealthiest woman on the East Coast.

“Let everyone see her for what she is.”

He went to the hall closet and pulled out a garment bag. Taking it upstairs, he headed straight for the door he knew would be locked to him. Kicking it open and loving the sight of his wife jumping up terrified at the sound, he walked over to her and shoved the bag at her.

“Here, put this on,” he demanded.

“Why?”

"It's time I make sure you can't leave me."

"What the..." she started to ask while obviously trying to recover her composure.

"You and Atherton have cuckolded me, woman, and I plan to make sure you and your boyfriend will never be together again. As long as you know everything about my life, it makes you an accomplice, meaning if I go down, so do you."

"Now, you've gone over the edge."

"Don't bother denying what you've done either—I can smell him on you. I can see his defiance in your actions of late and it will stop. Oh, and by the way, where's the cell phone?"

"The what?"

"Don't play stupid!" he screamed. "I want the damned phone so you can't go and warn any of your friends. No one can help you now, Alicia—no one!"

\* \* \* \*

Lohan stormed from the room, Alicia terrified. Taking the cell phone left her no way to call either Blake or Leighton meaning they would have no clue about anything Billings had planned. She ran to the window knowing she had no chance of making it to the front door. Finding it nailed shut, her heart sank. Every window the same, he'd effectively cut off any escape from the house and put her at his mercy.

Pacing, she tried to calm down and think rationally but the fight came hard and she knew she would lose. Billings would win this time like he always did and she would suffer like anyone else who came into her life.

Remembering back to a young man who delivered office supplies on a weekly schedule, she cringed realizing why he never came back. She knew Billings had been jealous and thought she'd convinced him nothing had been going on between them but her

husband never fully believed her. Alicia knew what had happened and blamed herself. *If I hadn't spoken to him...*

Movement in the hallway caused her to look up. She saw Lohan giving instructions to another one of his thugs, an act that told her Bruno had been given more important things to do. Her stomach tight, she backed her way to the bed where she gingerly sat on the side and grabbed one of the posts for support.

"I have someone standing guard to make sure you don't run. I'm sure you've already tried the windows but if you haven't, I had them nailed shut. Take a shower, get dressed in what is in the bag—nothing more, nothing else—and make sure you look like you should be out with me. I won't have you embarrassing me anymore than you already have."

"Lohan, you can't force me..."

"I can do whatever I want because after tonight, no one will give a damn."

Watching him leave the room again, she looked at the garment bag and shivered. Slowly she reached for it and picked it up then walked into the dressing room. Still able to lock a door between her and Lohan, she shoved a chair under the knob just in case.

Her heart racing, she let her tears push their way out knowing she would not get the chance to do it again if Lohan won. *Please, God, let them be safe. Don't let Lohan get away with this...*

\* \* \* \*

"Gran, I'm on my way over. Get a bag packed and tell Edward he's on. He knows what to do."

"What's happening?"

"The proverbial shit is hitting the fan and it's already started. I want you safe until this is over."

"I'll be ready," she assured him. "What about Alicia?"

"Try calling her," Blake said. "Don't be surprised if she doesn't answer—if it had been me, I'd have taken the phone to cut her off from anyone who might help her."

"I'll let you know."

Blake ended the call and tried Patrick's number.

"Fox."

"Meet me at Gran's. It's started."

"Slow down and talk to me."

"When I got back to the truck, I found a note telling me to be at *Cheers* at eleven. I've already warned Gran to leave and told her to tell Edward."

"Good, I'm going in the wrong direction so give me a few..."

"I want to be wired. It's the only way you'll know what's going on."

"What kind?"

"Something extremely nonchalant. Do you have any lapel pins?"

"Yeah, I can hide it in the clasp."

"Good, I'll see you at Gran's."

Blake ended the call and waited for Leighton to call back but when she did, she didn't have good news.

"She didn't answer."

"Fucking hell!"

"Blake, calm down. You won't be able to do anything if you're this upset."

"I know but... Gran, it shouldn't be happening..."

"Get over here *now*, Blake. I won't leave until I see you."

"Yes, ma'am."

Blake Atherton knew when his grandmother used a certain tone, she meant business—now one of those times. Taking a deep breath, he got in the truck and headed to the condo, parking in the

alley as always. Taking the elevator up to Leighton's floor seemed to take forever, making him more nervous. *Why?*

\* \* \* \*

Leighton stood at the elevator waiting for the doors to open. As soon as they did, she drew her grandson into her arms and held him.

"Gran, I'm so sorry."

"This isn't your fault."

"I should never have bid at the auction. I..."

"Blake, don't. You and Alicia are meant for each other."

"But..."

"Stop! By doing this, you're letting her down like everyone else has. He's made sure she has no friends. One of my investigators has turned up some interesting facts."

"Go on..."

"An office supply store made scheduled deliveries to the Billings' mansion. One day, the driver went out and never returned. They found his body in the harbor after he'd been shot. They also found he'd been nearly strangled before he died."

"Nearly strangled?"

"Enough pressure had been applied to his throat to cause his vocal chords to swell. With his breathing affected, he would have had trouble in the water."

"Sounds like Bruno at his best."

"Be careful, Blake. Billings evidently plays for keeps and he wants your Alicia."

"So do I."

"I know so don't let her down."

Blake hugged her again, afraid to let go of her.

"What would I do without you?"

"I don't know and don't want to. I love you, Blake."

“I love you, too.”

\* \* \* \*

Alicia opened the bag and pulled out one of her favorite designer’s gowns—a crimson velvet creation that, at any other time, she would have been eager to wear. Also in the bag, she found shoes and opera-length gloves to match the dress and nothing else. *Bastard! Well, fuck you, too, Lohan.*

Going over to one of her cabinets, she pulled out a thin thong—one she knew wouldn’t show under the clingy material. Laying it on the chaise, she went into the bathroom and took a shower. Once done with a task she usually enjoyed, she toweled off then went back to where she’d left the gown.

After slipping into the thong, she lifted the dress up and put it on. The layered shawl collar sat on the center of her shoulder, the way it fell creating a wide v-neckline. Tight at the waist, the material clung to her body until it flared out at her knees. A gorgeous gown, right now she hated it.

Slipping into the shoes with extremely high heels and very pointed toes, she knew exactly what look Billings went for—the scarlet whore. Pulling on the gloves, they went to the base of her elbow, the satiny material looking like many ripples of glistening red ice.

“Alicia, you’d better be ready!”

Inwardly groaning to herself, Alicia put the final touches on her make-up. Looking in the mirror for what she feared would be the last time, she resolved to never shed a tear in front of Lohan Billings again. The only one she felt she could show her emotions to would suffer because of her. *I’ve failed you and everyone else...*

When Lohan rattled the doorknob in an attempt to gain entry into her formerly private world, she trembled but vowed never to do that again either. Any show of emotion would be a win for him

as it empowered him to be an even bigger bastard. *No, I can't let you win...*

For the second time in an hour, a door flew open. Alicia faced her husband, hatred in her eyes as she watched him cross the room. Grabbing her arm, he dragged her out of it and downstairs to the entry hall where Bruno and several others waited.

"Alicia, you have lost. From now on, you will do as I say meaning I have total control over every aspect of your silly life. Tomorrow, you will turn the damned money over to me—do you understand?"

"I can't," she said, getting her final feel of satisfaction. "There is no money left thanks to the economy. The financial advisors invested it in stocks that suffered huge losses and that Ponzi scheme that took money from several Hollywood A-listers and sent the one behind it to jail. There is nothing left, Lohan—nothing at all."

Lohan's face turned red with rage as he reeled back and back-handed her to the floor. Trying to rise up, she saw a drop of blood on the floor but didn't see him nod seconds before she felt herself yanked to her feet. Bruno's huge arm held her in place, Alicia's struggle against him fruitless.

"Bruno, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir," Bruno said as his free arm went around Alicia's neck. With her throat centered in the bend of it at the elbow, she felt pressure being exerted on her. Her hands immediately went to his thick forearm, trying to free herself but to no avail.

"Bruno is putting enough pressure on your windpipe and vocal chords to cause extreme swelling. In essence, you won't be able to say a word without pain and very little volume—maybe a whisper, if you're lucky. Take care in what you do, dear wife—even taking a breath of life-sustaining air could be deadly."



Alicia felt faint, the fight in her gone. As Lohan had said, Bruno effectively cut off her throat from anything natural she might do. *Why didn't he just kill me?*

"The reason he is stopping is because I need you alive. I want Atherton to know what it's like to screw around with me. Once I'm through with him, I've promised you to Bruno since I refuse to ever touch you again. If you survive Bruno, we'll see what happens next."

Alicia's eyes rolled back, her mind unable to take what he'd just told her. Passing out, the last thing she felt had been the cold surface of the highly polished marble floor. *Please, save Blake and Leighton...*

\* \* \* \*

Patrick Fox stepped off the elevator and found Blake and Leighton in the living room.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nothing yet and I doubt I'll hear anything before the meeting," Blake said.

"You're more than likely right about that. From what I've learned in the last few moments, Billings plays everything close to the cuff. Only certain people know him intimately—Alicia not one. Every piece of evidence against him fails to mention her which is a good thing. With that and the three of us, she should stay out of jail."

Leighton gasped.

"It's all right," Blake assured her. "We've already taken steps to make sure she doesn't get implicated in anything but, as he doesn't know this, he could very well start involving her more in order to blackmail her."

"He's got to be stopped," Leighton avowed.

“And he will be but before we can do that, we have to know you’re safely out of Boston for the time being.”

“I will be leaving in a few moments,” Leighton stated. “I wanted to see you both before I left. Both of you must be careful.”

“We will do our best,” Blake assured her.

“Make sure the clinic is set up and the doc’s on hand. If anything bad happens, I don’t want the media getting hold of the information. Besides, I want to be able to spin it to our advantage if needed.”

“I’ll leave you two to do what needs to be done. Please, be careful. I want both of you and Alicia back in one piece.”

“So do I, Gran,” Blake said, hugging her.

“Me, too,” Patrick said as he hugged her after Blake.

Blake walked her to the elevator where Edward had mysteriously appeared and waited for her. Silently, the three men vowed to do everything they could to protect her and Alicia. They sadly waved good-bye as the doors closed before taking Leighton Waverly to safety.

“Please, God...”

“Hey, not being smart but we’re running out of time,” Patrick said, reminding Blake about why they’d met at the condo.

Blake turned, looking at his best friend.

“What’s up?”

“This is the wire you’ve requested—a simple American flag lapel pin. The range of it is phenomenal and the sensitivity is one of the highest. The entire unit is in the clasp that holds the shaft of the pin in place on your coat.”

“So what you’re telling me is that it will pick up a conversation from across the room if my jacket and I become separated?”

“About that. I’ve got Jonesey monitoring it for me so I’ll have a good idea what’s happening.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, it’s a tiny GPS, as well. We’ve got you covered to the max.”

“Good,” Blake said. “As long as I know somebody’s out there.”

“We’ll also be taping everything. The Justice Department wants this to stick.”

“I’ll give them anything I can.”

“I know. I need you to be calm and not cocky. Let him lead but don’t antagonize him to the point he clams up and we get nothing.”

“That won’t be hard—the asshole doesn’t shut up.”

“Remember we’ll be close by as soon as we can be.”

“If anything goes wrong, get Alicia out of there. She knows you and will feel comfortable with you instead of a stranger.”

“I’ll do my best but if I can’t, she gets another hockey player at her side.”

“Damned defensemen,” Blake kidded.

“Actually, I thought about our goalie—he is used to extreme saves.”

Blake snickered, the hockey analogies helping to calm him.

The wire mounted, they went over several things while going down in the elevator. On ground level, Blake looked at his watch, wincing.

“The time has come...”

\* \* \* \*

Blake arrived at *Cheers* near eleven. Thinking it strange that Billings wanted a meeting so close to his Beacon Hill home, Blake nonchalantly made mention of it hoping Patrick would pick up on it as well.

Sliding onto a bar stool where he could watch the door, Blake ordered a cup of coffee.

"Sure you don't want something stronger?"

"Had enough for the night—need to clear my head." *If only he knew...*

Moments later, he took a sip of coffee savoring its taste. Looking around, he didn't see Billings or Bruno though he figured Billings had to be with Alicia. That thought alone caused Blake's blood pressure to go up, something he could not afford to have happen. Bad enough his back caused problems—ones he prayed wouldn't act up or cause the numbness until after this had been taken care of—more maladies became the last thing he needed. *Calm and patient...*

Continuing to watch the bar and its patrons, he saw people come in and leave. Looking at the clock, he discovered he'd been there an hour with no contact. *What the hell...*

The bartender poured him more coffee then slid a bar napkin across the mahogany counter. Blake looked at it, his breath catching.

*Warehouse on Eighth Street near pier at midnight.*

"Bartender, where did you get this?"

"A man slipped me five to give it to you."

"What did he look like?" Blake asked, recognizing Bruno's description. "How long ago?"

"About ten thirty. He described you and told me that I should give it to you after you'd been here an hour."

"Thanks," Blake said, sliding a twenty across the bar. "Keep the change."

Blake left the bar, the cool air making him feel a little better.

"In case you didn't catch that—I'm on my way to a warehouse at the end of Eighth Street."

Blake got into the truck and drove to the location given him on the napkin. Toward the end of Eighth Street, he saw at least two

dozen cars parked near one of the warehouses. Parking away from the building, he slowly got out and walked toward it.

At the door, a man stopped him. Blake handed him the napkin, the man ushering him inside. Told to follow the hallway to where the light came from, Blake nodded then did so. Not liking his situation at all, Blake knew he couldn't leave if he had any chance of getting Billings out of their lives. He had to do this for Alicia so they could be together and his grandmother, who should never have felt threatened enough to leave her home.

Walking along the hallway, Blake passed several doorways that he figured to be offices. Passing the last on his right, he took a deep breath before going the last several feet. Suddenly, he took a hit to the back of his head, one hard enough to put him down on the floor with excruciating pain. Another hit put him out totally as he fell to the chilly floor. *Damn it!*

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Atherton went to his knees, two of Billings' men hit him again then dragged him into the office and out of sight of the participants in the evening's cage fighting events. Making sure their captive wouldn't go anywhere, they bound his hands and feet with tape then pressed a piece over his mouth.

"That should hold him until the boss is ready for him."

"I like easy jobs," the other said.

"Yeah, I hear the boss brought his wife with him."

"I wouldn't know—I never hear the juicy stuff. Just do my job..."

They took turns guarding Blake Atherton, an easy job considering he'd yet to regain consciousness. Throughout the night, they would level hits to his body, getting him ready for the last event. Bruno had issued additional instructions to *soften* Atherton up some, the guards doing as the man who seemed to be second-in-

command ordered. The last person they wanted to go against had been an ex-wrestler from Vince McMahon's stable—the guy crazy.

Near three in the morning, they'd gotten word to bring Atherton to the cage. Dragging his body along the hallway, they didn't care if they hit something along the way as long as it *softened* the guy up.

Dropping his body on the floor of the fenced-in cage, they stripped him down to his trousers and took his clothes and shoes with them. After they exited and dropped the clothing and shoes near the cage, they locked the gate behind them. Before leaving, a man handed them their envelopes, both men leaving without even looking at how much they'd made for the evening's work—standard operating procedure.

After driving to an after-hours strip joint they went inside and ordered drinks. Before the drinks had been set in front of them, both men had been garroted and robbed—the envelopes being the first thing taken.

\* \* \* \*

Lohan Billings stood in the shadows admiring the one enterprise in his life that had been successful. Legit businesses had given him some but none of it had been as profitable as his fight club. Even his rich wife had let him down, her family's so-called moneymen losing every cent she had—money he'd counted on until she told him the bad news a few hours before—leaving him no reason to keep her alive. No, his illicit sideline had kept him solvent and now he would use it to get rid of his wife's lover as well. *Hell, it'll look like any other rich guy out for kicks and losing—hockey player, my ass.*

Billings made his money from just that kind of client. Corporate bigwigs, investors and any other who had a high-paying stress-filled job paid good money for the physical abuse they'd either dole

out or take and nothing would ever be said because those involved with the fight club all agreed on one important thing—no one outside of the event would ever know, the extracurricular activities kept secret to protect the so-called *innocent*.

Seeing several people he recognized, Billings realized the evening had just become more profitable. Knowing some of the men's secrets, he added blackmail to his list of money-making options. His mind began storing away a list of his next targets though they would part with their money while Atherton would give his life.

As he watched the events and inwardly smiled, Billings decided the time had come to go for another franchise. On and off, he'd been looking at new possibilities and decided Buffalo would be good. Once they tied up the evening's loose ends, he'd begin making phone calls.

"Sir, your guests are waiting."

"Good," he said. "After the last event, drag Atherton in here and strip him down to his trousers before throwing him in the cage. Once I'm done, you can finish him off."

"Yes, sir."

"What about her?"

"She's in the office as you wanted."

"Gagged?"

"Yes, sir, with the red scarf as you ordered."

"Good, I don't want her dying naturally before I've had my fun."

Bruno nodded.

"Once I'm done with Atherton, take care of him while I drag her back to the office. As soon as he's dead or extremely close, she's all yours."

"Your wish for clean-up?"

"Dump him off the pier. By the time they find him, it'll look like he either fell in accidentally and drowned or committed suicide."

"And her?"

"Dump her somewhere else and make sure she can't be recognized for a while. That way, it might take the coroner a little longer to identify the body so I can act the grieving widower."

"I can screw up her fingerprints."

"No, I don't want to be too obvious. Wearing that dress, she'll look like the victim of a brutal robbery unless they consider something else to start with."

"Yes, sir."

"Get everyone out of here by two-thirty."

Bruno nodded and left while Billings walked the opposite way to another shadowy vantage point. *Damn, life is good.*

\* \* \* \*

When Alicia woke, she found herself in a dark room. From the light filtering in, she could tell she'd been left on a couch in an office but what difference did it make? Her hands bound behind her, she couldn't move thanks to being stiff. What concerned her the most—she had trouble breathing and swallowing, Bruno the cause.

Her head spun as she tried to make sense of what had happened. She knew Lohan could be sadistic but to have Bruno strangle her enough to make her throat swell while leaving her fighting for her life had topped the list of horrible things she would never have suspected him capable of.

Feeling soft material between her teeth as a gag, she closed her eyes and bit down on it to relieve some of the pain but even that didn't work. Her head spun from the sensations going through her, a pounding headache adding to everything else.

"Ah, it's about time you rejoined us," a voice said.



Alicia tried to ignore Lohan knowing he wanted to taunt her.

“Seeing as you can’t speak, you will listen. Your boyfriend is waiting in the warehouse for you. Because you’ve proven useless thanks to your investors, the two of you can leave here tonight, our marriage no longer an issue. We just need to discuss several things before you do.”

Alicia looked at him, confusion and hatred overwhelming her along with concern for Blake. She knew Lohan had no intention of allowing them to leave alive—he couldn’t afford to have any witnesses. *What does he have planned?*

Checking his watch, Lohan grinned as Alicia held back tears.

“Come, my dear, it’s time but you’ll have to remain quiet. You don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

Two men pulled her off the couch and escorted her out of the office down a long hallway and into a huge room. Using flashlights, they led her to a spot somewhere toward the center of it but that had only been a guess. Once they shut off the hand lights, they stood on either side of her holding her arms so she couldn’t move.

The wait began.

## Chapter 9

Waking a short while later, Blake Atherton found himself laying face down on a hard, flat surface. Once his senses returned, he figured he had to be on a mat of some kind—like one used in boxing or, from what he'd heard, cage fighting.

Slowly opening his eyes a little more, he saw what looked like chain link fencing surrounding the mat but thought his mind and eyes played tricks on him. Unfortunately, he could see the actual place he'd been taken to once a bright spotlight bore down on him from overhead.

Cool air coming down from the high ceiling chilled him even under the heat of the high intensity spotlight. Blake could usually take being in places like this until he realized most of his clothes had been taken from him including his shoes. *Fuck!*

Blake tried to get onto his knees to stand but he experienced extreme pain in his side as well as from both knots on his head. His vision slightly blurred caused him to close his eyes again. A solid hit to his side knocked him back to the floor.

He'd heard about cage fighting, more so after the Billings' investigations, though he'd never watched it. The idea of two men or women trying to beat each other's brains out or, in some cases, damned near to the death did not interest him. *It's not the ultimate sport—just give me a good old-fashioned hockey brawl...*

Trying to move again hurt as the knot on the upper part of his head throbbed after hitting the floor.

“Get up,” a voice taunted. “Fight like a damned man instead of a pussy...”

Again he tried only to be knocked back. As near as he could tell, two different men had hit him—definitely an unfair fight.

A huge hand yanked him up before leveling a right cross to his face. Blake tried to dodge it but only made matters worse. He could feel a cut opening on his cheek, more than likely a deep gash.

“Hold him,” the other said.

As soon as the first one held Blake in position, the second one leveled continued punches and jabs to his stomach.

“I see you two don’t believe in fair fights.”

“Ah, we have a sense of humor,” the first one said before nailing Blake again.

The sound of the cage door opening then swinging shut halted their abuse though, he suspected, not for long.

“Blake Atherton, millionaire sports enthusiast—a hockey bum, at that. Do you honestly believe my wife has time for a lowly minor league hockey player? Can you give her what I can—the Beacon Hill house, the fancy designer clothes...”

“If she wants what I can give her—yes,” Blake said slowly as he tasted blood in his mouth.

Blake found a bit of strength, channeling it all into a futile lunge at Billings. Between Billings stepping out of the way and Bruno’s friends from World Wrestling, Blake failed. On the way to the mat, Billings’ knee made contact with his chin, Blake feeling something go terribly wrong. Kissing the mat, he tasted more blood as the coppery taste of his life began to stain the surface.

Several more kicks made sure he stayed down for the proverbial count while Billings circled him. When he neared Blake’s ankle, he stepped on it until the sounds of breaking bones echoed in the huge area.

Blake groaned fighting to not cry out while thinking he faintly heard a gasp coming from somewhere to the side. *Alicia...*

Blake tried again to raise up only this time his body completely failed him as numbness set in, taking him back to the mat. His head facing his left shoulder, he could see his hand shaking a little as tremors filled his body.

"Lights!" Billings yelled moments before he kicked Blake again, this time Blake unable to move.

Gasping as more breaths left his quickly weakening body, he thought back to his hockey career where he'd never been full-body checked into the boards and hurt this much. He saw his career gone to him, his life without Alicia—everything. Closing his eyes, he prayed for a speedy end to it all.

"Don't you dare die on me—not until *I* say so!" Billings yelled. "Look!"

With his remaining strength, Blake looked in the direction of the light seeing Alicia, a vision in red, being held by two more of his thugs. He tried to catch her eyes to tell her he loved her but she fixated on Billings who now walked toward her.

"You'll notice a red mark around the neck of a scarlet woman. Before my men took over holding her, I had Bruno wrap his muscular arm around her throat and apply enough pressure to make her vocal chords and possibly her windpipe swell. That way, I wouldn't have to hear her lies and pleas for this to end. You see, I need her to be able to speak when I go to court to get her money. You'll also see the manner in which she's being held. From what I understand—though I've never actually seen it happen—contestants will use other fighters to practice with and one to practice on. They chain them to support columns—though in this case, my men will do the honors—then beat the crap out of them. If I recall correctly,

it looks something like this,” Billings said as he started off with a punch to Alicia’s stomach.

Blake winced unable to move after his own beating. He could only watch in terrified horror as Billings went on, Blake’s body wracked with overpowering shakes.

“My wife has to be able to explain to the judge that she is incapable of making sound decisions when it comes to money and that I should be appointed her conservator. Once that happens after the judge considers her suicide attempt by hanging...”

Hearing a whimper coming from Alicia, Lohan Billings angrily turned.

“Leave her alone,” Blake managed to croak garnering another kick to the side for his effort.

“I asked you before if you’d cuckolded me and you denied it. I can tell you lied considering your body never reacted to me the way it does around Atherton. Even beaten literally to a pulp, you want him. While you willfully lie to me, your whoring body tells me the truth. You bitch!” he screamed, slapping her across the face before angrily spinning around. “And you...”

Cold coursed through Blake’s body meaning only one thing. He had to be close to Death and if true, he could no longer do anything for Alicia. Their eyes met, Blake seeing the agonized pain in hers. His breathing labored, Blake Atherton made an uneasy peace with his life before closing his eyes for what might be the last time, Alicia his final sight.

“Take her to the office,” Billings commanded. “In case you’re wondering, I’m giving her as a gift to Bruno. With your stench on her, I can’t bring myself to ever touch her again unless it’s to murder her.”

Billings stormed out, the two men with Blake leaving him but not before they leveled their final blows to his battered body.

Blake lay in the spotlight dying. In the distance, he heard a commotion but no longer cared. Several gunshots echoed from other areas of the building, the intensity of their blasts overwhelming him.

"Blake, it's Patrick," Patrick Fox said, wrapping a blanket around Blake's body while trying his best not to move him or cause more injury.

"Forget me, find her. Bruno..."

Both men froze when they heard a single gunshot seconds before Bruno's body came bursting through the overhead window of one of the upper offices. His body making a solid thud on the hard concrete floor told them part of the story.

"Get...her...out...of...here..."

"The guys..."

"Will scare her... She knows you... Go..."

"But..."

"I'm not going anywhere—trust me."

More sounds echoed through the building, some louder than others yet most indistinguishable to Blake's ears.

"Stick with our plan and get her to Newport and me—it doesn't matter where I go. You know who to call for her. It's the only way to save her if he escaped."

"But..."

"He's gone. That's Bruno, her so-called bodyguard. I think Billings left moments before you came in."

"Blake..."

"Go...please..."

Gently, Patrick squeezed Blake's shoulder then did as his friend asked.

"I'll be back for you."

"I know," Blake whispered.

As Patrick stood to leave, Blake stopped him.

"Patrick?"

"Yo..."

"It's been a hell of a ride."

"It has," Patrick agreed a little confused.

"Take care of her and Gran—you're the only...one...I...trust."

"Blake?"

Looking down at his friend, Patrick saw he'd lapsed off, praying he'd only passed out and nothing more dire. Checking Blake's vitals, Patrick found a faint pulse then hurried out as another shot echoed through the building.

"I'll be back..."

\* \* \* \*

As Patrick Fox left his best friend in the capable hands of arriving medics from the Waverlys' private clinic, he ran toward the sounds giving his men their orders. Four would return to remove Blake from the building and take him to the private hospital set up and waiting for his arrival by helicopter—one landing outside the building as he passed the opened garage-type doors—while he and several others went after Alicia Billings and her criminal husband.

"I hope she's worth all this..." he muttered.

Passing by Bruno's dead body, he asked one of the team members the latest.

"From what I hear, the lady shot him—clean case of self-defense."

"Explain..."

"Billings had evidently told him to do what he wanted with her then finish her off."

"Thanks," Patrick said as he headed for the stairway. Racing upstairs taking multiple steps at a time, he ran into the office where

a female team member sat with her arm around a blanket-wrapped Alicia Billings.

“Report?”

“She’s in need of medical attention,” the woman said. “I’ve got to say, the lady’s good.”

“Why?”

“She evidently took a gun after the big dude untied her. She aimed it and fired at him while he tried to attack her. The force of the shot propelled him through the window.”

“Why is she still gagged?”

“Billings told Bruno to do it so she couldn’t try killing herself by choking. I...”

“Where’s her husband?”

“Not up here,” she replied. “In fact, I haven’t seen anyone looking like him.”

Patrick called to the agents he had on the perimeter of the building for updates on Billings. One reported that he’d been shot trying to shoot his way out.

“Where’s his body?”

“With me and a positive identification,” the man said, Patrick trusting his word without question.

“Good, make sure I get the reports as well as a copy of the autopsy—I’ve got two people who will need solid proof the guy’s dead.”

“Yes, sir.”

With Billings no longer an issue, Patrick did as his friend wanted and concentrated on Alicia.

“Alicia, it’s Patrick...can we take the scarf away from your mouth?”

“Scared...” she tried to say.



"I understand. Do you want it left alone until a doctor gets here?"

She nodded, tears streaming down her face. Reaching out to him, she took his hand turning it palm side up so she could trace the letter *B* in it.

"Blake's being flown to a hospital as medics on board monitor everything. As soon as I hear anything, I'll let you know."

Alicia closed her eyes as Marelle pulled the blanket tighter around her.

"Keep an eye on her," he stated. "If anything happens, I need to know ASAP."

"Of course," Marelle said. "Where will you be?"

"Outside on the overhang out here making the hardest call I'll ever have to make in my life."

Marelle nodded as Patrick left but not before speaking to Alicia once more after taking her hand.

"I'll be right outside. I have to make a phone call that just can't wait any longer."

"His...gran..."

"Yes and I'm not looking forward to it."

Alicia nodded.

"As soon as I do, we'll get you out of here," he explained. "Blake made plans prior to all this happening to make sure you're in a safe place."

Again, she nodded.

"I'll be right back."

Patrick Fox left to make *the* most important call of his life—Leighton Waverly.

\* \* \* \*

Alicia watched Blake's best friend leave the room to call Leighton Waverly. Marelle kept her promise by remaining so Alicia wouldn't be alone though part of her wanted to be just that.

Seeing what Lohan had done not only to her but to Blake terrified her, the horror one she wouldn't forget soon—if ever. *How can people be so cruel?* Lohan answered that question when he had Bruno nearly choke her only not enough to kill her, just do damage that could be irreparable.

When his eyes first met hers, she couldn't look at him thanks to Lohan coming toward her enraged. Bruno had done the job her sadistic husband wanted but then he had her gagged so she couldn't finish it. Now, she realized he'd done her a favor if any chance existed that she'd see Blake again. Able to take the slap across her face, she had not expected the low blow to her stomach though the faint whisper implying he'd kill any baby she might be carrying shocked her. *How could I have been married to the bastard for so long?*

The force of the blow caused her to fall to the floor but his goons held tight—just as any stone pillar would. Tears streamed down her face as she watched the love of her life beaten nearly to death. She saw the concentration of hits had been to his lower back in the area where he'd been injured and wanted to shriek when she saw him go numb. His body shook out of control as breathing became hard for him but even though he couldn't move thanks to the abuse, Blake worried about her first—he still tried to get Lohan to leave her alone but to no avail.

Hearing that he planned to *give* her to Bruno since he refused to touch her anymore terrified her. After what Bruno did to Blake, she could only imagine what he'd do to her. Somehow, she'd have to stop him—one way or another. *It's him or me...*

"Take her to the office," Billings commanded. "In case you're wondering, I'm giving her as a gift to Bruno. With your stench on

her, I can't bring myself to ever touch her again unless it's to murder her."

Hearing him tell Blake about it made her stomach wrench especially after his men deliberately dragged her in front of Blake Atherton as he lay dying. Due to the blow to her stomach, she had trouble walking, Billings' men happy to drag her though at this point, she no longer cared. *I'll never make it out of here alive...*

Taking an elevator up to the overhead floor where several offices overlooked the warehouse, they took her to an office throwing her on a couch before leaving her alone. She tried desperately to free her hands with what little strength she had left but to no avail—Bruno tied tight knots.

The minute Bruno walked in the door, she pushed herself into the corner of the leather couch she'd been left on. After locking the door, Bruno took off his holster and laid it and another gun on the end table next to where she sat. Grabbing her arm, he flipped her over and cut the restraints at her wrists.

"Stay just like that, Alicia..."

She could hear him taking his pants down and that's when she acted. Reaching over to grab the unholstered gun, she took hold of it and turned. Aiming it at Bruno, she hoped he'd back off though she knew he wouldn't.

"The boss didn't tell me you played rough."

"Get...back..." she tried to say, her throat hurting more with each word she spoke. Holding the gun steady, she continued to aim it at Bruno without wavering.

"Come on, honey, give me the gun—it's way too big for you to..."

*Bang!*

One shot strategically placed in the center of his chest stopped Bruno in his tracks while the following one pushed him through the

window overlooking the warehouse floor. Dropping the gun on the floor, she cowered in the corner of the couch scared of who would come through the door next. *If one of my husband's men does, it'll be over.*

The door burst open, several men and a woman entering the office. Alicia looked at them as a new terror overtook her.

"Alicia, my name is Marelle. I work with Patrick Fox..."

Alicia relaxed the moment she saw him outside the door, knowing things had to be better than she feared. Even though she did relax some, she still had some trust issues overtaking her. When Marelle tried to put a blanket around her, she grabbed it until the woman finally got it around her.

"Here, this should help warm you up," Marelle said. "Let's remove the scarf..."

"No..."

"But..."

Alicia vigorously shook her head even though the movement hurt her. Billings had mentioned the possibility of her choking unless it sat in place and she feared that now. When Patrick finally entered the office, his first concern went to the scarf. Though she understood his feelings and she tried to explain hers, it took Marelle to help out as well.

"Scared..." she tried to say.

"I understand. Do you want it left alone until a doctor gets here?"

She nodded, tears streaming down her face. Reaching out to him, she took his hand turning it palm side up so she could trace the letter *B* in it.

"Blake's being flown to a hospital as medics on board monitor everything. As soon as I hear anything, I'll let you know."

Alicia closed her eyes as Marelle pulled the blanket tighter around her. Wanting to ask more, she needed to know everything happening with Blake though one dreaded thought crept into her mind. *Will he still want me?*

"Keep an eye on her," he stated. "If anything happens, I need to know ASAP."

"Of course," Marelle said. "Where will you be?"

"Outside on the overhang out here making the hardest call I'll ever have to make in my life."

Marelle nodded as Patrick left but not before speaking to Alicia once more after taking her hand.

"I'll be right outside. I have to make a phone call that just can't wait any longer."

"His...gran..." she tried to ask.

"Yes, and I'm not looking forward to it."

Alicia nodded, knowing how intimidating Leighton Waverly could be especially where her grandson might be concerned. Being the one to give her the news about Blake's condition had to be one of the worst positions to be in. *My God, will she forgive me for bringing him into this?*

"As soon as I do, we'll get you out of here," he explained. "Blake made plans prior to all this happening to make sure you're in a safe place."

Again, she nodded.

"I'll be right back."

"Alicia, I'm not sure if this will work but I've got a water bottle with a straw if you want something to drink."

Alicia nodded but the thought scared her since pain followed every swallow. While Marelle held the bottle for her, she tried to take a sip, the cool water easing some of the pain though it re-

mained hard to do. When she'd tired herself out taking the water, she nodded in an attempt to thank Marelle for her help.

"You're welcome, Alicia," she said. "Mister Fox wants me to stay with you until you are safely out of here. Anything you need..."

Alicia nodded again then closed her eyes, tired from the effort required to do something simple.

"Alicia, if you're up to it, we're ready to leave here."

"I...am..."

Patrick came over to her and lifted her off the couch before carrying her out of the building.

"Blake wanted to fly you out but I'm afraid the pressure in the cabin might be a bit harsh on your throat—the air, too. Is that all right?"

Alicia nodded feeling anywhere would be better than where she sat right now. It made no difference how as long as he took her away from it and the horrid memories it now stored.

The bright sunlight from the early morning hurt her eyes, Alicia cowering in the blanket.

"It's all right, Alicia," Patrick assured her. "We'll be in the limo with a police escort out of the city."

"Where..."

"Newport."

Curious, Alicia looked at him wanting him to explain but she knew he acted on orders from Blake so she trusted him. Once in the limo, she stretched out on the seat pulling the blanket over her.

"Alicia, are you all right?"

"Very...cold..."

"I need a medic in here ASAP," she heard Patrick tell Marelle.

"What's...wrong..."

"You're breaking a fever and I want to make sure you can travel. We've got an hour and a half of drive time and they'd never forgive me if something happened to you."

"I just want to sleep," she slowly said.

"Alicia, stay awake until the medic sees you—please, do *not* fall asleep."

Somewhere deep in her mind, she remembered being told about concussions and not falling asleep. Had Lohan hit her hard enough to cause one? She could see the worry on Patrick's face and desperately tried to stay awake for the next few minutes.

A few moments later, a medic came over to the car and quickly checked her over. Due to recent events, the medic wanted to err on the side of caution and take her to the nearest hospital just to be safe. At this point, time could or could not be of the essence.

"Where's the closest hospital?"

"Not close enough for my comfort."

"Is the M. E. still here?" Patrick asked.

"Yes," the medic said before calling the coroner over the radio.

Moments later, Doctor Carol Clarkson joined them and after they explained the situation, she took a look at Alicia and told them her reaction to the experience had been normal but she needed to see someone about her throat before any more damage occurred.

Silently, she asked Marelle and Patrick about the scarf, Patrick explaining Alicia's fear of dying if she removed it.

"Sweetheart," Doctor Clarkson said, "you can remove the scarf. You don't need it."

Carefully, Clarkson removed the scarf from Alicia's mouth.

"I can give you some antibiotics for the fever right now but as soon as you get where you're going, call a doctor and get something stronger."

"Thank...you..." Alicia whispered.

"Try not to talk—write things out if you have to. With compresses and rest, you should heal without a problem."

Alicia smiled, quietly overjoyed that she'd recover.

After Clarkson finished up and she'd gotten some of the medicine into her patient, they left for Newport. Alicia fell asleep for the duration of the ride—a good thing for her once she found out that she wouldn't be with Blake and that his condition had been listed as extremely critical. Due to Blake wanting them to be safe until the entire Billings' group had been arrested and/or accounted for, they had to do things this way or everything would be for naught.

\* \* \* \*

"Doctor Clarkson, a word?"

"Yes, Mister..."

"Fox, Patrick Fox," he answered, extending his hand to her. "Could you explain something to me?"

"Sure, if I can."

"What's the deal with the scarf? You seem to understand this more than we do."

"Evidently her captor gave her a suggestion or put the thought into her mind that if she didn't have it, she could choke to death. In essence, her mind used it as a security blanket while she fought to stay alive. She honestly believed it would save her life. I think if you take a look at it, you'll notice her teeth probably bore down on it a lot in an effort to block out pain or transfer it to another spot."

"So her husband basically did that to her by..."

"Telling her something that her mind wrapped itself around. Considering what happened in there, I'm surprised she's even coherent at this point."

"Interesting," he said. "Thanks."



“Anytime.”

Patrick got back in the limo and they drove out of the city heading for Leighton Waverly’s Newport estate. He watched Alicia sleep, obviously for the first time in a long while. The shivers had abated, some more good news.

“Now, if Blake survives this...”

\* \* \* \*

“Leighton, it’s Patrick.”

Three words sent chills through Leighton Waverly as she dreaded the news she would hear.

“Give it to me straight, dear,” Leighton said.

“It’s not good,” he started. “Blake’s damned near dead thanks to Billings and his boys. We got there later than he expected thanks to the GPS unit and heavier than usual traffic. We had to get enough from the wire to put Billings away for several lifetimes.”

“And Billings is where?”

“The city morgue.”

“Confirmed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then I’m on my way to be with him.”

“He doesn’t want anyone...”

“And I’m not anyone, am I?”

“No, ma’am.”

“And Alicia?”

“On her way to you.”

“Good,” she said. “And she’s...”

“Bruno crushed her vocal chords and possibly her windpipe. She’d not in bad shape but she’s not good either.”

“What does she need?”

"To see a throat specialist, compresses and no talking plus a great deal of rest. She also took several hits to her face and stomach."

"Poor dear," Leighton gasped.

"Blake wants her with you until he's been worked on and fixed. I'm sorry but he looks like Legos barely hanging together."

"I will be there in ten minutes. When will Alicia arrive?"

"Give us about two hours."

"If I'm not here, wait for me with her. I don't want her intimidated by the place and you know it can be."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Patrick, seriously, how bad is he?"

"He coded in the helicopter and they had to shock him back. Billings broke his ankle and he needs surgery to stop the numbness he's been fighting the past several months. It's one of the reasons he's in the condition he's in right now because he had an attack while Billings had his fun."

"My, God," she whispered.

"The worst thing about this is that I'd hate to be the doctor who tells him his hockey career may be over."

"If I know my grandson, he'll find a way to prove them wrong."

"Very true," Patrick agreed.

"One thing we didn't figure on," Leighton said, changing the subject. "She needs clothes."

"When they executed the search warrant on the house while Billings hosted his little party, I had an agent pack her clothes and put her luggage in my car. They're in the trunk as we speak."

"Good thinking."

"It comes from hanging around with you two."

Leighton smiled though she knew he couldn't see her.

"I'll see you later," she said.

"Give Blake my best. I'll see him after I'm sure Alicia's safe."

"I will and, Patrick?"

"Ma'am?"

"Thanks, I know Blake became caught up in something he got in over his head on. If you hadn't..."

"But he damned near died," Patrick protested.

"But he's alive. You got to him and got them both the help they needed. For that, I'll always be grateful."

"You have no idea what that means to me."

Leighton hung up then, after taking a deep breath, she called Edward who immediately drove her to the private family clinic across the city of Newport, Rhode Island where her grandson received the emergency treatment and specialized care he needed so he'd be able to survive what had happened. *Please, God, let him survive this...*

\* \* \* \*

While she restlessly slept, Alicia's mind raced. She saw the entire evening from the moment Lohan broke into her room the first time up to Patrick calling a doctor for her while she laid on the backseat of a limousine. No matter how she subconsciously tried to stop the images, they continued like a film loop.

Seeing what Lohan had done to Blake made her sicker each time. She couldn't stop envisioning his broken body as he lay staring at her, his hand involuntarily twitching. Her monster of a husband didn't care what happened to innocent people—hell, he made money off of their stupidity—but now, she would more than likely be made either accountable for his activities or charged as a conspirator—just as he wanted. Then came the memory of her shooting Bruno—add the charge of murder and she'd never see Blake again.

Of course, with the condition of her throat, she couldn't even stand in the docket and defend herself against that charge or any other. *To put it bluntly, I'm fucked.*

Tears threatened to push their way out but she held them back—the fear of pain from crying terrifying her.

Finally, the constant movement of the limo lulled her deeper into sleep and she got some of the rest her body needed. Not caring where Patrick took her, she vowed to enjoy it as best she could before she gave up any freedom she ever had thanks to Lohan's insidious affairs.

When she woke later, she lay under a satin quilt in a huge bedroom—one that would swallow the supposed master suite at Beacon Hill. An unusually warm breeze gently blew the curtains into the room, Alicia cherishing the fact the windows had been left open. Looking around, she saw the door to the outer room open while hearing a conversation going on in it. Trying to sit up, a gentle pressure pushed her back to the pillows.

"Don't move too much," a nurse said. "My name is Kyra and I'm taking care of you. Doctor Carey examined you when you arrived and left me instructions and medications. He also wants you to write everything out so you give your throat a chance to heal."

Alicia took the pad of paper and pen and quickly wrote out a question.

*How's Blake?*

"I've had no word yet. The last I heard, they had him in surgery."

Alicia winced between the pain in her throat and the news about Blake.

*What is the doctor's diagnosis about me?*

"Doctor is worried about the swelling. If you touch here...and here...you can feel it. As soon as you are able, he wants to get

some pictures of it to see if there might be any permanent damage. He's also been concerned about your stomach after he got the report about the punches to your abdomen. There's been some bruising and I'm to keep an eye on it."

? Alicia wrote.

"Then there's the possibility of internal bleeding. We heard about the intensity of the hits you took and he's taking standard precautions. Doctor Carey is one who prides himself on being on top of things."

"Oh," Alicia mouthed before nodding.

*What about eating?*

"Clear broths, tea, water—basically a liquid diet though he doesn't want you drinking anything acidic or carbonated to keep inflammation down."

*Where am I?*

"You are at *Reveresgate*," Kyra answered.

?

"Mrs. Waverly's Newport estate."

*Where is she?*

"She isn't here right now but she wants you to be comfortable and she'll see you as soon as she returns."

*Can I clean up and get out of this dress?* Alicia wrote, referring to the red velvet designer gown she couldn't wait to get out of.

"Sure, Mister Fox had your things brought over from your... I'm sorry, the house on Beacon Hill."

Alicia nodded, grateful for their foresight. Unless she had to, she never wanted to return to that damned mausoleum ever again.

"Let me help you..."

Half an hour later, Alicia dressed in one of her favorite peignoir sets—ice-blue silk and lace. Her hair clean, she let Kyra dry it for her. While she did, Alicia's thoughts went to Blake needing to

know what had been happening to him. Worry for his health and safety overwhelmed her while threads of guilt still let her know everything that had happened to them had been her fault. *Will he forgive me?*

Kyra helped her to a chair near the window then left her alone while she went in the other room to make some notations on Alicia's chart. The fact no one played watchdog did not go unnoticed, Alicia relaxing while she gazed out at the rolling lawns of the huge Newport estate.

After a bit, she closed her eyes and dreamed of Blake Atherton—this time no *film loop* overpowered her, just good memories.

\* \* \* \*

With the deaths of Lohan Billings and Bruno confirmed, both of Blake's captors' bodies found and identified plus the other thugs in jail and singing, the case against Billings and his associates closed. Several raids of fight clubs in Boston, New York, Buffalo and other major cities resulted in numerous arrests, the government's cases solid.

The search of the Billings' estate yielded nothing until they went through his home office. By the time they left, Federal agents carried out dozens of file boxes plus additional evidence. As instructed—since Alicia Billings had not been suspect in any of her husband's criminal acts and had been cleared completely in the death of Bruno—several agents packed up her clothes and personal effects from the master suite and transported them to the pier where Patrick Fox waited.

All in all, the Federal agencies had had an extremely good day though the personal cost for him had risen way too high. Leighton absolving him of any blame made Patrick feel better but he also needed to hear it from Blake because he felt he'd failed his good friend by arriving on location too late.

While he spoke to Marelle in the sitting room of one of the guest suites of *Reveresgate*, he heard Kyra speaking to Alicia, another good sign. The sound of the shower running an even better sign that Alicia might survive what had happened to her, Patrick relaxed knowing he'd be able to give Blake some good news.

He answered a phone call, made some notes then took a deep breath. Knocking on the suite's inner door, Patrick waited until Alicia invited him in. If she didn't want to talk, he'd understand but sooner or later it had to be done.

"Come in," Kyra called, Patrick inwardly relieved.

Taking another deep breath, he entered the room and crossed it to where Alicia sat enjoying the sun and the view of Leighton's estate.

"Alicia, you look gorgeous."

*Thank you*, she wrote.

So began Patrick Fox's debriefing of Alicia Billings. When they finished, he took her hand in his and looked straight into her eyes.

"Alicia, you have nothing to worry about. The case is closed and you aren't in any way involved. Any evidence Billings may have left implicating you can be proven false. To put this in words of one syllable—you are a free lady."

Alicia looked at him in disbelief until what he'd said slowly sank in and she smiled.

"Thank you, Patrick," she whispered.

"My pleasure."

## **Chapter 10**

Leighton Waverly walked in the front door of the Newport Clinical Center then straight past the receptionist to the rear of the medical offices of Doctor Phillip Kaplan.

“Mrs. Waverly...” one of the nurses started.

“How’s my grandson?”

“Still in surgery, ma’am.”

“What’s the latest?”

“Uh, I...”

“My dear, don’t play games with me. If any decisions have to be made for him, I’m the one who’ll be doing it and I want to know everything so I can make informed ones. Now, tell me.”

Unable to refuse Leighton’s intimidating logic, the nurse updated her with what they knew to the moment.

Leighton listened intently as the list continued to grow, asking questions about each new injury. In her mind, she prioritized everything figuring the prior back injury would take precedence due to having to correct whatever caused the numbing episodes. The team had repaired the one bleeder and stopped any further internal bleeding, had treated the two head wounds and set his ankle. Now, they concentrated on his torso—the wait began.

The nurse ushered Leighton into Doctor Kaplan’s office where she’d be more comfortable and have some privacy. Everyone on staff knew what it would be like if the press got wind of the fact that Blake Atherton had been beaten to near death at the site of



an illegal fight club. It didn't make any difference that the perpetrators of the illegal sports venue had been stopped and others raided—the notoriety would stick to him and the family like a cheap suit.

After several hours, Kaplan emerged from the surgical theater wiping his forehead. He washed up before going to see Leighton feeling a little bit more presentable.

"Leighton," he said as he walked into his office to find her standing at the window.

"How is he?"

"Considering how he arrived, he's doing extremely well. I truly expected to be working on him a lot longer. The point causing his numbness turned out to be a simple fix."

"What..."

"It seems that a nerve has been pinched continually since the initial event. The more pressure exerted on it, the weaker it became, meaning it couldn't take any more and went numb to stave off the pain. A simple operation to fix it and he'll be as good as new and yes, he'll be able to play hockey."

"Good," Leighton said, smiling.

"Trust me, I did *not* want to be the bearer of bad news when it came to that subject."

"None of us did. Patrick's been concerned about that as well."

"How's the lady involved?"

"Doctor Carey's been to see her already and will be forwarding her chart to you unless you stop by the house. From what I've heard, Alicia's in a great deal of pain thanks to that bastard."

"You haven't seen her yet?"

"No, I came straight here. It's a ten-minute drive and they had two hours on the road before they got to the house. I've been in contact with Patrick every half-hour unless something happened."

“And?”

“Kyra helped her with a shower and she’s been sitting in the chair by the window looking out over the lawns. She’s taken some liquid though slowly and Kyra’s applied compresses and given her the meds.”

“Not bad though I wish she would stay in bed more...” Kaplan began.

“Considering she’s evidently awed by the fact there are no locked doors or windows, I’d say the chair will do the trick.”

“I thought I had the degree in medicine.”

“You do, Phillip, but I’ve been around a little bit longer than you and go by what my mother taught me.”

“True and most of the time, the old remedies work better than the new pharmaceuticals.”

“With less side effects,” Leighton observed.

“True,” he agreed.

They spoke a little while longer before he went back to check on Blake who now rested in recovery.

“Can I see him?”

“For a few moments but don’t tire him out.”

She shot him a look that told him to watch his tongue then smiled. Leighton Waverly could intimidate the best of them but deep down, the heart of a lamb ruled.

\* \* \* \*

The last thing Blake Atherton remembered sent a myriad of emotions through his weakened body. Pain radiated throughout every inch of him, Blake unsure if there remained any part of him untouched. The hardest cross-check he’d ever taken hadn’t come close to or equaled anything near the beating he’d suffered.

Seeing Alicia at Billings’ mercy then learning what he’d ordered Bruno to do to her plus his later plans for her made Blake

sick because he knew he couldn't help her or put a stop to anything happening to them. Blake Atherton hated feeling helpless.

He'd never hated anyone in his entire lifetime as vehemently as he did Lohan Billings and as he watched his enemy play out a winning hand, Blake prayed the asshole would rot in Hell. No jail sentence would be harsh enough for him.

Relief coursed through him when he heard Patrick Fox's voice. At least if he couldn't do anything for Alicia, his best friend would. *If I die, I know Patrick will keep Gran safe and try to get Alicia out from under her sadistic husband's control.*

Blake felt cold, the chill air from overhead not the reason. *I'm dying...*

"Blake, it's Patrick," Patrick Fox said, wrapping a blanket around Blake's body while trying his best not to move or cause more injury to his friend.

Whispering to Patrick, Blake tried to give him a message to pass on to Alicia and Leighton.

"I've got to get you out of here," Patrick interrupted.

"Forget me, find her. Bruno..."

Both men froze when they heard a single gunshot seconds before Bruno's body came bursting through the overhead window of one of the upper offices. His body making a solid thud on the hard concrete floor told them part of the story.

"Get...her...out...of...here..."

"The guys..."

"Will scare her... She knows you... Go..."

"But..."

"I'm not going anywhere—trust me."

More sounds echoed through the building, some louder than others yet most indistinguishable to Blake's ears.

"Stick with our plan and get her to Newport and me—it doesn't matter where I go. You know who to call for her. It's the only way to save her if he escaped."

"But..."

"He's gone. That's Bruno, her so-called bodyguard. I think Billings left moments before you came in."

"Blake..."

"Go...please..."

Gently, Patrick squeezed Blake's shoulder then did as his friend asked.

"I'll be back for you."

"I know," Blake whispered.

As Patrick stood to leave, Blake stopped him.

"Patrick?"

"Yo..."

"It's been a hell of a ride."

"It has," Patrick agreed a little confused.

"Take care of her and Gran and tell them I love them—you're the only...one...I...trust."

"Blake?"

Blake lapsed off feeling a strange peace settling over him. He no longer felt pain, his entire body numb and cold. *I don't want to die like this...*

\* \* \* \*

Blake Atherton spent the next several hours feeling as if he floated between life and death only he could sense a strong pull toward life. Over the course of endless time, he'd felt several more invasions to his body but what did it matter? Billings and his gang of thugs had taken care of most of it—a little more didn't make a whole lot of difference.

In order to ignore the pain, he concentrated on Alicia and the time they'd spent together at Leighton's condo, the hotel after their first dinner together and at the arena. Seeing her gorgeous body sent heat through him especially when he recalled the intensity of it when he embedded his cock inside her velvety heat. Sex with Alicia had been phenomenal and if their short time together proved to be the only chance they had to be happy, then he could die a contented man though longing for more.

Despite his best efforts, pain continued to invade his mind but even that told him something—he might still be alive but in what condition? Memories of the cage overpowered the ones he wanted to concentrate on and he ended up reliving the last several hours of his life. It seemed like every time he tried to go back to happier times, a power from above said *no deal* and forced him to relive his nearly fatal beating. *Or have I died and this is...*

Shaking the thoughts from his mind, he tried to focus again on Alicia—her striking beauty, her personality, their heat. *If I'm dying, I want her to be the last thing I see...*

Suddenly, he felt several jolts to his sides, his body jumping off the flat surface he felt against his back.

"Don't do this, Blake. I won't let you die..."

The voice sounded familiar but at this point, he couldn't be sure if it had been real or wishful thinking.

"Blake, Leighton's outside. I swear she'll kick your ass if you die and I'll let her."

*Gran? No, get her away from here! Billings will...*

"That's it, Blake, fight back."

From somewhere deep inside his soul, Blake Atherton found the path back to his life and ran to it. For the first time in a while, he felt warmth instead of Death's cold hand.

“Come on, Blake, you’ve come this far—just a little farther...”

Slowly, he opened his eyes, unable to speak because of the respirator he’d been put on to ease his breathing. Gazing around, he saw Kaplan standing over him, relief written all over his face as he smiled.

“Glad to have you back,” he said before turning to his staff. “Let’s get him into ICU.”

Blake reached up and grabbed Kaplan’s arm.

“Blake, calm down. As soon as I get you moved into the other room, I’ll have the tube removed and put you on the flex tubing to make it easier to breathe. Leighton’s waiting to see you so be on your best behavior.”

The thought of his grandmother running the clinic despite the fact Kaplan owned the practice amused him. For her age and her elegant demeanor, she constantly proved she could better anyone if she wanted to. He’d learned a great deal from her and knowing he’d be seeing her in a few moments eased his mind considerably. *Hopefully, she can tell me about Alicia...*

\* \* \* \*

*Patrick, why won’t you tell me about Blake?*

“We haven’t heard anything yet,” he replied as he handed the notepad back to Alicia.

*It’s been over twenty-four hours. Where’s Leighton?*

“She’s been handling some things for the both of you as well as keeping in touch with me and Kyra about you.”

*I don’t understand. I thought you said she’d be here.*

“That I did but things have been happening so fast that someone had to look out for the business interests as well as spin some damage control.”

*Damage control?*

"We want everything on the up-and-up in case Billings did any damage before he hosted his *party* last night."

*You mean about me?*

"The situation in general—we have no idea if he planned to announce the affair between the two of you or if he'd keep it quiet."

*He would have kept it quiet—no way could he have accepted what his friends would have said.*

"But if he even hinted at any improprieties..."

Alicia nodded knowing Lohan could have been that vindictive even if it meant his regretting it later.

"Alicia, I know you're worried about Blake and upset about what happened. You more than likely figure Leighton wants nothing to do with you because she hasn't seen you since you arrived."

Again she nodded, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

"Don't cry," Patrick said, taking her hand. "You have to understand Leighton Waverly when it comes to Blake Atherton. She raised him from a very young age after his parents died. Not only that, they've been fortunate to have an amazing and unique relationship—one I wish I had with my parents. There is nothing in the world she wouldn't do for him, even if it means ignoring everyone and everything around her. If Blake dies because of this, she will take action and anything with the Billings' name on it will cease to exist."

*Even me?*

"No, because Blake loves you and so does she. She doesn't consider you a Billings."

*What does she consider me?*

"An Atherton," Patrick replied. "The moment Blake mentioned marriage, she started with the clandestine meetings between you so you'd have the time together you wanted and needed. In the

meantime, she learned everything she could about your husband—on both sides of the fence—and started to quietly set out to destroy him. By yesterday afternoon, she'd already taken a third of his holdings."

*No wonder he acted the way he did.*

"His advisors had more than likely just advised him of the takeovers."

*Then I told him about the money no longer being available to him and...*

"What did you tell him?"

*That the economy ate it up thanks to bad investment advice.*

"And you wonder if she cares about you. That's a slick maneuver, lady."

*Actually, spur of the moment.*

"Amazing," he said. "Congratulations on some quick and sound thinking."

Alicia smiled, her pain evident.

"I'm really sorry about what happened to you. If we'd been able to get to the warehouse sooner..."

Alicia put her hand up effectively stopping him.

*It would have made no difference—he did it before he took me into the warehouse.*

"When you feel up to it, tell me what happened. I want to add it to my report."

*From the moment I walked in the door after the trip to Providence, Lohan acted strange. I'd seen a violent side to him but nothing like this. I thought a locked door would keep me safe but he broke it down and forced me to wear the red gown and specific accessories effectively making me look like a scarlet woman. I locked myself in the dressing room but he broke that door in as well then had me dragged downstairs. That's when he had Bruno do his number on my throat. I passed out and woke later at the warehouse*



*where he forced me to watch what he did to Blake. Then he told me that the gag would keep me alive while keeping me silent. I remember biting it as hard as I could to get rid of the pain but it didn't work though I did believe him about it saving my life. I must have looked like an idiot.*

"No you didn't. Billings had a way of playing people to get what he wanted. The Justice Department put together an extensive profile on him from information supplied by my investigation and the one Leighton called for. If he'd been arrested, the evidence would have proven solid enough to put him in jail for life if not on Death Row."

*I still can't believe I didn't know what happened in my own house.*

"He counted on you not caring. Once you started working with Leighton and after dinner with Blake, he became extremely nervous. You could have single-handedly ruined him with what he thought you knew. Without knowing it, you became a threat."

*Then I really angered him with my lie about the family fortune.*

"Most definitely. From what we can tell, he depended on eventually getting the money and once he learned it had been squandered, he saw financial ruin."

*But the earnings from the fight club...*

"Had to be laundered before he could publicly use the funds. He knew he had to be extremely careful with them while he planned to use every last penny of your inheritance without a care."

*Bastard.*

"And that's being nice."

They heard a commotion in the hallway, Patrick standing in anticipation of Leighton Waverly's entrance.

"Alicia, my dear, you're looking better. How's the throat?"

*Extremely sore. Any news about Blake?*

"He's in intensive care and will be for a while. His ankle had to be splinted after being set, there are two good-sized welts on his

head they are keeping an eye on and they need to monitor his side after they repaired his nerve problem.”

Alicia had paled as Leighton went into further detail.

“Alicia, he’s under constant monitoring and in good hands.”

*When can I see him?*

“As soon as he’s out of danger.”

*May I ask a question?*

“What, dear?”

*Am I being kept away from him because he doesn’t want anything to do with me anymore?*

“No!” Leighton stated emphatically. “Phillip feels it’s best if he’s kept heavily sedated so he doesn’t screw up the surgeries which Blake will do because he doesn’t like being confined to bed. With the injuries he’s suffered, they also have to decide whether he can ever play hockey again.”

“My God, I’m so sorry,” Alicia cried, the pain even more evident with her upset.

“For what, dear?”

“He wouldn’t be in this situation if he’d never met me. That damned auction...”

“Calm down, Alicia. Blake has never blamed you for anything. When he learned about the illegal activities your husband had been into, he started doing everything possible to make sure you did not get implicated in any of it. He’s worked tirelessly to keep you from being blamed.”

“But...”

“Alicia, enough talking. You’re hurting your voice.”

Alicia showed her frustration, her fists punching the comforter at her sides. No matter how many times she’d been told she would not be blamed, the only one who could make her believe it would be Blake and she dreaded the fact he might never talk to her again.

"This is my fault..."

\* \* \* \*

"Kaplan."

"It's me."

"How are you, Leighton?"

"Good, but we have a problem."

"I take it she's blaming herself for everything that's happened."

"How did you know?"

"It's normal for guilt to set in, especially when one can't see the other."

"Then tell him."

"I will when he's a little more lucid. He had a bad time right after you left and I ordered him sedated."

"What happened?"

"With the swelling beginning to go down and the bruising beginning to abate, we're finding other things that, until now, remained hidden. I'm opening him up again in the morning after he's had some more rest to chase a bleeder."

"How much more can he take?"

"Be glad it's not his kidneys. From what I've been able to tell, he took several extremely hard hits to that area as well as the rest of his body. Billings meant to do major harm before he ordered Blake killed."

Leighton gasped, concern for Blake overwhelming her.

"I'll come over."

"No," Kaplan said. "He wouldn't even know. I'd rather you came after he's out of surgery."

"You'll call?"

"Of course," Kaplan assured her.

"And Alicia?"

"Tell her he's still unconscious from the surgery which is where he should be and everything is on track for a full recovery. By the way, how's her throat?"

"Sore and she's doing her best not to talk but she's frustrated. She should be a writer..."

"Maybe you should nurture that thought."

"Maybe I should. Thanks, Phillip. I'll wait to hear from you."

"Same here. I want to know if there are any changes as soon as you know. She's not out of the woods yet."

"I will."

Leighton hung up then went to the window and looked outside. She rued the fact that Blake and Alicia had been separated but Blake had convinced her he knew best. Seeing Alicia's frustration worried her because she understood the need for absolution from the one person in the world who could give it. No matter how much anyone tried to convince her that she would not be held accountable for recent events, Alicia had to hear it from Blake and the longer it took for him to recover, the worse Alicia would get.

"Why?"

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Phillip Kaplan walked out of his operating room rubbing his neck to ease the stiffness he'd gotten from concentrating on a stubborn bleeder that had to be repaired. While the problem had not been life threatening, had he not operated when he did, Blake Atherton could one day drop dead from it rupturing either as a result of the sport he loved so much or progressive weakening over an extended period of time. Better to do the repair now while he had Blake under anesthesia and in a somewhat controlled environment than have to deal with him later. *At least I can keep an eye on him.*

Going straight to a phone, Kaplan called his longtime friend and sometime lover Leighton Waverly to update her on her grandson's condition. Leighton Waverly gave him more reason to make sure he did everything he could for his patients—the fact she had funded the clinic and his practice over the years as well as their friendship plus everything they'd shared over the years. If anything happened to Blake Leighton Atherton, hell would not come close to how hot she could make things for him. He'd seen her wrath years before and did not want to again, though Lohan Billings had come damned close. *God, I haven't seen...*

"Hello?"

"Leighton, he's fine."

"Good," she said quietly.

He explained what had been undertaken after opening Blake's side, Leighton listening intently as she did with everything that interested her.

They talked a little longer before hanging up. Kaplan went to shower and change before he looked in on Blake. As he walked, he thought about the man in his care. *Please, God...*

\* \* \* \*

Leighton Waverly entered the sunroom at the rear of her Newport estate. Overlooking gardens that would bloom in a few weeks, this room had become her favorite in the entire house. In a chair near a double set of French doors, Alicia sat deep in thought. Leighton noticed the notepad next to her, several pages apparently written on.

"How are you this morning?" Leighton asked.

Alicia nodded as she tried to smile.

"I just spoke with Blake's doctor. They took him back into surgery this morning to repair a bleeder they found after the swel-

ling in his side started to go down and the bruising had stopped becoming darker. A minor problem, Phillip thought it best.”

*A bleeder is not a minor problem. He could die...*

“Alicia, you have to understand Blake. If he’d been conscious, he would have told Phillip not to operate—that he’d wait out the consequences. With my grandson under sedation, Phillip could take care of it with Blake under constant monitoring and in a controlled environment.”

*But why isn’t he in a hospital in Boston? They’re world renown for...*

“When Blake played hockey in high school, he got cut by another player’s skate blade. It’s not as noticeable as it once had been but he took the cut across his neck and, had it not been for another player on the team applying immediate pressure while they waited for the team doctor to get to him from across the rink, Blake might have died. They transported him to the nearest hospital in Boston and even though he wore more blood on his jersey than a sports injury should have, the emergency room operated on first come, first served basis back then. My grandson damned near died before a doctor saw him. Had it not been for my getting to the hospital with Phillip, we would not be having this conversation. Phillip treated him there then had Blake transported up here.”

*How did he get away with that? Don’t they have...*

“I called one of the members of the hospital board and told them what happened and what Phillip planned to do. I informed them that if Blake’s condition took a turn for the worse as a result of the hospital’s negligence in treating him that I would not only take them to the accreditation board and the medical association but I would sue them for a hefty sum. If Blake had died, I would have sought to close the hospital as well as everything else.”

Alicia looked away, tears in her eyes.

“After he recovered, he made me promise if he became injured and unable to speak for himself that I would make sure he came to Phillip. He refuses to go to hospitals and doesn’t trust anyone besides Phillip and the few associates he might recommend. Before all this happened, he asked to make sure the clinic remained on constant stand-by because he knew something might happen and he wanted Phillip taking care of him. It’s also the reason why he put off having his side looked at. He wanted to wait for the end of the season plus see whatever involved you to an end.”

*I’m so sorry. He wouldn’t be there if he’d never met me.*

Leighton got up and walked to the door leading to the rest of the house. At the door, she stopped, her hand resting on the doorknob.

“If I had ever believed you had anything adverse to do with Blake’s attack or that you had even the slightest part in your husband’s illicit affairs, I’d have made sure you didn’t come back here. I do not take kindly to anyone harming Blake—even if he is in love with them—because he is my flesh and blood. I raised him and have been there for him when no one else has. I love my grandson more than you may ever understand and when it comes to him, I take anything or anyone hurting him personally. Had I believed anything putting you in a bad light, I guarantee you would not be sitting in my home. You are an amazing woman, Alicia, but you have to stop taking the blame for what Lohan Billings did in his lifetime because none of it has ever been your fault.”

Leighton left the room, concerned over Alicia’s despondency. She understood the need for absolution but Alicia’s bordered on desperation that could possibly drive her to do something extremely stupid.

“Marney?”

“Ma’am?”

“Quietly keep an eye on our house guest. I don’t want her to know you are doing so but I don’t want her alone either.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Leighton headed toward the kitchen to get a cup of coffee. Just as she entered the room, she heard Marney’s scream. Hurrying back to the sunroom, she gasped at the sight of Marney hovering over Alicia.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Marney said. “I came in here and found her like this.”

Leighton picked up one of the extensions and called Phillip.

“She needs help...”

\* \* \* \*

“Tell me what happened,” Phillip said as he hurried to his exam room. Finding one of the nurses putting something away, he signaled her to prepare the room for an incoming emergency.

“I told her about Blake and explained everything to her but she started blaming herself for everything that’s happened. I basically laid down the law to her by telling her that if I had one shred of evidence implicating her in any of this, she wouldn’t be in my home and then I left. I told Marney to nonchalantly keep an eye on her and a few moments later, she screamed. When I entered the room, Marney looked at me frightened and told me she had no clue what had happened.”

Phillip asked her several questions, making notes as he walked toward the private helipad several hundred yards away from the clinic—another gift from Leighton.

“I’m on my way. In the meantime, keep a close watch on her and make sure she can breathe.”

Boarding the helicopter, Doctor Phillip Kaplan sat back and thought. On the approach to the estate, it hit him what might be



the problem so he made a mental note on what he wanted to check first. As he walked away from the aircraft, he called the clinic and told the nurse what he wanted ready in case they needed it.

As soon as he got to the house, Kaplan crossed the terrace and entered the sunroom. Going straight to Alicia, he immediately checked her throat and got his answer—newly formed scar tissue had started to overtake her throat and had begun to cut off her breathing.

Moments later, two men dressed in flight suits entered the room and helped him settle Alicia on the stretcher.

“Phillip?”

“She needs immediate surgery to remove scar tissue.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Leighton stated. “Somebody needs to be with Blake when he’s told.”

“You’re amazing, Leighton.”

“Get to work,” she said, smiling.

Within a few minutes, the helicopter lifted off the lawn then flew toward the clinic. Kaplan kept a close eye on how Alicia handled the flight—so far, so good.

\* \* \* \*

When Blake Atherton opened his eyes again, he learned he’d been taken to Kaplan’s intensive care unit—actually a well-equipped suite in the clinic. He remembered back to the day the plans had been laid out before Leighton Waverly and inwardly smiled. On her firm advice, the plans had been altered to create a small hospital under the guise of a private clinic. From groundbreaking to the present, Leighton’s influence proved extremely evident.

When she walked in, people respected her knowing she’d been instrumental in the clinic’s design as well as the fact that no

one won against her determination. Whatever Leighton Waverly wanted happened.

Now, he gazed around the room, relieved his plan had been carried out and Kaplan and his staff cared for him. Yes, it more than likely went against all medical standards, ethics or whatever but after what had happened to him years before in high school, Blake wanted only those he could trust around him if he needed medical care. His grandmother made it happen though he always wondered why Kaplan readily went along with the idea. Then he found out.

By accident, Blake walked in on a very intimate moment in Leighton's condo learning then that she and Kaplan had been seeing each other off and on for several years. An extremely open relationship, they had other affairs but somehow always gravitated back to each other. As years passed, they settled into a comfortable friendship—both knowing there would never be anyone else.

Blake tried to swallow but had trouble thanks to the tube. Patiently—or as best he could—he waited for it to be removed. Moments later, Phillip Kaplan entered the room with Leighton one step behind him.

Leighton took his hand, squeezing it.

"A few more minutes," she said as she brushed his hair back. True to her word, the tube came out and he felt ice chips on his lips.

"Blake, you really know how to challenge me," Kaplan said, trying to ease things.

"Sorry, had no idea about his tag team."

"I'm going to tell you right now, you're out for the rest of the season and the playoffs while the ankle heals. It took a bit to set it thanks to the way it had been crushed. He knew exactly where to cause the most damage."

“What about the numbness?”

“It should be gone. I freed up a nerve that, as time went on, became more and more trapped by bone. Instead of it being caught, it’s able to travel freely as nature meant for it to do. You’ve got a lot of bruising and I can tell you now, once the swelling goes down, we may see more that needs to be worked on.”

“Now, I know what a punching bag goes through. I’ve never taken checks as painful as what those guys did.”

“You coded twice, son,” Kaplan said. “Right now, you need rest and then we can start you on rehab for the ankle.”

“What about Alicia?” Blake finally asked, dreading what he’d hear.

“She’s at the house as you wanted. I’ve been in constant contact with Doctor Carey and Patrick who has decided to stay with her until I return. Her throat is very swollen but has been responding well to the compresses and medications she’s being given. She’s been good at limiting her talking and from what Patrick tells me, she might have a future as an author.”

“That bastard hit her.”

“And Carey has been keeping an eye on that also. Alicia’s physically strong but...”

“What, Gran?”

“She refuses to let go of the notion that she’s to blame for any of this.”

“But it’s not her fault...”

“I know that, dear, but as long as you two remain apart, she’ll do this. She needs to see you because she feels you are the only one who can forgive her—at least the only one she’ll believe.”

“Bring her here.”

“Not until you’re out of the woods, son,” Kaplan said. “Leighton and I discussed it and we feel that, to bring her here while your

condition is still stabilizing then you possibly have a problem or need more surgery would be counterproductive for both of you. I can guarantee that if she came in to see you and you relapsed in front of her, she'd blame herself more and possibly do something out of desperation. Her mind is still trying to handle the fact she is no longer under that man's control. To see the only man whose treated her like somebody..."

"Okay, I get the point," Blake said.

"We don't want to keep you two apart any longer than necessary but right now, I feel it's for the best."

"What are you telling her?"

"Basically the vaguest answers to her questions. Patrick is really good at..."

"I'm glad he's with her," Blake said. "Now, give it to me straight—where are the other players?"

"Lohan Billings, Bruno and several others are in the morgue, their identities confirmed. Billings caught one of the agent's shots as he tried to escape while two of his thugs turned up down by the harbor. The coroner figured they'd been murdered shortly after your abduction."

"What about Bruno?"

"Seems he ran afoul of a woman with a gun," Kaplan said.

"We heard that Bruno had taken Alicia to one of the upper offices and when he'd turned his back, she grabbed a gun then shot him when he came at her. She put several into his chest, the force of the shots pushing him through the plate glass window and down onto the warehouse floor. Patrick took the gun from her hand then wrapped a blanket around her."

"Alicia took care of Bruno?"

"Patrick wrote it up as a clean-cut case of self-defense. Not only that, she won't be implicated in anything dealing with Billings

or his crimes. As far as the reports state, she had no idea what he dabbled in whatsoever.”

“Good, she should be relieved to hear that.”

“It doesn’t matter a damn bit. All she thinks about is how she got you involved in this and what it’s done to you and me,” Leighton said, squeezing his hand again.

“I saw no other way to handle it. Billings pushed everything up—I mean the guy ran on full throttle and out of control.”

“Not anymore,” Leighton soothed. “It’s over.”

They talked a little while longer before Leighton left so they wouldn’t tire Blake out and to give Alicia the good news about Blake.

Blake lay back, deep in thought and methodically going over his injuries while setting a game plan to get back to Alicia and the game he loved so much. *Thank God someone took care of Billings...*

\* \* \* \*

Near midnight, Kaplan stopped in once more before he went home. Checking on Blake, he didn’t like what he saw—Blake showed signs of internal bleeding. Once he’d ascertained the approximate area, he called his nurse and had her bring in the team at six.

“Blake, talk to me.”

“My side’s tender and it hurts like hell.”

“I’m going to sedate you and monitor you through the night. Around dawn, I’m taking you back into surgery to see if I can find it.”

“If?”

“Blake, you’re so damned fucked up from the beating, I’m surprised it showed itself this early. It could be nothing but then again...”

“So you’re putting me under now then...”

"Basically, it's like this—I plan to fake you out and check this thing before it scores against you."

Blake grinned at the analogy, Kaplan always able to put him at ease, no matter how dire the situation.

"Then get to it," Blake said. "I don't want to die because something got overlooked."

"Good man," Kaplan complimented. "Besides, we both know what Leighton will do if anything goes wrong."

"I wonder about Alicia..."

"She's strong but she's got a whole new life ahead of her. Right now, she's despondent over the meeting of her past and future because she thinks she's the reason for everything happening. Patrick mentioned that she has been looking at her new freedom with the naiveté of a child. She's unsure how to handle open windows and doors, the freedom to walk through the mansion without fear of an argument... This is all so new to her."

"Billings had her that overwhelmed?"

"Maybe more than we honestly know about."

"I remember she brought several things over to the condo steeped in sentimental value to her but I imagine monetary to him. Gran put them in her safe plus the money issue..."

"I'm surprised she's not more of an emotional wreck."

"Phillip, fix me so we can help her."

"Then relax and let the sedative work. I need your body rested before I try to do the exploratory. I'll wake you before I give you the anesthesia to make sure we're still on schedule."

Blake nodded then took a deep breath.

"Phillip, why didn't you marry her?"

"It's not because I didn't try. As far as she's concerned we are and that's good enough for her. She doesn't need anything more than what we have."

“Oh.”

“Blake, I’ve always considered you as mine—Leighton made that easy. I wouldn’t do anything to lose you. I may say it’s because of what she might do to retaliate but deep down, I love you too damned much to let anything happen to you.”

They hugged, Blake holding onto Kaplan with a tight hold.

“I’m glad because I feel the same,” Blake assured him. “Ready when you are.”

## **Chapter 11**

As soon as they brought Alicia into the clinic, Leighton went straight to see Blake to tell him what had happened. When she entered the room, he seemed a bit out of sorts though she took it to be from the aftereffects of the latest surgery.

“Blake, how...”

“What the hell happened to Alicia?”

“What?”

“I woke up having extremely bad feelings. You’re here now when you said you’d be in later and Kaplan’s running around like an emergency case just came in. What’s going on?”

“Brace yourself,” she said, taking his hand. “She’s being rushed into surgery because she may have developed a polyp on her throat which might be related to scar tissue that appeared after the swelling began to go down. I’d been talking to her and telling her for the umpteenth time that she needs to stop blaming herself but she continued to refuse to listen to any sense. I left the room then sent Marney in to nonchalantly keep an eye on her while I went to get a cup of coffee. Hearing Marney’s scream, I went back to the sunroom and found Alicia unconscious and having trouble breathing and Marney beside herself. I called Phillip immediately and here we are.”

“She literally stopped breathing in a few minutes?”

“Apparently,” Leighton said. “We made sure she wouldn’t be left alone too long though I didn’t want her to think Marney had



been instructed to baby-sit her. She's upset enough and I think she's intimidated by the house though she can go anywhere she wants to. When I described her symptoms, Phillip figured out what might be happening with her and the rest you know. It seems this is one of the results of this type of injury."

"My God, she doesn't need this."

"None of us do. I want you both well and happy, not here in pieces."

"Gran, I can't lose her."

"And I refuse to lose you. I know you love her but if she causes you any pain..."

"Gran, calm down," Blake said, squeezing her hand. "Despite my love for her, you will always be my number one. I wouldn't be where I am today if not for you and your love."

Leighton bent to kiss him, loving her grandson more. *If he dies before me...*

She sat on the side of the bed, holding him while they waited for word about Alicia's condition. Surfing channels on television distracted them for all of twenty minutes before they decided to turn the set off.

"How much longer?" Blake asked nervously. He obviously figured the longer the procedure, the worse the news. *What the hell am I going to do?*

\* \* \* \*

Somewhere in the darkness, Alicia tried to call for help. She vaguely remembered feeling faint, her head light as it'd been when Bruno partially choked her to death. *Why didn't he finish it?* Suddenly, she could barely breathe and her breaths came erratically. Desperately, she tried calling for help but what remained of her voice came out as a raspy gasp.

Her world went black, Alicia lapsing back to the night at the warehouse.

*Please, help me...*

Feeling weight covering the entire length of her body sent her mind racing.

*Where am I?*

Frightening thoughts raced through her mind, one overwhelming her. Images of perpetual darkness took precedence. Never before in her life had she feared Death—a great deal of the time it seemed a pleasant answer to a horrible situation but now...

*I don't want to die...Blake...*

Something snapped driving Alicia to fight for her life. Unaware of anything going on around her, especially the fact she'd gone through surgery, she tried desperately to lift the weight off her.

"Doctor..."

*Doctor? What the...*

Alicia refused to stop, dreading that her overtaxed imagination had taken over.

"Please, relax," an unfamiliar voice said. "It's all right, you're safe."

"I..."

"Shh, don't say anything. Your throat needs to heal."

"Why?" Alicia persisted since, at this point, she didn't care as nothing made any sense to her.

"Doctor Kaplan will explain everything in a few moments."

"Who?"

Just as the nurse went to answer her, Kaplan did instead.

"Alicia, I'm Phillip Kaplan and you are at a private clinic in Newport. Leighton had you brought in after you passed out and had trouble breathing."

“Why?”

“Shh, you need to not talk. Let me...”

Frustrated, Alicia nodded.

“Originally, from what I’d been told, I thought you had a polyp on either your throat or one of the vocal chords. Once the swelling began to go down, I expected something like this to happen as it is a normal result from that kind of injury. Instead, I found scar tissue which had become inflamed and started to increase in size. As soon as we discovered it, we took care of it and you should be fine.”

Alicia closed her eyes, trying to stave off tears.

“You’ll feel a gauze collar around your neck,” he started to explain. “It’s holding a medicated cloth over the bruising the initial attack caused. I’m also putting you on a liquid diet for a day then it’ll be like recovering from a tonsillectomy. In the meantime, if you need anything, use the call button and if you have to say anything, use this.”

Alicia took the notepad and pen from him and immediately scribbled one word.

*Blake?*

“He’s doing well but is still in intensive care. You’ll probably see him in a day or two when you’re both out of the woods.”

*Serious?*

“I believe Leighton gave you the run down and, fortunately nothing’s changed. I need to keep an eye on him for another twenty-four to thirty-six hours to be sure though.”

?

“As you are well aware, he suffered a great deal of trauma to his torso resulting in severe bruising. We’ve already taken care of one bleeder and I intend to make sure there are no others lurking that could cause problems later if not found now.”

Alicia nodded, wincing at what he'd told her.

"Alicia, you may believe I'm jumping on the bandwagon with Leighton about this but I have to tell you—you are not at fault. This would have happened regardless of whether it had been Blake or someone else who just happened to get in your husband's way—no one blames you except you."

*I need to hear it from him. If he had not met me that night then...*

"Right now, Blake has to concentrate on getting better. He's still in danger until his body regains its full strength. You won't heal as long as you let this eat away at you."

*I'm sorry but I can't shake this. If he doesn't forgive me...*

"Alicia, this is nonsense," another voice stated emphatically.

Everyone froze as Leighton Waverly entered the room.

"Leighton," Phillip began.

"No, this is ridiculous. She's wasting away because she refuses to believe what everyone close to her and Blake all know and have been telling her. As long as you are despondent over what happened, you won't get better then he won't because my grandson will put his recovery on hold in order to make sure you recover. I won't have that happen—he's too damned important to me. I don't know what your husband did to you nor do I care at this moment. That monster is out of your life and no longer in control of what you do—the past is past and best laid to rest. As long as you dwell on it, you can't go forward and neither can Blake."

Unable to control her emotions any longer, Alicia broke down in tears. Ignoring the pain from the operation, she let her grief consume her as well as other pent-up emotions. Kaplan issued orders to counteract what she did, the nurse bringing in a sedative and adding the contents of the syringe to Alicia's IV. Moments later, Alicia calmed then dozed off.

“Keep an eye on her. If she wakes up, I want to know immediately so I can evaluate whether to keep her under sedation or not.”

“Yes, Doctor Kaplan.”

In the distance, Alicia heard his orders but no longer cared. She’d lost everything she held dear—Blake Atherton another casualty of her life. Hating herself more, she slept as her mind sought a way out the darkness she felt doomed to.

\* \* \* \*

“Leighton, what the hell do you think you accomplished by that?” Kaplan asked when they got far enough away from Alicia’s room so they wouldn’t be overheard.

“I’m sorry but it had to be said and, as I’m not you—the kindly doctor—or my grandson who loves her more than his own life, it fell to me.”

“Do you realize the setback that could occur from this once she’s out of sedation?”

“I’ve thought about it as I watched her exist in self-pity. I know what can happen because I’ve been there. If she lets Lohan Billings control her from the grave we’ll all be better off without her. Blake needs someone who is full of life, not wallowing in selfish emotion.”

“Are you ready to face him if anything happens to her?”

“I’ve also been there before and more than likely, I will be again. You know me, I watch out for my family and those who are extremely close to me. I’ve fought like a tigress for Blake, you and several others, and you know it. I can’t let her destroy him because if she does, it’ll destroy me and I’m not ready for that—not in this lifetime.”

“Leighton, I...”

"Phillip, you know me. I'd risk his anger to keep him safe. She's a wonderful person but she's got a hell of a lot of problems that can't be solved if he ignores himself. He can't help her if he's dead and trust me, you don't want to know what I'll do in that event."

"I've got a damned good idea. I just ask one favor."

"What?"

"Don't put me into a position where I might have to testify against you."

\* \* \* \*

After Leighton calmed down and Phillip had updated Alicia's chart, they went to see Blake.

"Well?" he asked before they'd gotten to his bedside.

"She's under sedation so she'll heal right."

"Why?"

"She won't stop feeling sorry for everything that's happened. Crying's made her condition worse so..."

"I've got to go to her."

"Blake, no," Leighton said with quiet authority. "Alicia's putting her need for absolution on your shoulders. She has deeper emotional problems than we knew about."

"But if I..."

"You could very well absolve her of blame but I can tell you right now that she needs help which we can't give her."

"That bastard!" Blake cursed.

"Blake, I'm giving this to you straight," Leighton began. "I told her off because I'm sick and tired of this. I know you and you will go to her at great risk to your own health and mental well-being. You've already been told you can't play the rest of the season and into the playoffs. If you do something stupid, you could very well

jeopardize the one thing you've devoted your life to since childhood."

"Gran, I..."

"I know how you feel about her but Billings hurt her deeply in many ways. She needs help to cope with what happened. Yes, you can be there for her and yes, plan your future but not until she's discovered what she needs to live on her own. You do not want her jumping from her past into your future without learning about her present."

"Why are you always right?" Blake asked though not in a resentful way.

"Years of experience," his grandmother answered. "We learn our lessons and hope our children and grandchildren will benefit from our mistakes so they do not waste time making them again. I've been fortunate in that because you've listened to me—most of the time."

"I still want a life with her."

"And I want that, too—if she makes you happy—but she needs time, so be patient with her."

"Like you've been?"

"I'm allowed to be a little impatient at my age."

"Honestly, Phillip, will she be all right?" Blake asked, turning to Kaplan.

"Physically, I'm giving her good odds if she doesn't do anything rash or stupid. Emotionally, it's up to her and whoever she might turn to."

"Then find her someone and send me the bill."

"Blake..."

"Gran, you know as well as I do that Billings' estate will be tied up for a while unless Patrick can work his magic with the Feds."

In the meantime, she has nothing so someone's got to pay the bills. If things work out for the best, it won't matter."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

\* \* \* \*

Sometime later, Alicia stirred. Slowly opening her eyes, she found the darkened room lit only by light filtering in from the hallway. In her groggy mind, Alicia tried to figure out what had happened and what she might possibly have to do.

In the remnants of a sedated haze, Alicia realized that Leighton Waverly had been right in her assessment of the way Alicia had been acting. Yes, she'd been feeling sorry for herself but the shame of being the reason that several people had been endangered needlessly overwhelmed her. While she'd been told that no charges would be filed against her and that her name had been kept out of the investigation except for the fact she'd been married to Lohan Billings, it didn't change anything—threats had been leveled and because of her, Blake had been beaten damned near to death for what? So Billings could prove he could.

Looking at the clock on the wall, she saw she had an hour before daybreak. Reaching over to open the cabinet next to her bed, she found a set of scrubs on the shelf. Cautiously, she slipped from bed, removed the IV line and changed into the surgical clothes. Keeping to the shadows, she went to the window relieved she only had a few feet to drop from the first floor sill.

Taking care not to make any sounds, she slid the window open then slipped out of the room. The dew on her feet chilled her but she didn't care as long as she could get away and remove the Billings' poison from Blake's life. She ran down the lawn into a small wooded area below what looked like a helipad. Figuring she would



hide there until she could figure out what to do or where to go, she headed straight for it.

Inside the woods, she looked around her but felt nauseated and light-headed. Stepping down, she felt something cut into her bare foot but, instead of stopping, she kept going. Her body weak from surgery while still fighting the aftereffects of the sedatives, Alicia began to falter. Stumbling over a branch, she fell down knocking her breath out of her.

*My God, I can't even run away without screwing up...*

Lying in the underbrush, Alicia cried. Not caring that she might do permanent damage to her voice, she sobbed as her body shook from emotions taking over and the chill of the early morning.

Alicia Billings lapsed off in the light of the early morning sun believing more than ever that people believed the worst about her. *Maybe I'll be better off...*

\* \* \* \*

"This better be important," Kaplan said as he answered his cell phone after it rudely awakened him.

"Doctor, I'm sorry to bother you but Mrs. Billings has disappeared."

"What?" he asked as he sat up, now fully awake.

"We did rounds as usual. At four, I checked her vitals and when I returned at five, she'd disappeared. The bedside cabinet door sat ajar and a set of scrubs kept for emergencies..."

"And no one saw her go down the hall?" he asked.

"We're pretty sure she went out the window."

"Keep looking. I'll notify the authorities to start a search."

Kaplan ended the call then slipped from bed to call Patrick Fox.

"What's wrong?" a sleepy voice asked.

"Alicia's disappeared," Kaplan said as he sat on the side of the bed waiting for the call to go through.

"What?"

"Seems she skipped out the window. I'm calling Fox to start a search."

"My God, this is..."

"It's not your fault, Leighton, and don't even begin to blame yourself on this one. This goes far deeper than you telling her off earlier."

"But she had to be pretty much a wreck after I got done with her. My God, Blake..."

"...Is sound asleep," Kaplan assured her as he took her hand. "Patrick, Phil Kaplan. Listen, we've got a problem."

"What's up?"

"Basically, the bird's flown the coup."

"How?"

"Out the window."

"How long?"

"Within the last hour."

"Clothes?"

"Either green or blue scrubs."

"I thought you had her on sedatives."

"So did I but obviously, the dose should have been stronger."

"Does Blake know?"

"Not yet and I wouldn't wake him. He needs all the rest he can get right now."

"Good point."

"Keep me advised. I'll be at the clinic getting prepared for her arrival."

"Good," Patrick said. "And if you talk to Blake before I do, tell him we still have a couple to bust before we can release any news."

"What's taking so long?"

"One fled to Canada and we're working on getting him back here. The other went underground and from what we've heard, he surfaced in Florida. Extradition could be easy or a real bitch depending on the sitting judge."

"Damn it!" Kaplan cursed as he saw the situation spiraling out of control.

"Keep an eye on Leighton."

"Always do."

"I'll call when we find her."

Phillip ended the call shaking his head.

"I've got to go."

"Do you want some help?"

"No, get some rest. I have a feeling you'll need it."

\* \* \* \*

Patrick kissed his wife then went downstairs to where he kept his English Springer spaniel. Middle-aged by human standards, Playboy still had good tracking talents especially when it came to hunting small game in the fall. Figuring to keep his search for Alicia low-key, he decided to use his dog instead of calling in the locals. With a short lead time ahead of him, he hoped to have little or no trouble finding her.

"Come on, boy," he said when he opened the door to what some people would call a small alcove off the kitchen. Heated and comfortable, his pet lived the good life.

The spaniel followed him out to his Jeep, then they got in and he headed to the hospital where he obtained her hospital gown and started his search. Below the window outside, he found small footprints which told him Alicia wore nothing on her feet—something that would definitely slow her down some. Playboy picked up her scent and took off, Patrick following with a blanket under his arm.

Passing the helipad, Patrick noticed she'd traveled a relatively straight line which led toward the wooded area at the edge of the property. Trying to remember what lay beyond it, he groaned when he remembered a rail spur lay there and while not in use, it would still give her a pathway of some kind to follow.

Taking a deep breath, he continued to follow his dog into the woods where the trail became confused. Moments later, the dog took off before sitting down and worrying. Patrick walked to him, gasping at the sight of Alicia Billings curled in a fetal position and unconscious.

Petting his canine friend for a job well done, he pressed Kaplan's number in his speed dial. Once Kaplan answered, Patrick advised him that Alicia had been found.

"I need a team to meet me at the edge of the woods."

Pocketing his phone, he carefully wrapped the blanket around Alicia and lifted her up before carrying her out of the woods and into the morning sun's warmth. Feeling her shivering, he pulled her closer in an effort to warm her more.

"What the hell have you been thinking?"

\* \* \* \*

As soon as his team brought Alicia back, Kaplan immediately took her into his trauma room and gave her a complete examination. Aside from some cuts and scrapes—one to her foot the most concern—she didn't appear to be harmed physically, meaning the emotional state came first. In order for her throat to heal, he needed her to be calm but to sedate her when she lay in an unconscious state already would be the wrong course to take.

Keeping his patient warm during the exam, Phillip treated her foot wanting to stave off infection. Finishing up, he ordered a nurse to be with her at all times until she regained consciousness and they could figure out where they stood.

“Remember to keep talking to a minimum.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

He left the trauma room heading to his office. The moment he closed the door behind him, he went to his desk then sat behind his computer and sent an email to a colleague who specialized in emotional despondency and post-traumatic stress. After Doctor Barrett agreed to see Alicia after she woke, Kaplan called Leighton to update her.

“And Blake?” she asked.

“I’ll see him in a moment.”

“I’ll be in...”

“Give me an hour,” he suggested. “I think one-on-one man-to-man is called for.”

“An hour it’ll be,” Leighton said to Phillip Kaplan’s relief.

He admired Leighton’s love for her grandson but there came times when Blake needed to be able to speak with a man—one who wouldn’t intimidate him with her strength. Leighton Waverly had grown strong thanks to many different instances in her life though losing Blake’s parents became one of the most defining. Raising him, she did her best but as every boy does, Blake needed a male influence in his life.

Fortunately, he had his close friends and the hockey team but Kaplan felt privileged to act as a father figure when Blake needed someone. Leighton yielded to him, their friendship stronger though it had taken some hard hits over some of the advice he’d given her grandson.

Taking a deep breath, he left his office after changing into street clothes then headed to see Blake Atherton. Checking Blake’s chart before entering the room, Kaplan quickly went over what he wanted to say.

"Blake, how are you this morning?" he asked as he walked in the door.

"Better but I sense something's been going on."

"How is it you're so damned intuitive?"

"Look at who raised me. I swear she has several more senses than the normal person and I guess some had to filter down to me."

"I see," Kaplan said as he glanced over Blake's chart. "Well, you're right. Alicia pulled a disappearing act before dawn and since we found her and got her back here, I've been in trauma treating her."

"What the hell happened?"

"We don't know. She found a set of scrubs, changed and went out the window. Patrick found her just inside the woods below the helipad."

"But what about the sedation?"

"That's what I need to find out about. With what she'd been given, she should still be under and not unconscious because she went AWOL."

"Is she all right?"

"The worst physical injury came to her foot where I think she stepped on something which cut her. I treated it and wrapped it in gauze. She has minor cuts and scratches but when I left her, she'd yet to regain consciousness. I have a nurse with her at all times so she can't do it again and I'm to be advised as soon as anything happens."

"What the hell is going on with her?"

"I believe her marriage to Billings has a great deal to do with things. I've called in a colleague who'll be able to treat her."

Blake laid his head against the pillows once he resituated them after raising that part of the bed up.

"What the hell else is going to happen?"

"It's up to her right now. Let me ask you something—did Billings say anything to her in front of you?"

"Aside from threatening my life and berating her for being weak and stupid—no. In front of me, he displayed the face of sadistic anger."

"Then maybe upstairs or before he brought the both of you together."

"What are you getting at?"

"He'd just realized what his future looked like. He had Bruno virtually silence Alicia then forced her to watch what he did to you. If he made some comment or any kind of threat..."

"Then it might still be playing on her mind..."

"Exactly," Kaplan said as he pulled out his cell phone and sent a quick text message. "I'm informing Doctor Barrett about what we've come up with so that she knows what route to follow."

"Doctor Barrett?"

"You remember Alyce?"

"Didn't she speak with the team after..."

"She's the one," Kaplan said not wanting to bring up past bad memories. "I figure she can help here."

"When can I see Alicia?"

"As soon as she's seen Alyce. I want to know what we're up against and if it's safe for you to see her right now. The woman is holding something in and whatever it is overpowered her to the point she felt the need to run. I want to find out her reasons why..."

"Maybe she'll tell me..."

"And if she turns on you, you're not physically well enough to defend yourself. You just started trying to put weight on that ankle..."

“And I’ve followed your orders longer than even you expected. I’ve had ankle breaks before.”

“But not smashed,” Phillip reminded him. “I’m also still concerned with your side. I don’t want you pulling it...”

“Phillip, I have to get out of bed some time—soon. I’m going crazy here and you know it.”

“I’ll make a deal with you—take it easy on your body and as soon as Alyce gives the okay, I’ll personally take you to her room.”

“Deal,” Blake said, the two men shaking hands. “Phillip, thank you.”

“For?”

“I think you know. We both love her but...”

“Don’t utter another syllable.”

Both laughed, the tension in the room easing considerably.

“I’ll be back as soon as I know something.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”



## **Chapter 12**

Blake Atherton did not like being confined to a hospital bed, now more than ever. When he had the need before, he usually left early against Kaplan's wishes though the good doctor had found a way to get around that as well—he would refuse to clear his patient to start playing hockey again until he felt satisfied Blake had healed as much as he could. The team coach and doctor found this the best way to protect one of their better players and left the fight between Blake and his doctor.

Looking at his ankle and the cast on it, he cursed. Billings had made sure he wouldn't play again this season—if he even survived what happened that night. He'd been able to move it a little though he had not mentioned this in case he pushed things but so far, he'd felt no pain. If Kaplan considered therapy already, maybe the injury had not been as severe as they first thought.

His side felt better and he appreciated the fact the numbness had been taken care of though as much as he hated and hid the fact it happened to him, its timely occurrence in the fight cage helped immensely with the pain inflicted upon him. Had he felt every hit, Blake knew he would have done everything he could to end it even if it meant purposely pushing one of his attackers to kill him to stop it.

Seeing a set of crutches leaning against the nearby chair, he did exactly what Kaplan and his grandmother didn't want him to but then again, they shouldn't have left them where he could get them.

Reaching for them, Blake eased off the bed and stood on his good foot while getting the crutches situated under his arms. *God, I hate these things...*

Slowly, he started to put pressure on the healing ankle, wincing from the expected pain. *I'd kill Billings if someone else hadn't already...*

Making his way across the room to the window, he gazed out grateful for his blessings and the fact he could enjoy the beautiful view. Now, he determined to get better for several reasons—Alicia, the game and of course, his grandmother would expect no less.

"Mister Atherton, what are you doing? You shouldn't be out of bed..."

"It's all right," he assured the nurse. "If Phillip didn't want me to be here, he wouldn't have left the crutches where I could get to them."

"But..."

"It's all right, dear," another voice said. "This is actually quite normal for him."

"Gran, I wondered when you'd be coming in. I need to ask a favor."

The nurse quietly left them to talk, realizing she'd been outnumbered.

"What, dear?"

"Can you take care of the company for me? I think somebody should check on it since I haven't had the chance to for several days."

"Already did and you're still solid. I wanted to make sure Billings had not tried making a run for it. Seems he'd made serious inquiries into both yours and mine."

"Asshole," Blake muttered.

“One that is no longer a problem.”

Blake nodded, grateful Leighton had been looking after things for him but then again, she always did.

“What will I ever do without you?”

“Hopefully, we won’t have to find out.”

Blake turned and cautiously made his way over to give her a hug.

“Thanks,” he whispered, Leighton’s solid hug telling him everything he needed to know. “I’m really sorry about this.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. My investigators have discovered several interesting things dealing with Billings. He made immediate inquiries into you the morning after the auction which you knew about then several shadow offers for the company as well as trying to buy stock in order to gain control that way. Your advisors fortunately blocked any sales. He spoke with several of my people who solidly refused his advances. There’s also information that he tried to set up several of his people within both companies to work from the inside out.”

“So he’s not as stupid as he acted.”

“Far from it and luckily we could get one step ahead of him after things came to light.”

“But where did he get the money since his legitimate finances had him near bankruptcy and he couldn’t openly touch what he made off the fight club?”

“From what Patrick tells me, Billings had lined up several investors—all legit—who started to back him only they pulled out the day before the fight club. The authorities are now questioning them and auditing their books in order to discover any possible discrepancies that could land them in court or under the government’s regulatory eyes.”

“How far reaching is this?”

"The United States and Canada," she replied. "It's one of the reasons why there's been nothing said about your condition, Alicia's status or anything else. That way they can do their jobs without interference from the press or anyone else."

"I trust Patrick's judgment though I had wondered."

"We agreed it would be for the best."

"Let's walk."

"You shouldn't..."

"You know me, Gran."

"Yes, I do."

\* \* \* \*

Kaplan had just finished checking on Alicia when she stirred. He watched her for a few moments waiting for her to say something.

"Alicia?"

"Where am I?"

"You're back in your room at the clinic. Do you remember what happened?"

Alicia raised her hand to her forehead, wincing.

"I woke and ran. Everything caught up with me and I felt overwhelmed. You won't let me see Blake, Leighton's acting like I'm some sort of monster and..."

"Blake's condition is the reason you haven't seen him. He's been constantly asking for you but when we have a reconstructed ankle and his side to worry about, I thought it best. With the recurring numbness, I had to be sure the surgery didn't mess anything else up—precaution at its best."

"And how do you make excuses for Leighton?"

"For God's sake, Alicia, she's very protective of Blake—after all, she raised him and has every right. She can't handle self-pity

because it stands in the way of what someone wants in order to get ahead in life.”

“Well, excuse me but...”

“Several people in the know tell you constantly that you are *not* to blame yet you insist on wallowing in falsehoods. Trust me, if she hated you, you wouldn’t be here because she would not allow you anywhere near Blake.”

“I...”

“I have to agree with her because if I allow you to see him and his condition changes for the worst, you will leave for your own safety. I don’t mean to be cruel and as your doctor, I should not be but the circumstances warrant it if you don’t get a hold on the good parts of your life.”

“Then if that’s the way you feel, transfer me to another hospital.”

“And have Blake pissed off at me? Not yet.”

“Then can I see another doctor?”

Kaplan inwardly smiled, appreciating Alicia’s request more than she would ever realize.

“I will see what I can arrange.”

“Thank you,” she said, turning away. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone.”

“A nurse will be with you in case you need anything.”

“And to make sure I don’t leave again?”

Kaplan ignored her comment while he updated her chart. Closing the notebook, he left the room—not another word said. *What the hell is it?*

Going to the desk, he grabbed the phone and called Doctor Alyce Barrett.

“She’s all yours but she requested my replacement.”

“Great, that might work better for us,” Alyce replied.

“I sure as hell hope so.”

\* \* \* \*

Alicia Billings wondered when the hell her life had taken the wrong turn. Several days before, she had Blake and his phenomenal love along with Leighton Waverly’s friendship and support. One evening in a godforsaken warehouse seemed to have changed things since no one allowed her to be with Blake—a hindrance more than help as it had been implied—and Leighton had seemingly turned on her as well.

If they felt she could be bad for Blake, why did they insist on keeping her at wherever she’d been taken to? Why didn’t Kaplan transfer her to another hospital?

Alicia could not understand why, all of a sudden, they considered her the enemy. *My God, I did everything I could to protect them from Lohan’s evil.*

She could see a nurse sitting in the chair writing something—another watchdog. *First Bruno, now her... Why can’t I win?*

Looking away, she closed her eyes. The nightmarish vision she’d been seeing since the warehouse once again came back to her.

*If you survive this, no one will want you because you can’t be trusted thanks to me. Your high-and-mighty friends will quickly turn on you and hang you out to dry, blaming you for everything that, in actuality, is all my fault. Enjoy your life...*

Lohan’s words vividly came back to her as she saw everything that happened after Bruno choked her as if it’d just happened. Her hands clenched, hating the memories.

Going back to when she came around in a darkened area of the warehouse, she remembered the constant pain as she tried to do simple things like breathe and swallow. Bruno yanked her to her feet before leading her to where Lohan literally put her on display

and where she had no choice but to watch what happened in the cage.

In the dimness of the area, she saw what appeared to be a figure lying in the center of the fight cage but could not see the person clearly enough to know who she looked at.

"You disappoint me, Alicia," Lohan said, forcing her to look at him. "You've been screwing around on me and I refuse to ever forgive you for that. Because of what you've done, your boyfriend will suffer—maybe even die before the night is through."

She remembered trying to ask him *why* but he ignored her.

"What you have become a part of is a simple exercise in control. While he must deal with Bruno and his friends, I can come over to *my* wife and do whatever I want to you by virtue of the fact that we are married. If I want to drop the top of your dress and expose you to everyone here and do whatever husbands do, I will, but don't worry, I won't. I won't ever touch the lying cheating bitch I married. When this evening is over and Atherton is taken care of, you will become Bruno's to do with you what he wants. If you die, I no longer care."

Alicia felt sick, her stomach turning not only from the thought he might touch her but from what he had planned for her. She loathed Bruno and knowing that Lohan would allow the thug to do whatever to her—with his blessings no less—made her sicker. She tried to shake her head to deny what he said but Lohan Billings refused to acknowledge her unless it gave him sadistic pleasure.

"If you survive this..."

Now, his prediction seemed to be becoming truth—in everything. *What am I going to do?*

Alicia cried herself back to sleep hating her life even more than she had before Blake Atherton came into it. *I can't live like this...*

\* \* \* \*

Once Blake learned the latest on Alicia, he decided he had to do something even if he failed. Too much time had passed from the night at the warehouse to the present though he understood the reasoning. Yes, it had been his decision to keep them apart until Patrick had taken care of Billings but at the time they set their plans, no one had any clue as to how far Billings' reach extended.

As soon as Patrick and Leighton told him the latest news, Patrick took over making the decisions as to their safety plus any press and notifications that could accidentally become public knowledge. The last thing they needed would be a leak since they'd agreed that somewhere along the line, Billings had found someone to finance him if he didn't have somebody laundering the income from the fight club.

Blake knew Patrick had successfully sidestepped the questions about Alicia's reasons for not attending her husband's funeral as well as being *in communicado* since word leaked out of Billings' death. Everything that had been done in order to keep them alive as well as Alicia out of the public spotlight had nearly been jeopardized by Alicia's aborted flight to escape. *If she'd been successful...*

Now that she'd dismissed Phillip from her case with Alyce Barrett taking over, maybe she'd finally be able to see that they had not become her enemies. If anyone could help Alicia, it would be Alyce Barrett. If she could help the team handle an extremely bad accident on the ice during a game where one of the opposing players had been cut in the neck by his teammate's skate blade, she could help one stubborn yet beautiful woman.

A knock on the door brought him out of his thoughts and back to the present.

"Alyce, how are you?"



"Fine, Blake, and I see you're getting better as well as pushing yourself," she said.

"You know me," he said, grinning. "Have you seen..."

"Yes, and I think she could stand a visit from you though how you handle it is up to you. She's under the impression that none of you will ever forgive her because of her association with Lohan Billings. I think I may have convinced her that all of you have been telling her the truth but she really needs to see you."

"I want to but I'm not sure I can give her what she needs. Sure I can forgive her but considering her beliefs, I wonder if she'll believe anything I say."

"Only she can say one way or another though I'm sure you are the one who may be able to break through to her."

"Any idea how I should go about this?"

Alyce gave him some suggestions then left after wishing him good luck.

Blake decided no time like the present would do—the longer he took to go to her, the worse the situation would become. He pulled on his black bathrobe, grabbed his crutches and slowly made his way to Alicia's room. No one stopped him, something that didn't go unnoticed.

At her door, he looked in seeing Alicia Billings sleeping. Quietly, he made his way across the room to the window, turned and leaned back against the sill in order to take the weight off his healing ankle. One thing he loved doing—watching Alicia sleep though right now, enjoying that pleasure would have to be put on hold. That and what he truly wanted. *Damn it!*

After half an hour, he turned and looked out the window trying to figure out what to say to her in order to convince her that everyone had told her the truth though it remained in his mind that she'd run—from him, the care of the clinic, her life... Shaking his

head, he continued to look outside, uncaring as to how long it might be before she woke.

He heard her stirring, deciding to let her make the first move then he'd take it from there.

"Blake?"

"Why did you run?" he asked, ashamed of the way it came out.

"I..." she said, stopping before she said any more.

"Why, Alicia?"

\* \* \* \*

Alicia stirred sensing the presence of someone else in the room. Glancing around, she saw someone standing at the window, one arm against the frame while the other gripped a crutch.

"Blake?" she asked, praying her imagination had not decided to play tricks on her.

"Why did you run?"

"I..." she began to say before stopping, unable to give him a reason.

"Why, Alicia?" he asked again, this time with more force to his voice.

"I thought you'd all be better off if I did. I haven't been allowed to see you while your grandmother literally turned on me. Everybody here tells me that none of this is my fault but the one person I need to hear it from finally decides to come see me then demands to know why I ran."

"No one's lied to you."

"I find that hard to believe. They're all telling me what they think I want to hear although I have to give it to Leighton—she spoke her mind and told me what she thought of me."

"She's very upset about you."

"I doubt that—she only cares about you."

"What the hell happened, Alicia? You've changed since that night."

"After what happened, did you honestly think I'd be the same? My God, Bruno damned near choked me to death before Lohan told him he could have me once everything had been taken care of. I shot a man and killed him then found myself at your grandmother's huge estate and being lied to."

"No one lied to you," he repeated.

"Why haven't you come to see me before now or at least let me come to you?"

"At first, I thought it would be safer in case someone got wind of what happened. Bringing you to Gran's estate gave you the privacy you needed to heal. You've had the best medical care and everything you needed."

"But I didn't have you."

"I spent several days in and out of heavy sedation thanks to several bleeders that had to be found so I wouldn't bleed to death internally. My ankle's been reconstructed so, in essence, I have to learn how to use it all over again meaning my hockey season is over for this year. They've been monitoring my side so if I go numb again, they can fix the problem before it gets out of hand. I've been a mess, Alicia, and you probably won't believe this, but my vision of you helped me get through it all. Now that I've learned what's it's like to be on your bad side, I wonder if maybe my plans should have included you going to Mass Gen instead of trying to give you somewhere that could aid in your recovery."

"Blake, I..."

"You start speaking then stop," he said. "You didn't do that before. You always spoke your mind. Maybe Phillip and his staff can't help you. Maybe I can't..."

Blake situated his crutches, turned then headed toward the door.

"I'm really sorry, Alicia. I truly thought we had something special. I wanted it to work but evidently I've been wrong. Gran told me you wanted me to give you some sort of absolution. I would if I could but no one can give you something that you have to give yourself first."

He walked out of the room never looking back.

"Blake..." she said. "Blake!"

Alicia cried knowing she'd screwed up the best thing to ever walk into her life. *How do I get him to believe me?*

\* \* \* \*

When Blake returned to his room, he found Leighton waiting for him. Fortunately, she didn't ask him any questions because at this point, Blake couldn't be sure he had any answers to give her.

"What's going on with the case?"

"Patrick called this morning and said it's more than likely going to be wrapped up this afternoon. Why?"

"Tell Phillip I want to get out of here. The estate's fine—I just can't take being here any longer."

"What about Alicia?"

"You tell me. She's off somewhere even I can't get to."

"What do you mean?"

"She swears you've turned on her and it wouldn't surprise me one bit if she believes you're deliberately trying to keep us apart. When she spoke about you, the bitterness in her voice..."

"I did come down on her a little harsher than I should have but she's got so much to live for and she's wasting away."

"I saw that," Blake said as he eased himself onto the side of the bed before elevating his now throbbing ankle. "Gran, that woman in the other room is not the one I fell deeply in love with. She's so

wrapped up in herself, she doesn't give a damn that her diabolical husband nearly killed me. That's not the Alicia I knew several days ago."

"I noticed the same thing. I can't believe she worked with me on a charity event that I need to get back to Providence on. While you may be out for the season, the carnival goes on."

"I'll help if I can."

"One condition..."

"I know, I have to stay off the ice."

"I'm sorry, Blake, but if you expect to play next season..."

\* \* \* \*

Begrudgingly honoring Blake's wishes but only because he knew Leighton would make her grandson behave, Phillip Kaplan signed off on his patient's request and released Blake from the clinic.

"Use the whirlpool as soon as the cast comes off. It'll help with the circulation in your leg. You've got stretching exercises to do and I'm sure your therapist will get together with the team trainer about rehab."

"Thanks, Phillip," Blake said, shaking the doctor's hand.

"I'm only doing this for selfish reasons, you realize."

"Whatever the intent, it gets me out of here."

"It would be remiss of me as your doctor not to say this, but here goes—take it easy and don't overdo it. Next season..."

"...Starts in late summer."

"Like I said..."

"I'll make sure he does what he's supposed to," Leighton said. "After all, don't I always take it from this point?"

"That you do," Kaplan agreed. "I'll be over later to check in on him."

"Dinner's at seven then..."

"I'll be there."

Kaplan left them, Blake shaking his head.

"What?" she asked.

"Marry him, Gran," Blake whispered in her ear. "He loves you so damned much, it's not funny."

"And since when did you become an expert?"

"Since I found out what it feels like to lose it. Love is fragile—don't chance it."

"And when did you become so smart?"

"It comes from being with you."

They left the hospital, Leighton waiting for Blake to settle in the limousine. Once Edward pulled away, Blake looked at her and sighed.

"Blake, everything will work out. If you two are meant to be, it will happen."

"I guess but I hate the way I left things. She tried calling to me but the hurt overwhelmed me. I can understand her tearing into me and even Patrick but I can't take it when someone goes after you. Yes, you voiced your opinion on things but you also gave her what she needed in order to get away from Billings even if for a few hours every week."

"Her new life may be more than she can handle."

"Then how is she going to deal with his affairs? She can't touch any of his assets."

"The legal ones she can like the house and property—anything bought with her knowledge and legitimate financing. I think Patrick's people have already figured that out in order to go after the ill-gotten gains. Plus there is her inheritance."

Blake looked at Leighton and nodded.

"I'd forgotten about that."

"I left an envelope for her at the hospital with all the information she needs to access the account plus the personal possessions she left with me for safekeeping."

"I guess now, she'll really believe we want nothing to do with her."

"She needs help to understand what's happened to her. You can't be involved because it could easily become a case of her jumping from the frying pan back into the skillet. She has to be able to function on her own before she gets involved in any sort of relationship."

"You're probably right."

"In the meantime, I expect you to get well and give me some ideas for the carnival. I don't expect Alicia will want to continue with it so I need someone to help and I think it would do you a world of good."

"Gran, you know I would never let you down."

"Or the team?"

"Or the team," he replied, squeezing her hand.

Blake Atherton would always be grateful for Leighton Waverly. She understood him and never tried to stop him from doing anything he wanted. Her advice and counsel solid, he'd always been able to seek her guidance while giving no one reason to call him a *grandmama's boy*. Leighton had raised him to be strong and he'd grown to be good at whatever he did while still having a soft side—one that had taken a horrific beating. *Will I survive her?*

\* \* \* \*

Alicia left the clinic several days after Blake. Alyce Barrett had done everything in her power to try to treat her emotional upheaval but Alicia continued to build walls between her and anyone who tried to care about her.

"Will you please tell Mister Atherton that I appreciate everything that has been done for me and..."

"I'm sorry but Blake left several days ago."

"What?"

"Doctor Kaplan agreed to allow him to finish recuperating at *Reveresgate*."

"*Reveresgate*?"

"Leighton's estate—the one you..."

Alicia put her hand up stopping Alyce from saying any more.

"I should have known."

"Known what?"

"He's so dominated by her, it's ridiculous."

"Wait just one moment," Alyce stated. "Leighton Waverly is not what you're trying to make her out to be. If you would settle down and think back, she never did anything to you to deserve the treatment you've given her. From what I understand, she set up your clandestine meetings with Blake and gave you what you needed to get out of the house. She gave you and Blake time to be together while she went out, vacating her home for the both of you so your husband wouldn't become suspicious."

"But..."

"I'm not through yet," Alyce went on. "Blake loves her dearly but he also fell deeply in love with you. Phillip told me he worried more about you than himself."

"But he never came to see me. He didn't call..."

"He'd been placed under heavy sedation. He couldn't physically do anything until they could be sure how the surgeries went. I'm sorry that you feel hurt and abandoned but it's not the case at all. Maybe sooner or later, you'll understand."



"Look, I have nothing left. My so-called husband treated me like a possession and for what—money. I don't even know if I have anything of my own left to live on. Blake is gone..."

"Leighton left this for you the day he went home," Alyce said as she handed Alicia the envelope Leighton had given her to give to her patient. "I also want you to know that I've contacted a colleague of mine in Boston who'll be closer to you and who may be able to help you more than I can. An entire hockey team is easier to deal with than you are."

"So you're giving up on me, too?"

"No one has given up on you but right now, I'm too close to the parties involved to be able to continue being your doctor. I feel it's for the best."

"Wonderful," Alicia muttered obviously sure she had no hope.

"Your things have been packed and are waiting in the closet for you. Leighton wanted to make sure you had your personal possessions when you left here. She sent a car to take you wherever you want to go. You've been discharged and I will hope for the best."

Alyce Barrett left her patient wondering what had just happened.

Alicia had never met more cold and callous people before until she remembered she'd been married to the coldest bastard alive. Pulling the covers off her and getting out of bed, she went to the closet and found her suitcases waiting for her. Going through one of them quickly, she pulled out what she needed and decided she would have to get a new wardrobe. *My God, I can actually go shopping...*

After she dressed and brushed her hair, she picked up the envelope and opened it.

*My dearest Alicia,*

*You asked me to keep this for you until you could safely access it. The information for that is attached. My best wishes for you, LRW*

Reading the attached sheet, she found the account number and pass code along with the names of several banks in Boston that could handle her requests when she needed to withdraw any funds from the account. Looking at the next sheet, she saw what she had in the account and gasped. *I don't believe this...*

## **Chapter 13**

“Hey, Blake, how are you feeling?”

“Better but I miss being on the ice.”

“Be glad you aren’t. Those kids from Portland handed out some hard punishment. Scott’s nose got busted in one of the melees that broke out.”

“Did we win?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Several other players joined them, each one telling a story to bring Blake up on what had been happening in his absence.

“Ya gotta love playoff time,” he commented.

“We do,” they chorused.

“When do you think you’ll be back?” one asked.

“Pre-season at the earliest. Doc and Kaplan are both concerned about my ankle considering how much damage had been done.”

“After all the abuse you’ve taken on the ice...”

“No amount of checking came close to the pain I felt that night. Of course, it didn’t help that they sucker punched me several times.”

“We’re glad you’re back, Blake.”

“Thanks.”

The guys left the locker room for their final practice of the day leaving Blake alone. He pulled himself off the bench, leaning on

one crutch—the other having been discarded the day after he went home from the clinic—and he went in search of Leighton.

They'd come to the arena to go over final details for the carnival. Because the playoff schedule had the away team playing two games in Providence, she'd gone to their coach and extended an invitation to the team to attend and help out.

"After all, it's for a good cause," she reminded him. "Plus it might also help ticket sales."

The coach hesitated about committing to the event until she told him that they had some of Boston's greatest players signing autographs and spending time with their fans. The mention of one name in particular—Orr—made the final decision for him.

"Yes, ma'am, we'll be there."

"Good."

Blake grinned loving Leighton for her quiet resolve to get what she wanted when she wanted it. They'd been successful in getting the guys from the Bruins to come up from Boston and, as Leighton had figured, the game had sold out thanks to her marketing assistant working with the ticket sales office at the center. *She's amazing...*

Walking out of the locker room, Blake stopped remembering the last time he'd been in this room and with whom. He could see Alicia, the hot love they made in a stolen moment together—one of several that day. His body's reaction reminded him of the hot touch of her sweet lips on his cock plus the velvet heat he'd sunk it into next—their time together now no more than a memory that he tried very hard to push to the back of his mind.

Alicia had pushed him out of her life and, thanks to her, he had no intention of ever getting involved with anyone again. He'd been hurt years before and sworn off women then left himself open to Alicia and the attraction between them. After that came the mi-

sery he dreaded because while he couldn't get her out of his mind, he felt sure she no longer gave a damn about him. *She got what she wanted and it damned near killed me in the process. Damn her...*

Leaving the locker room, he found Leighton finalizing where certain stands would be set up as well as approving the prices for the concessions and the autographs and other details.

"What do you think?"

Blake looked over the list and nodded.

"The only suggestion I have is that you might want to talk to the guys from Boston and see if they have any set prices they charge for their signatures and how they work it. I know when they make personal appearances at stores, they have one fee where an event like this might command something else."

"I'll make the call before we leave," she said, gazing at him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, just some memories came back that I'm having trouble dealing with."

"It'll take time, sweetheart."

"I think you told me that the last time."

"Some things never change."

"How true..."

\* \* \* \*

Contrary to what Blake believed, Alicia did give a damn about him and what she'd given up. After leaving the clinic, she returned to the *mausoleum* since she had nowhere else to go. Once there, she called her family's attorney and invited him to meet with her because she had many things to discuss with him. His first task though had been to issue a statement as to her reaction to Billings' death and her reason for not being at his funeral.

"That won't be a problem," he said. "We'll just say *no comment* on the reaction and extreme emotional distress for the funeral."

"Whatever you feel is best," she said.

"Alicia, talk to me."

"I keep thinking about Blake and his grandmother—my God, they must hate me."

"More than likely they don't but then again, I don't know what happened."

"Simply, because of me Blake damned near died and my involvement with him threatened his grandmother's life. I seem to hurt everyone I come into contact with."

"I think you're being a bit hard on yourself. Lohan Billings had no sense of anything but himself. He would have found any reason possible to get rid of both of them because they represented the competition and what he wanted. Where Blake Atherton worked for everything he's ever gotten and been successful, Billings connived—prime example being your inheritance. By the way, what's the status of that?"

"Before I left the clinic, I received an envelope with all the information regarding the account inside."

"And that surprises you?"

"I did sign it over to her."

"And she did exactly what she said she would—she placed it into an account that only you can access and handle. Leighton Waverly never had any inclination to take your money. She just safeguarded it for you and from what I can tell based on what you've told me, she made you some in the process."

"If the two of them gave a damn about me, surely they would have called to check up on me. I've heard nothing from him and she hasn't even asked me to continue work on the carnival."

"Under the circumstances, I can see why. With relations between the three of you slightly strained, it seems the best answer."

That way, there is no possibility of personal feelings hurting the charity event.”

Alicia gazed out the window of the parlor hating the house and everything in it along with her life.

“What can we do about the house? I don’t feel comfortable here at all. In fact, it gives me the creeps,” she stated, effectively changing the subject.

“I can have it put on the market but the way the economy is at present, it may take a while to sell. In the meantime, you can either stay here or live somewhere else.”

“Where do you suggest?” she asked.

“Stay here until I can find out what the market looks like. I can’t see you paying for both this place and another if you can’t even market it.”

“Hopefully, it’ll be fast. I hate this place. Blake called it a mausoleum and I truly agree.”

“You could always redecorate at a fraction of the cost of a new place and make it your own. This is, after all, all yours.”

“We’ll see,” she said absently, her stomach tight from bad memories. The only good memory had been meeting Blake in the anteroom off the ballroom when she went to get a drink—several actually, if she remembered right. *Damn him!*

After discussing several more legal matters, Steven Archer stood and prepared to leave. An attorney with one of Boston’s oldest firms, he’d been the family attorney for Alicia’s parents for years before taking on Alicia’s affairs.

“A word of caution...”

“What?” she asked as she continued staring aimlessly out the window.

“Whatever you do, don’t get Leighton Waverly mad. She’s been very good up to now but if you piss her off, she will bury you without a thought despite what her grandson wants.”

He left the house, not another word spoken.

Alicia put her head back and let the tears she’d been holding back flow. Having her life to herself and the ability to make her own decisions meant nothing without Blake Atherton. She honestly wanted to believe they didn’t blame her for what happened but Lohan’s words had burned into her—the results of that one night confirmed it.

She left the room intent on going to the kitchen. Passing the door to Lohan’s study—one room she’d never been allowed inside—she stopped. Taking a deep breath, she put her hand on the knob and turned it slowly. *How nice, the FBI left it unlocked...*

Entering the room, she felt cold. Granted it had been closed up for several months but this felt different—sinister came to mind.

Walking around the room, she felt sure the search had taken everything that meant anything out and she didn’t really want to see what Billings had done. The man lived and breathed contempt and defined the word despicable. She looked at the things sitting on shelves seeing a number of framed pictures of a dark-haired woman with green eyes. Between them sat a small card—*To the one I love, Tiffany...*

Without a thought, Alicia shoved everything off the shelves smashing it all to pieces. Rage coursed through her like never before, Alicia feeling an intense hatred she never knew existed.

“You fucking son of a bitch!”

Alicia continued her angry destruction hating Lohan more while hating herself for what she’d put everyone close to her



through dealing with her self-pitying attitude. *God, if I'd only known...*

She stood in the center of the room and screamed, pent-up rage and emotions leaving her feeling better and able to decide on a course of action before she sat behind *his* desk to map it out. Her mind clear for the first time in a long while, Alicia Billings knew exactly what she had to do in order to have the future she thought had been taken from her forever.

For the first time in a very long while, excluding the time she spent with Blake, Alicia felt alive and free—and it felt good. *Please, forgive me and please wait...*

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, she had her life plotted out on paper. Calling Archer, she told him not to put the house up for sale as she'd decided to redecorate as he'd suggested.

"Please line up the designer Mrs. Waverly uses. I think they'll be able to do what I want. Also, see about the historical registry..."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "And if this gets back to her?"

"I'll handle it."

"Alicia, are you all right?"

"Steven, I feel better now than I have for a very long time."

"It's good to hear," he said. "I'll get back to you as soon as I know something."

Alicia thanked him before hanging up. Finding a phone book, she looked up art dealers looking for one who might be able to appraise the paintings adorning the walls of the house. While she detested the sight of them, she knew someone might want them and pay good money for all or part of Lohan's collection.

"Wherever you are, I hope you're sick..." she muttered as she looked at Lohan Billings' picture on the desk. "You pompous ass!"

Breaking glass echoed through the house. Going to the bar he'd set up on another shelf, she poured some of his expensive whiskey in a glass and downed it then refilled the glass. Work had to be done and it would take some *liquid strength* to deal with the surprises Lohan's death had left in its wake.

After she made several phone calls, Alicia headed straight to Lohan's bedroom. Steeling herself for more betrayal, she entered the room and learned more about the man she'd been married to for a good part of her life. More framed pictures of Tiffany dotted the room as well as her clothes in his closet. *So he had her here while...*

Having a horrible thought, she immediately called Archer and questioned him about Lohan's will.

"You are his sole heir. Evidently he knew he couldn't openly leave his paramour anything plus, if he had, he could've hurt his chances at getting your inheritance. My guess is that he showered her with gifts and made her swear to not complain unless she wanted to be cut off. Lohan had too much to worry about to expose the fact he had a mistress."

"I hope you're right," she said. "I'd hate to be in the middle of things only to find out it's not even mine."

"He couldn't have left the house to her with your name on the deed. The legal fight would have been outrageous."

"For my sanity, please check."

"I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

She thanked him before ending the call. Next, she went to the closet and pulled everything of Tiffany's out then took it downstairs to dump it in a trash bag. Once she had, she dragged it outside and put it with the rest of the trash that would be picked up in the morning.

A light rain had begun to fall and she put her face up, catching the raindrops as they fell. Alicia basked in the cleansing drops of rainwater hoping this would be a good omen of what would come in the near future.

“Please, God, please...”

\* \* \* \*

Blake hadn’t had time to think about Alicia thanks to the extensive therapy he threw himself into, the end of the season—he still went to games—the upcoming playoffs and fundraising carnival plus the fact Leighton wouldn’t allow anything to get in the way of his recovery.

Listening to the financial news on *CNBC*, Blake jotted down some figures then went on-line to do some initial research. Making more notes, he then did some math and sat back. A possible deal, the company he’d been looking at would be a good addition to either *Atherton Sports Group* or *Revere Waverly*.

Grabbing his cell phone, he called Gary Orbison to discuss the details.

“Blake, it’s good to hear from you.”

“It’s been a while.”

“What’s up?”

Blake explained his proposal, listening to Orbison’s advice.

“If you really want this company, start reasonable with an offer from *Atherton*. If that’s rejected, make an offer from your grandmother. You know how persuasive she can be.”

“Good idea.”

“Once it’s yours, you can decide which umbrella to put it under.”

“Good advice,” Blake said. “Now, to tell Gran.”

“She won’t have a problem.”

“I know but I’ve always kept her in the loop.”

“Smart idea,” Orbison said. “By the way, have you been watching the art sales?”

“No, why?”

“Alicia Billings has put that entire collection up for sale. It’s valued at several million.”

“Good for her.”

“Interested?”

“Nope, not my kind of art. When he bought it, he went for some of the...I can’t even begin to describe it. All I know is that it’s not something Gran or I would choose if buying.”

“If you’re interested for other reasons, it’s being held at the gallery near Leighton’s.”

“Thanks but I doubt it. We’re pretty busy with the carnival. By the way, how big of a donation can we put you down for?”

“I figured ten grand but I may add some if I can get to meet Bobby Orr.”

“You’re on, my friend.”

Blake ended the call and sat back in thought.

“Who have you been talking to?” Leighton asked, bringing him back to the present.

“Gary.”

“And what are you trying to hatch now?”

Blake explained their discussion, Leighton listening intently.

“Go ahead with it. If you can’t get it on the first offer, I’ll make the call then once we succeed, we’ll list it under *Atherton Sports Group*.”

“You’re sure?”

“Your find and research—why not? Besides, one day it’ll all be yours so why squabble over the details?”

Blake stood up and hugged his grandmother, words not needed to express his feelings.

"I imagine the business part of the call ended quickly. What else did he have to say?"

"He's donating ten grand to the carnival but will up it if he gets to meet one of his idols."

"Good, I want this to be successful."

"Trust me—between Gary's, mine and yours, we're off to a good start."

Leighton smiled, then probed a little more.

"Anything else?"

"I know you want to know about what we said about Alicia—just ask."

"Okay, what is she up to besides using my decorator for the house?"

"She's put that ugly art collection up for sale at the gallery down the street."

"Any value mentioned?"

"Several million, Gary said."

"Then she should have a good nest egg to fall back on."

"If I know her, she won't keep the money. To her, it brings back bad memories. She told me once if she had the chance to sell it, she would give the money away. For her to be even redoing the house is so out of character to how she felt about living there."

"I've heard through the grapevine that she's put the place on the historical register and wants to restore it back to what it once had been. According to my decorator, she wants to open it to the public."

"More power to her. If it works, I'm happy for her."

Leighton changed the subject, Blake grateful. Talking about the woman who'd stomped on his heart after literally throwing him into the boards still hurt. It amazed him how she still got under his skin, his body betraying his desires for her.

He saw the diamond solitaire he'd bought to slide on her ring finger at the first opportunity they had and thought about selling it. *Hell, I have no need for it nor will I ever...* But somehow, he couldn't bring himself to do it. *Why?*

"Blake, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Sweetheart, it takes time."

"Is that your excuse for keeping Phillip at arm's length? Granddad's been gone how many years?"

"Blake, I..."

"Look, it didn't work out for me and I don't intend to let myself get into that situation again. The man loves you. At least, let one of us have that kind of happiness before we pass."

"I've been thinking about it."

"Then think harder."

"It's not a business deal."

"No, it's not but you both deserve to enjoy life without hiding behind closed doors or fearing innuendo. I've heard speculation and would have acted on it before but..."

"It seems I've done the same thing to the two men I care about the most, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"Honestly, how many people truly know how closely related we are? Those who do know have been sworn to secrecy."

"But very advantageous when it came to Billings' threats."

"And Alicia could have screwed everything up but she didn't."

"No, she got what she wanted using me and you. Gran, at any time, she could have..."

"But she didn't," Leighton said. "For whatever reason, she didn't."

\* \* \* \*

Alicia watched the last painting crated and removed from the house. With the collection gone, she could now do what she wanted with the place. *How many years...*

"Miss Alicia, is there anything else you need for your meeting?"

"No, thank you."

Since her return to the house, she'd fired the previous staff who'd been loyal to Lohan needing to have people surrounding her who didn't know her past. Hiring Christine had been a blessing and she adored being called *Miss Alicia*. Until the courts approved her petition to legally go back to her maiden name of *Lawford*, she lived in a sort of limbo—for business or anything dealing with her marriage, she'd continue to use *Billings*. For her future, she would be known as *Alicia Lawford*. She'd been assured there'd be no problem but the wait unnerved her.

Alicia needed to get rid of her past, the name change one step on a long road to being able to live her own life.

Each day, the house took on its new look—one room at a time. While being worked on, the furnishings went into the ballroom where she made the decision whether to keep or get rid of it. Most she kept once the pieces had been appraised and dated. It became apparent much of it had come with the house though she'd been led to believe it'd been bought with her in mind. *Yeah, right, he stole money from the start...*

As more came to light, Alicia realized she'd been very lucky to survive Lohan Billings.

"Ma'am, your guest is waiting in the sunroom."

"Thank you, Christine."

She took a deep breath and cleared her mind before entering the room.

"Doctor Barrett, how are you?"

\* \* \* \*

Weeks passed, many things happening to both Blake and Leighton. First, the deal Blake worked on went through after his first offer, a coup for *Atherton Sports Group*.

"I'm proud of you, Blake."

"I've had a good teacher."

"Flattery gets you everywhere," Leighton said, smiling.

Leighton had surprised him a few days before when she told him that she and Doctor Phillip Kaplan would marry after the carnival and season ended.

"Why are you waiting, Gran? Just do it," Blake said.

"Because I want my grandson to give me away."

"What?" he asked taken by surprise.

"I want the world to know about the men in my life. After our talk the other day, I did some hard thinking. I think it's time everyone knew."

"But what about *Revere Waverly* and..."

"I've decided to turn the reins of the business over to you—it's time."

Blake literally fell into the closest chair to him.

"Excuse me?"

"You've been handling both companies easily for years. You've got good advisors who've been in place long enough to know how we both work and respect it plus you'll have the time you want for the team."

"Gran, I appreciate this but I really need to know why. We've always been so damned careful..."

"We knew it would happen eventually. The board is in favor of it considering you're the one they've been dealing with the last several years."



“As an advisor—not the heir to the proverbial throne or your grandson, for that matter.”

“You can protest all you want but I’ve made my decision. Everything goes into effect one week after the Calder Cup is won.”

Blake gazed at her before he hugged her.

“Blake, what’s wrong?”

“I hope and pray I don’t fail you.”

“You won’t, dear,” she assured him. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Blake had been preparing for this day and looked forward to it but now it overwhelmed him. He knew he could handle all three of his loves without a problem. *Hell, I’ve been doing it for years.* The thought of everything out in the open threw him. *What will the team say after all this time when nothing’s been said? If the board’s okay...*

“If you’re wondering about the team’s reaction, most of them know and don’t care. They know you as you—their teammate and one who’s not afraid to take a check or penalty for the team.”

“But how? When?”

“While you recovered at the clinic, I had to tell them why you wouldn’t be there. When I told them about you being my grandson, they all asked one question.”

“What?” Blake asked suspiciously.

“How could they help you?”

“Gran, talk to me,” Blake said, obviously confused.

“It seems to have leaked out several years ago but because of your down-to-earth attitude and the fact you never acted like *Olde Boston* money, they didn’t care. When they heard what happened, they immediately asked what they could do to help out with your recovery. In fact, they’ve wanted to honor you for years for the support you’ve given the team and the league on and off the ice but knew you loved the game and that’s why you did it.”

“Amazing.”

“Aside from the ones you and Patrick recruited that night, I’ve learned that if they’d been given the chance, they all would have backed you up.”

“I never knew...”

“Now that it’s out, there shouldn’t be any problems. There never has been—at least, that I know of. So...” Leighton said, her words trailing off.

“I guess you’re right,” he said. “I’ve got it all—except for one thing.”

“And you might still find it. Thanks to you, I have.”

“And I’m happy for you but for me—not in this lifetime.”

\* \* \* \*

The night of the gallery sale of the Billings’ art collection gave Alicia great pleasure. The next morning, she stood in the foyer of the huge house the collection had been housed in for years, holding a check for five million dollars. The art had gone for more but she didn’t feel bad after the gallery took its commission.

Kissing the check, she suddenly had a brainstorm. Hoping she hadn’t done something rash, she ran upstairs to her room. Rum-maging through one closet filled with nothing but designer gowns—most worn only once—she looked for one specific gown hoping she had not put the one she wanted with those she’d sent to a fashion auction. Over the course of the last few years of her marriage, she’d amassed several dozen designer gowns thanks to her husband’s refusal to have her wear any one of them twice—something about his being embarrassed if she did.

She’d halved the amount of gowns yet still had a closet full and she’d yet to find the one she wanted. *But if I find it...*

Alicia knew that when she went out, Lohan searched her things—one reason why she’d asked Leighton Waverly to hold

several items of personal and sentimental value for her. Leighton had and then returned them when Alicia left the clinic.

Finally, she found the dress and held her breath as she pulled it from the back of the closet and checked it. Breathing a huge sigh of relief, she took it into the bedroom and looked at it more closely. Finding nothing wrong with it, she started making plans for one night that would either make or break her life.

“Christine?” she called.

“Yes, Miss Alicia.”

“Can you get this to the cleaners? I need it back as soon as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said as she took the gown off the bed.

“Thank you,” Alicia said as she watched her housekeeper leave the room with the gown she wore at the auction—the same night she met Blake Atherton. *I need to explain...*

Alicia thought back to Doctor Barrett’s visit and their conversation. Once Alicia realized the truth, life had become more enjoyable save one very important aspect—the man she wanted to spend her life with. Without him, it would be hard though she knew she’d have to go on. Their meeting had been more like a therapy session—one she needed and took a great deal from.

Grabbing her handbag and keys, she left the house to run some errands, her main priority—putting the check in her account then getting one tiny thing she missed having. Alicia wanted a cell phone and she felt the time had come to get one of her own.

Alicia Lawford—formerly Billings—had finally begun to become a viable part of the twenty-first century. *Hopefully, it won’t be too late...*

\* \* \* \*

Leighton went over the final guest list for the party after the carnival noticing an unfamiliar name. She called Blake.

"Do you know an *A. Lawford*?"

"Not offhand," he replied. "Unless it's one of the girlfriends."

"She's not listed with any of the team members."

"Let me see," he said, taking the list from his grandmother. Looking at it, he couldn't place the name or match it to a face though something struck him as odd. *How did it wind up on the list?*

"It looks like my assistant's handwriting."

Moments later, Leighton spoke to her personal assistant, Anthony Farrell.

"Did you add *A. Lawford* to the guest list?"

"Yes, an invitation response card came back so I..."

Leighton stopped him, looking over the list of those attending as compared to those invited.

"Who has not responded yet?"

"The usuals who'll be in Florida or the Islands and Alicia Billings."

"You sent her an invitation?" Blake asked.

"Of course," Anthony said. "She did work on the event if only for a short time. Besides, no one told me I shouldn't."

"I see," Leighton said, smiling.

"What?" Blake asked.

"Alicia's maiden name is Lawford. She obviously went back to it and plans to attend the carnival, the party or both."

"I thought she didn't want to be involved any longer."

"I never asked, considering the way she acted. I had to continue without her and asked you to help," Leighton explained.

"So she plans to..."

"Blake?"

"I don't know if I can deal with her and her..."

"You'll be with the team and Patrick told me you'll be busy signing autographs."

“For an hour, I think.”

“If this goes like Philadelphia’s, you won’t have time to worry about her.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m just getting to the point where it doesn’t piss me off if her name is mentioned.”

“Blake, if she does show up, be nice. Remember how I raised you.”

“Gran, I...”

“It’ll be fine, I promise.”

“I hope so...”

## **Chapter 14**

With the team practices, the game schedule plus the carnival, Blake stayed in Providence and handled everything until Leighton joined him. With everything keeping him busy, Blake had all but forgotten *A. Lawford* and Alicia.

Slipping into his team jersey, Blake left the hotel room and headed to the arena. Even though he'd been placed on the injured list, league policy stated all players—if able to—would be at games to support their teammates. It wouldn't have mattered anyway—Blake Atherton refused to stay away. He loved the sport, his team and the friendships he'd made over the years. Nothing short of a huge emergency could keep him away.

He spoke with several of the players to make sure they had no questions about their jobs during the carnival. Considering the goalies had the busiest station since they had to be geared up to take shots on them from fans, he wanted to make sure it ran smoothly and they didn't get hurt by an overzealous fan.

"Someone will be with each fan so you don't get a shot like Zdeno Chara's," he said, referring to the speed of one of Boston's top defensemen. At six foot nine, he held the All Star Championship records for the fastest shot—the current being clocked at just over one hundred and five miles per hour—and he'd held the record for three years running.

Wishing the team luck before he left the locker room, Blake hated that he'd spend another game watching from the owner's

box. Frustrated, he really wanted to be on the ice but Kaplan and his therapist had told the team and the league that he'd be out the remainder of the season.

"Atherton," a voice called.

"Coach?"

"I need someone on my left tonight."

"What's up?"

"He's got the flu so I'd hoped you'd take his place tonight."

"Sure, I'd love to."

"Besides, gets you out of that posh owner's box and back down where you belong."

"Thanks," Blake said, fixing his tie.

Since therapy on his ankle had been strengthening it and his lower leg, Blake decided to leave his crutch back in the locker room. So far, the injury had not been bothering him but once he started really pushing himself, his body let him know its dislike.

He watched warm-up then he took some time to watch the team they'd been facing successfully in the playoffs—the Portland Pirates from Maine. Seeing some things he'd never taken notice of before due to being busy on the ice, he made some notes for the pre-game meeting.

Standing off to the side during the meeting, he listened to everything his head coach said, glad that everything he wanted to mention had been covered.

"Tonight, Blake will be assisting me on the bench to my left as Tom's home with the flu. Anything you want to say, Blake..."

"Thanks, Coach," Blake said. "It's odd being on this side of the team but I hope to do a decent job. One thing—I owe you guys a lot of thanks for being there for me over the last several weeks. It means a lot to me."

The team applauded him then settled down.

"I do have one thing to say about tonight's game and all the others you'll be playing in the series and later on," he started. "Always keep your head up. The minute you look down, the other team will nail you."

"Good advice—remember it," the coach said.

The team stood then filed out of the locker room for the first period, each member giving Blake a high-five. He and the others on the coaching staff followed, taking their places behind the team for the game. Blake took a deep breath before settling into his job, one he actually enjoyed—especially when they won. As it looked, and with a lot of hope, their team would go to the second round.

After the game, he walked out with Patrick. They heard his name called and stopped.

"Coach, what's up?"

"First off, how's the ankle?"

"Hurts but I expected as much considering how long I stood on it."

"Well, suffice it to say, you did a great job out there tonight."

"Thanks, I enjoyed it."

"If that ankle decides it doesn't like skates anymore, I've got a place for you with me. You're the kind of assistant coach I want on my team."

They shook hands, Blake thanking him.

Once in the hallway with Patrick and no one else, Blake leaned against the wall, lifting his foot to relieve the pressure on it.

"Blake?"

"Honestly, how did I do?"

"Great," Patrick said. "The guys like the fact you know how we play because we've all skated together. You gave some great advice and suggested good plays. Why? What's up?"

"I don't know," Blake answered. "I don't know why I'm..."



"You've been second-guessing yourself since..."

"Don't say it, please."

"But, Blake..."

"I know, I fucked up big time. If I hadn't been so damned..."

"Yo, you saw a beautiful damsel in distress and went in like King Arthur. No one had any clue how it would turn out."

"I did go charging in, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did but it's nothing new. Had you not, I would have been worried. You and I have always..."

"But neither of us damned near died. Plus, if she truly gave a damn, you think she would've called."

"I've done some checking and she's been busy."

"We know about the house and the art collection—what else?"

"She's not only redoing the house, she plans to open parts of it to the public because of its history. Besides the art collection, she sent several dozen gowns to an auction then donated a good part of the proceeds to charity. She's changed her name legally..."

"To her maiden name," Blake finished. "Gran and I found out when her name appeared on the after-carnival party list. So far, it tells me nothing more than what I already know."

"Did you know she met with Alyce Barrett?"

"So?"

"Alicia invited her to the house and it seems that Alicia's stronger and very determined to make amends for the past."

"Which evidently no longer includes me."

"Blake, keep an open mind on this. Because of privacy laws, Alyce couldn't go into their conversation but it seems she came away from it extremely impressed."

"I still don't see where it includes me."

“Just do me a favor—if she wants to talk to you, hear her out.”

“We’ll see,” Blake said. “Come on, let’s get a beer.”

\* \* \* \*

Watching the news, Alicia learned that Blake Atherton had stepped in as assistant coach for the game filling in for one of the coaches who had the flu. The team won their game and led their best-of-seven series by two wins.

Checking her clipboard, she made some notes then sat back.

*So he’s coaching...*

She went on-line—something she did quite often once Christine helped her get acclimated to the world of computers. Searching for hotels in Providence, she found a bed and breakfast near the airport while the party would be held at a nearby Radisson.

Alicia had made a conscious decision to stay somewhere other than that hotel in case things did not go as she hoped. *Clean break if need be...* Satisfied with the reservations and continuing down the list of things she needed to do, she stopped at the one point giving her the most heartache—Blake Atherton. While she planned to wear the designer gown to the party that she’d worn the night they met, she’d yet to figure out how to get his attention.

She’d had several ideas but every one of them had a drawback.

*Why can’t I come up with something?*

Alicia picked up the invitation to the party noticing something she had not noticed before.

*Following dinner at nine will be a fundraising auction with the top item being a getaway to the Bahamas.*

“If I can slip in before and... Dinner for two at *Locke-Ober...*”

An idea began forming, Alicia writing furiously as she plotted out what she wanted to do. An hour later, she sat back and smiled.  
*I think it may work...*

\* \* \* \*

The day of the carnival proved to be long yet rewarding. Blake again stepped in for the flu-stricken assistant coach, their team winning once more. During the intermissions, he handled last-minute details for the carnival while Leighton entertained their special guests in her luxury suite.

After the game, rivalries went by the wayside as both teams, hockey stars from the Bruins and fans enjoyed a few hours of carnival fun for a worthy cause. Only Leighton Waverly could convince the opposing team to take part, everything working out well.

Blake spent the entire time helping out with the goalies down on the ice. Literally, kids of all ages took a chance to score against one of the net minders, most shots going in. Blake grinned when the small kids tried to send the puck across the ice, especially when the hockey sticks seemed to tower over them.

At one point during the afternoon, he thought he saw Alicia but a fan asked him for his autograph and when he looked back, the woman he'd seen had disappeared though his body refused to relax. *No, not now, not again...*

The one thing he feared more than anything had been possibly letting his guard down once more. Unable to take that kind of hurt again, he prayed Alicia would not be at the party. The way his body persisted in betraying him, he dreaded what might happen because he knew if he came anywhere near her, he'd be fucking her as soon as he found somewhere they could be alone—even if it meant the backseat of the Jag.

Blake endured the rest of the carnival but the moment he found Leighton, he pulled her aside.

"Blake, what's wrong?"

"She's here."

"Who?"

“Alicia.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing yet but it’s what could happen that worries me.”

“Take it easy,” she soothed. “Did she talk to you?”

“No, I’d been signing autographs and had a lot of people around me.”

“Okay, and since?”

“I haven’t seen her but...”

“Blake, calm down. We don’t have too much longer then we can take it easy.”

“I hope so... Maybe I shouldn’t...”

“Blake Atherton, I want you with me. You’ve done a hell of a lot for this event and deserve to be there.”

“But my personal life...”

“Mrs. Waverly, I’ve been asked to give this to you,” one of the players said as he handed her an envelope.

“Thank you,” she said, taking it and looking inside.

“What is it?”

“Look for yourself.”

Blake looked at the contents seeing a certificate for dinner for two at *Locker-Ober*.

“What the hell is her game?”

“I’ll let you take care of it. Just have it back to me before the auction’s over if Alicia has nothing to do with it.”

Blake nodded as he slid the envelope in his pocket.

“I will get to the bottom of this—one way or another.”

“Take care,” she said. “I don’t want you doing something rash.”

Blake pulled his grandmother into a hug then whispered his love to her.

“Trust me, everything will work out.”

"I hope so."

\* \* \* \*

Alicia had seen Blake watching him while he signed autographs. The moment their eyes met, she lost her nerve and escaped to another part of the arena only to spend the rest of the carnival dodging anyone she might know. As much as she still loved him, the sight of Blake Atherton sitting a short distance away unnerved her. *Why? I love the man...*

She spent the rest of the carnival trying to blend in with the crowd until she finally asked one of the players she didn't know to give an envelope to Leighton Waverly. After that, she left and headed straight to the bed and breakfast she'd taken a room at.

"Miss Lawford, did you enjoy your day?" the innkeeper's wife asked.

"I had fun," she admitted.

"Good," she said as Alicia smiled and went upstairs. In order for her to stay at the small inn without many questions, she'd paid her hosts double the rate then told them she may not be in her room every night.

"This should cover any inconvenience," she'd said when she registered.

With that said, she settled into a corner room with a view of a pond behind the inn. Now she had several hours to get herself together and prepare to face the rest of her life—with or without the man she loved.

Alicia took out her day planner and studied the agenda she'd outlined. If this evening didn't work out the way she wanted, she'd be on a plane to London where she planned to disappear. She had enough money from the sales of the art collection and the gowns even though she'd donated a healthy portion to charity. Her attorney had started proceedings to liquidate her husband's businesses,

closing them and ceasing operations. Even though she'd been restoring the house initially at her own expense, she'd been able to obtain grants and help from local history clubs who took on the task and had been doing an amazing job while also helping her recoup what she'd already spent. With her family's money and the investments made under Leighton's watchful eye, she sat financially well off and could basically do anything she wanted—only she wanted what she possibly could not have. *Tonight will tell...*

Taking out a notebook, she went through several articles she'd taken from the financial sections of the *Boston Globe* and *USAToday*. Since he'd been able to return to work, Blake Atherton had taken over the reins of *Revere Waverly*, openly running his grandmother's successful empire as well as *Atherton Sports Group*. Worth billions, Blake still remained true to his first love as evidenced by what she'd witnessed at the arena. With his net worth, he could easily buy controlling interest in his favorite team and help it out of bankruptcy. *I wonder if he will try...*

Alicia looked at the clock and took a deep breath. Walking into the shower after stripping out of her clothes, she let the hot water run over her body then dried off before sliding the gorgeous blue designer gown on. She had not worn it since the night she'd met Blake and hoped it wouldn't bring up bad memories for him though she felt sure his seeing her might. She'd been cruel and she knew it but part of her therapy session with Alyce Barrett spelled out what she had to do to personally heal—make amends and try to straighten things out with the people she hurt.

"If it doesn't work out, you can walk away knowing you genuinely tried."

Alyce's words came back to her giving her hope.

Adding accessories, she grabbed her coat and keys then left the inn for the hotel and the after-carnival party. Her stomach felt like

several squadrons of butterflies fought each other, none of them winning. She'd had nerves before but never like this. As she drove—another new part of her life as Billings had not allowed her to do it on her own—her life passed before her, Alicia seeing many aspects she hated. So far, she'd dealt with most of her demons save the ones she'd face tonight.

Alicia knew that if Blake accepted her and they got back together, Leighton Waverly would be easy since her grandson and his happiness meant everything to her. If she failed tonight, she saw no sense in even trying to make any kind of overture to his grandmother because there would be no reason to.

Getting out of her car after parking it, Alicia took a deep breath then crossed the lot to enter the hotel.

"Well, here's goes nothing—or everything..."

\* \* \* \*

Inside, Blake had just left the front desk and found his grandmother as she and Phillip walked to the elevators.

"I just checked with the desk and she's not registered as a guest."

"Blake, take it easy," Leighton told him.

"I know you're right but it worries me. What happens if she..."

"If she makes sense to your stubborn mind?" she asked. "Blake, if you two are meant to be together and I'm sure you are, then let it happen and don't fight her."

"Whoa, this doesn't sound like you. I mean, you..."

"You opened my eyes to what I'd been missing by denying this wonderful man here the pleasure of admitting our relationship existed. We've never been happier and I want the same for you. You had it for a short while—you'll find it again."

"But the damned pain that came with her..."

"She's had a lot to deal with—on her own, I might add—in the last several weeks. She's liquidated his business holdings and taken several other steps to disassociate herself from that despicable man. I'd say she's cleaning house to come to you as a free woman with no baggage."

"Son, you want her, it's obvious. Give her a chance..." Kaplan advised.

The elevator doors opened and the three of them entered it. Turning around to press the button, he saw Alicia entering the hotel wearing the same dress she wore the night they met. His legs felt weak, Blake leaning against the back of the elevator for support after he pressed the button for the floor he'd been staying on.

"Blake?"

"I need the other crutch," he said absently.

"No, you don't," Leighton said. "She's here, isn't she?"

Blake nodded.

"Why?"

"Because she's a part of the success of today's event. She received an invitation and said she'd be here. Blake, please..."

Blake got off at his floor after telling them he'd meet them in the ballroom. He quickly headed down the hall to his room, slid the keycard in the door and went inside. Suddenly, he felt as if he couldn't breathe, much like the night at the warehouse. *What the hell is going on?*

He went to the bottle of whiskey sitting on the entertainment center and poured a shot drinking it down in one gulp. The liquid's burn traced a clear path from his lips to his stomach and he poured another, the second shot following the first in the same way. Hopefully, the hotel bar would remain open later because of the numerous parties being held there. The way he felt right now, he wanted to get smashed and wake up some time later—a lot later.



Before leaving the room, Blake washed his face with cold water, the chill of it feeling good. He walked out of the bathroom and looked at the set of crutches and his grandfather's walking stick, deciding on the latter. Though he used the need for his crutch as a reason to get some liquid strength, Blake knew better than to return without something. The walking stick would do and keep questions to a minimum.

Entering the ballroom a short time later, he made his way over to the table reserved for Leighton and Phillip, the team's owner and his wife, the coach and his wife and Blake. Sitting next to an empty chair allowed him to elevate his ankle if needed, as well as putting the walking stick safely out of the way.

"Did Mister Daniels help?" Leighton asked mischievously.

"Twice."

"Feel better?"

"Some."

"Before you start searching, she's sitting at a table on the opposite side of the room."

"Who is she with?"

"Several of our corporate sponsors who have no idea who she is. By the way, have you found out about our mystery donation for the auction?"

"Not yet," Blake answered. "But I will."

"Remember when I need it by..."

"Yes, Gran. I'll have an answer for you as soon as I can speak with the lady who more than likely—no make that definitely—donated it."

"What do you mean?"

"She's wearing the same dress she wore the night we met. I took her to *Locke-Ober* a couple nights later as part of the winning auction bid. There's way too much for it to be coincidental."

"I see what you mean," Leighton agreed. "Let me know and good luck."

"Thanks, I'll need it."

"Before I forget, did you want to say anything to our guests?"

"No, I leave that up to you. That way, I can slip out and do some sleuthing."

"All right, Mister Holmes," she said, referring to Blake's love of the fictional detective, her reference finally getting her grandson to smile.

\* \* \* \*

Alicia sat with several of the corporate sponsors she and Leighton had lined up for the ad book and donations. She imagined they must have made some hefty contributions to be guests at the party—an idea she liked. The dinner delicious and the conversation light, Alicia enjoyed herself while trying not to look for Blake.

She'd seen him enter the room heading straight for the table where his grandmother waited then nothing more thanks to a small group of guests talking in front of them. A closer look and she noticed several of the players and figured it had to be a *team discussion*.

Halfheartedly, she listened to the conversation at the table and added her thoughts or asked questions if necessary. When a break came before the awards part of the evening followed by the auction, the men at the table left for the bar as their wives headed for the ladies' lounge. Sitting back, she lifted her water goblet to her lips seconds before the lights dimmed.

"We need to talk—now!" a voice said, Alicia freezing.

"Excuse me but..." she gasped as Blake's hand wrapped around her upper arm and firmly pulled her from her chair then through a door behind her that she hadn't even noticed. Leading her away from the room, she had no choice but to go with him though she stubbornly protested. *And the heat rises...*

“Blake, stop this,” she said. “Let go of my arm...”

They stopped once they’d turned a corner finding themselves alone and away from anyone at the party. Alicia turned to him coming face to face with the envelope she’d left for Leighton earlier.

“It’s for the auction,” she stammered.

“At *Locke-Ober*, of all places... Why there, Alicia?”

“It’s a nice restaurant. I enjoyed it and thought...”

“You thought it would get a reaction out of me, didn’t you? Well, it did, lady. Are you satisfied?”

“Blake, I need to talk to you but not while you’re like this.”

“Then you’ll have a long wait because what you see now is what you created.”

“Blake, I...”

“No deal, Alicia, I won’t allow it.”

Without warning, he shoved her into a small room that looked like a cloakroom which had not been used for a long while. Leaning against the door, he pulled her to him, his lips covering hers. Strangely, despite wanting his kiss, she fought him—this side of Blake Atherton one she’d never seen before.

“That’s what I thought—showing up at the carnival then here, the damned dress and the donation—it’s all a game to you.”

“It hasn’t been, I swear.”

“Then what’s this, Alicia?” he repeated, showing her the envelope again.

“A donation to the auction.”

“Why there?” he asked again.

“Blake, I can’t even begin to try to explain anything while you’re being unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable? Is that what I am? I damned near died because of you and what did you do? You turned on everyone who tried to

help you. You let me walk out of your room at the clinic without even trying to stop me.”

“I had no voice. I’d had surgery the day or two before to remove scar tissue after I came in as an emergency case. I couldn’t manage to get any words out. Besides, you’d been so angry, it scared me.”

“Why did you run?”

“To save all of you from me. I thought that Lohan’s last words might be true. I took all the blame, terrified something could happen to you and your grandmother—even Patrick. Everywhere I went, people seemed to turn up dead and Lohan put the blame on me. Then I discovered the harsh reality of what I’d been married to and realized I’d been lied to. Because of him and not me, people I cared about either died, got hurt or lived under his threat. I couldn’t put either one of you through that so I ran away like a coward—not from you but from myself.”

“So you expect me to believe you had a sudden epiphany and everything can be fine between us just because you told me about your bastard husband and his threats? What did he do—screw around on you?”

“Right across the hall,” she said quietly. “Her name is Tiffany and she tried to say that Lohan left her the estate. My attorney won that argument and she walked away with only what she’d been given while they slept together. While I locked myself in my room so he wouldn’t touch me, they had fun across the hall from me knowing I’d never catch them—no matter what took place. He saw me as a trophy wife who’d become a liability to him. Had he survived that night, I’d be dead because I lied to him about the Lawford money and I can guarantee, he had plans for you and Leighton. I didn’t want any more of the Billings’ poison touching either of you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’d better leave.”

“Why?”

“You are so angry that you refuse to believe me. I’ll have to live with that. I’m sorry, Blake,” she apologized. “Honestly, I am.”

“Alicia, I spent weeks trying to figure out what the hell went wrong. I’ve heard about everything you’ve done and I’m impressed. You have no idea how many times I tried to pick up the phone but didn’t because I couldn’t bear being hurt again. To lose both loves in my life hurt and it became worse every day.”

“Both?”

“The sport I’m married to and the woman I wanted to marry.”

“Wanted to marry?” she asked, her stomach feeling nauseated. “I hurt you that much?”

“Yes,” he said. “Gran can tell you that I swore off women totally. My heart couldn’t have taken the pain again. I put everything into the time we spent together only to have it thrown in my face. I can’t forget you because of what we shared plus the pain I live with thanks to what Billings did to my ankle.”

“I am so very sorry. I wanted to say something and fight him but Lohan made sure I couldn’t. If he hadn’t stopped Bruno, he would have broken my neck and left me there.”

“They told me you shot him...”

“Yes and I’d do it again. I vowed that night that no one would ever touch me again with the exception of the man who, I thought, lay dead on the warehouse floor below me. When Patrick told me you’d been taken to a hospital, I breathed a huge sigh of relief but thanks to Bruno, I couldn’t cry because it hurt so damned much. I wanted to die yet I wanted to live so we could be together. Now, I wonder why. I’ve never seen you so damned bitter. I understood about our being separated until they informed me I couldn’t see you when...”

"I'd had so many operations, Phillip feared opening me up again. I've never been in any pain near what I experienced yet the woman I'd fallen in love with caused me more than the surgeries did."

"And I'm sorry but that doesn't help if you won't believe me. Blake, I didn't stop loving you. I hated myself more along with the dangerous liability I'd become to all of you. I ran so you all could live. The world didn't know me but it knows you and your grandmother. In a warped way, I believed my sacrifice would be worth it if you both survived."

"But we never even talked..."

"No one would let me near you. Once I got to the clinic, I kept asking to see you and they kept saying no. What else could I do?"

Blake didn't answer her though he remained in front of the door barring her from leaving.

"Several of Billings' associates had to be apprehended along with two men the Feds believe wanted to open more clubs in New England and Canada—the reason he wanted your money. From what Patrick told me, these guys didn't care who they hurt to get what they wanted. One had ties to the Russian mob. Our original plan had been to keep you safe and out of the limelight in Newport and then I'd meet you at the house. The best laid plans never figured that asshole's cold ruthlessness into the equation. From the moment his men left me the note at *Cheers*, all strategy went out the window. Patrick and my grandmother became extremely over-protective but when you became despondent over everything while dwelling on everything being your fault..."

Alicia listened to Blake wanting to believe him. The only thing she could trust had been the still evident heat between them.

"All right, to make things simpler—everyone involved handled the entire situation in the worst possible manner. Where does that leave us?"

"I don't know," he said, taking out his cell phone, Alicia watching as he sent a text message.

"Telling Leighton about our conversation?"

"No, I'm telling her to forget auctioning off the dinner."

"Why, it's..."

"It's our place where we had our first date, so to speak. I don't want to share it."

"What difference does it make now? Are we together?"

"Alicia, a great deal's been said but one thing remained alive in all this."

"What?"

"The incredible bond and heat between us. I felt it when I grabbed your arm. Something's still there."

"Like I've told you, Blake—I never stopped loving you."

Blake found a chair and shoved it under the doorknob then pulled another over to sit down on. Loosening his tie, he sat back making sure he eased the pressure on his ankle.

"Can you think of any way to solve this?"

Alicia grinned as she reached behind her back and unzipped her gown letting it fall to the floor before she went to him wearing only her thong and a pair of stilettos, seducing him as she did. Kneeling before him, she undid his pants and took his waiting cock deep into her throat.

"My God, Alicia, are..."

Nodding, she took him deeper until her lips brushed his balls, Blake groaning. As her pace quickened, she felt his fingers tangling in her hair before he pressed her head closer.

"Damn, woman, I can't hold it any longer," he gasped as he felt her fingertips teasing his balls. Moments later, weeks of pent-up frustration exploded into her throat, Alicia taking it all.

She pulled back, laving his slit before gazing at him while she snaked her body along his. Their lips met, their kiss brutally passionate as his hands cupped her breasts firmly as if he refused to ever let go of her.

"I swear, Blake, I never stopped loving you..."

Blake somehow stripped out of his pants and boxers, his jacket and shirt hanging open while his tie lay on the floor near her gown. She'd removed her thong and now straddled his lap, Blake knowing what she wanted. He easily put his cock at the entrance to her hot velvety body and she slid onto him, impaled by his thick throbbing shaft.

Grabbing her by a handful of her thick hair, he brought her lips to his while she erotically moved up and down on him.

"Alicia, I never stopped loving you either," he told her. "I guess it's why the last several weeks of my life basically sucked."

"That's in the past and we have only this moment and our future."

His breath caught as she took him to the edge and held him there. Kissing her again, he gasped when he filled her—the explosive release fiercely hot.

"Blake?"

"What?" he groaned.

"Marry me?"

"Anything," he gasped. "Yes!"

While she continued taking his cock and keeping him on an erotic high, Blake framed her face with his hands then gazed at her before kissing her again, their tongues dancing in harmony with their bodies.



“I can’t get enough of you, lady.”

“Same here,” she said before moaning as he filled her again. “I can’t believe this heat survived it all.”

“Like Gran said—if it’s meant to be...”

“Oh, this is, Blake. This is...”

## **Epilogue**

Hockey season ended with their team going to the final round of the Calder Cup series and taking it four games to three over their opponents. At the celebration party, Blake announced their upcoming nuptials and they expected everyone to attend.

On her wedding day, Alicia wore an amazing strapless gown that hugged her gorgeous curves as if it had been tightly wrapped around her. The skirt flared out from the bodice, the gown of white satin with tiny rhinestones dotting it as if she wore a moonlit sky. Over her right side, clear gemstones accentuated her bust line in a floral design, one that matched the one at her waist on her left. A simple veil trained down her back and beyond the hem of the extremely full skirt.

Blake wore a midnight blue three-piece suit with white shirt and tie, the bride and groom meant for each other. At the end of the service, he slipped two rings on her finger—an engagement ring set in platinum with a three carat diamond set between two one carat stones and six channel set smaller weight stones on each side of the setting. He then slipped the matching wedding band on with it and squeezed her hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce Mister and Mrs. Blake Atherton.”

Everyone in the church stood, cheering them as they kissed. When they went outside, the guys from the team met them with an arch of hockey sticks that they walked underneath.

Following their honeymoon in Europe, they returned to Newport only Blake had another surprise waiting for his wife. When they drove up to a huge estate overlooking bluffs leading to the ocean, Alicia gasped.

"I'd been looking for a place for a while and figured the time had come between our wedding and Gran's. I also have the mansion in Boston near Gran's so we'll be close but yet far enough away."

Alicia Lawford Atherton threw her arms around his neck and hugged him as they stood in front of the huge house. The front door opened as the butler welcomed them home. Blake carried Alicia over the threshold then straight upstairs to the master suite.

"You've read my mind," she said.

"Perfect because I've wanted to do this all day."

"Then take me, I'm yours."

Blake groaned as he fulfilled her wish, slowly undressing her. When he found she wore no lingerie, he grinned.

"You are..."

"I want my husband to fuck me as much as he can in any position he wants. I love you, Blake Atherton, and I never want to be away from you."

Blake groaned again as he thrust his impatient cock into her waiting body. Fiercely passionate yet brutally forceful, he took his wife several times as Alicia begged for more.

Considering the time they'd spent apart, Blake and Alicia had more than made up for what they'd missed but they didn't care. They had each other and they'd learned one very important thing about their personalities—they needed to be inseparable.

Controlling *Revere Waverly* proved this as together, their ideas made money. *Atherton Sports Group* had officially been brought under the corporate umbrella though Blake still oversaw the day-to-

day operations. Alicia invested her entire fortune in *Revere Waverly*, the company now one of the most powerful on the eastern seaboard.

Her last official act which neatly closed out her past had been donating the Billings' house to the historical society then walking away from it.

"Are you all right?" Blake asked.

"Of course," she answered. "I never liked the place anyway except for one night where I met a man who bid one million dollars to spend a night with me. I wonder if he'd ever do it again."

"First, I have the woman I love in my life and as for bidding at another auction like that—no deal. Once proved to be enough, thank you."

"Speaking of deals, have you heard back about the team?"

"The matter's still in court but I keep up on what's happening daily."

"Good, I hope it works out."

"Then we could buy a house in Phoenix..." he suggested.

"Blake, I'm home wherever you are. It doesn't matter where as long as you are with me."

"Perfect," he said, pulling her close.

"When does the season start up again?"

"In a few months—why?"

"Then I get to spend the next few months getting you in shape to play, don't I?"

"And if I'm coaching instead?"

"I'll be there, no matter what."

"And I thought I'd lost the both of you."

"Never, Blake. The night you pushed the million-dollar bid for one night of my life, it changed forever. I've never been happier."

"Neither have I."

"Then let's go upstairs and make some deals," she suggested.

"No deal, wife. We made one and it'll stand the test of a lifetime."

Blake Atherton carried his wife to their bedroom, laid her in the center of their king-sized bed and made slow, lazy love to her. When he had her exactly where he wanted her, he thrust his cock inside her and refused to be gentle knowing Alicia would crave more.

At the height of her orgasm, she cried out his name while digging her nails into his finely-toned ass. Blake fell to her, kissing her as she took the last remnants of his essence. Massaging her breast, he noticed a subtle difference, looking at his wife.

"Alicia, do you have something to tell me?"

"Yes," she said between feathering kisses wherever she could touch. "But I have one thing to say first."

"What?"

"If we decide to relocate to Phoenix, we need to know how the schools are."

"Why?"

"*Revere Waverly* will operate under the next generation of Athertons and they'll need a good education."

"Run that by me again..."

"I'm pregnant with the next head of the family businesses."

Blake grinned then began to pull back, Alicia stopping him.

"Don't you dare, Blake. I want it all without you holding back."

"You're sure?"

"Passion created this child," she stated. "Why change now?"

Groaning, he rolled onto his back pulling her with him. With Alicia impaled on his cock, he eased her into a pace she then increased as the heat between them boiled over.

“Blake...” she cried out as she closed her eyes.

“Alicia, take me,” he urged as she nodded.

One night, dinner for two and an evening in bed—one million dollars.

Unbridled heat and a unique bond and love that would last a lifetime—priceless and the best deal a couple could ever make.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy Poff lives in southeastern Pennsylvania with her husband and two kids—her daughter (a college student) and her son who serves in the Army National Guard stationed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania plus his little one—his infant daughter who has proven to her that she's forgotten so much over the last twenty years.

Previously, she wrote news articles for local newspapers and regional firefighting publications. With her articles, she added photography to her pieces. Writing for several years, she has a deep respect for the Civil War and has done extensive research into the times. This love and research have resulted in several Civil War novels including CHASE FOR AN ANGEL which was born from this love and released in March, 2006. Others will follow.

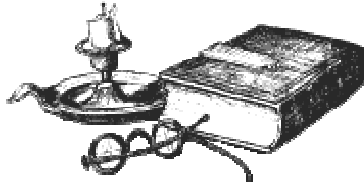
She loves old cities with history like Charleston and New Orleans, the wide-open spaces of Wyoming and the Dakotas, the beauty of a Maine sunrise plus seeing the rest of the U.S. and western Canada.

A volunteer firefighter for over twenty-five years, she's been able to use her experience in several published works for others and even in some of her own work.

People wonder what she writes to—Brooks and Dunn, Gary Allan, Linkin Park, Nickelback, Harry Connick or whoever strikes her mood at the time. She loves to watch *Top Gear*, *Torchwood* and *Doctor Who* on *BBC America*, *CSI:Miami* and reruns of *Nash Bridges*, *Miami Vice*, *Night Court* and *JAG*.



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