

A man wearing a yellow hard hat and no shirt is drinking from a clear plastic water bottle. He has a tattoo on his chest that reads '真愛' (True Love) and another on his right arm that reads 'TRANSFORM ME'. A woman with curly hair, wearing a white tank top and a large cross necklace, stands next to him. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

EROSA KNOWLES

Ready for Love

The Men of 3X CONStruction

Ready for Love

Copyright © March 2011 by Erosa Knowles

Published by Sitting Bull Publishing

Raeford, NC

www.wix.com/SittingBullPub/sittingbull

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book ONLY.

No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed without prior written permission from Erosa Knowles or Sitting Bull Publishing.

eISBN 978-0-9832287-5-2

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.



Ready for Love

Chapter 1

Sitting in the kitchen of her home, Denise Brown looked at the cookbook again and made a few notes. Her twins, Shantel and Shannon, loved the scones she'd made for their snack yesterday. Idly, she wondered if she'd found her niche. After taking numerous courses at the local college, everything from auto mechanics to scrapbooking, she'd found the cooking class the most interesting.

She flipped through the cookbook trying to decide what dessert to take to Cherise's later that week. The two women had become close the last few weeks. Ross, Cherise's live-in love, and Red, Denise's ex and father to her twins, were business partners in a construction company. Lately, they'd been exchanging babysitting duties to give the other a break since Ross's daughter Lenora lived with them and was close in age to the twins.

The next page showed a picture of a red velvet cake. A pang of longing shattered her composure. She swallowed hard as her finger traced the delectable treat. Red velvet was Red's favorite. He'd been on her mind a lot, lately.

Her daddy had been calling regularly, applauding her for coming to her senses and leaving that white boy alone.

"I'm proud of you, no need in allowing him to just use you. His kind never means you any good" Strange, normally his praises meant so much to her, but they were beginning to fall flat. How could a preacher hate someone? Or say such mean things about other people, especially when they didn't know them. He'd never had a conversation with Red and she'd dated him for eight years as well as had his children. What happened to all that love stuff he preached?

Even more surprising, a conversation she'd had two nights ago with her mother that shook the foundation of her world. She thought she had a handle on the direction she wanted her life, but now she wasn't so sure if her motives were her own.

"I don't understand what you hoped to accomplish by breaking up with that young man," her mom said, in an amazing turn of events. "He takes better care of you and my girls than a lot of married men do."

Denise knew that was a half-hearted dig at her daddy, who was in the ministry full time, even though his congregation was small and couldn't afford him. Her mom worked long hours, six days to make up the difference.

"Us breaking up had nothing to do with him handling his responsibilities."

"Really?" her mom asked. "Did he cheat on you while you were together?"

"Not that I know of," she answered slowly, wondering what had gotten into the woman. When had she become Red's fan?

"He must've forgotten to buy food, clothes or making sure the kids had a place to stay."

Denise shook her head, forgetting her mom couldn't see her. "No, no, he was always on point and made sure everything was taken care of." Feeling like a child defending her actions,

she shut down. “I don’t want to talk about him, Mom. How’s Dad?” Her father had gotten sick and was recuperating at home. That had been the purpose of her call home.

“As well as can be expected, I suppose.” Her mom paused. “Denise, I’m pushing because I don’t want us both to be miserable. You were always a daddy’s girl. Always wanting his approval and doing whatever you could to please him.”

“That’s not true—“

“Yes it is, and don’t interrupt,” she scolded. “I just want you to live your life for you. I know you let that young man go because of all your fathers’ hateful words. I’m stuck in a listless relationship that’s been dead a long time because he’s so opinionated. I’d give a lot to have someone take care of me the way your young man does. And he does this after you broke his heart.”

Stung at the accusation, she sought to change the discussion. “There’s more to it than that, Mom.” She didn’t want to go into it. Her thoughts scrambled in a dozen directions. Her mom was in a dead relationship? Miserable with her daddy? How? When? She hadn’t a clue. Were they divorcing?

“Are you... are you thinking about leaving Daddy?” she whispered, afraid to voice the question too loud.

“Sweetie, when you sleep in different bedrooms, rarely talk or share your day, eat at different times, you’ve already left even if you’re in the same house. We haven’t been a couple in years, he seems content.”

“But you’re not.”

“Not by a long shot.” Her mom paused. “After you visited the last time and the way he put your young man down, I wondered how you’d respond.” She’d gone to South Florida to see her mom, who’d been sick. She and the girls hadn’t stayed long. Reverend Brown, her dad, lectured on the evils of white devils, and how they violated black women constantly. It’d gotten old fast. Fortunately, it was a sermon special tailored for her and not the twins.

“You didn’t sound surprised when I told you he moved out.” Denise remembered her mom sounded sad, disappointed, but not shocked. She’d taken that to mean she approved of her no longer living *in sin*. They’d never talked so openly, why now? Was her mom really leaving her daddy?

“No, like I said, you always wanted to please your daddy. He knows that and uses it to get his way. He wanted you to break up a long time ago.”

“He wants me to move back home. I haven’t done that.” Like a petulant child, she clung to her version of the situation, even though it cracked around the edges and had large holes.

“I’m proud of you for holding strong and I hope this means you are growing up, living life on your own terms.” Her mom sighed. “You don’t want to wake up one day, alone, wondering what happened to your life. All the preaching in the world can’t comfort you at night when you’re hurt and alone.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying I should live with him even though we’re not married.” She marveled at the mixed message her mom sent.

“Marriage starts and lives in the heart, honey. The moment I met your young man, I knew he’d be your husband. You’re too picky to have spent so many years of your life with someone you didn’t consider yours. As far as I’m concerned you just need to make it legal.”

“Daddy doesn’t agree with you.” Her mind swirled with her mom’s logic. Why hadn’t they talked before? *Because she worked all the time, not Daddy, taking care of the family.*

“He wouldn’t,” her mom chuckled humorlessly. “He’s used to getting all your attention, and admiration, of being first line with you. He hates sharing.”

Denise looked at the book without really seeing the page. She’d been examining her life and didn’t like what she saw. That night at the fundraiser had been a revelation, cracking her view of reality further.

Jealousy had gripped and shaken her hard when she’d seen Red talking to some woman in the corner. In a pique, she’d joined a conversation with Richard, an old acquaintance, and his cronies even though she normally wouldn’t have given him the time of day. The man had been too happy to see her. His hand landed on her back and before she could check his half-drunken ass, Red pushed him off, and pulled her away. For all of one second she’d been grateful.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He snarled in her ear. “You can’t do that shit in front of me.”

She gasped, offended. “I’m a grown ass woman You don’t get to talk to me like a child.” She stalked off in a huff and stood at the table, too furious to sit as all the things she should’ve said crossed her mind. He’d surprised her; she hadn’t been prepared, the longer she thought, the more she wanted a do-over. She had some colorful adjectives prepared for his ass. Just as she’d reached her boiling point and started to cuss him out, he’d grabbed and kissed her, shutting her up, once again.

All she could do was stand there and stare at his retreating back, like an idiot. After all her protests, all her declarations that they were over, all the cussing outs she’d given his ass, that one kiss stripped her bare, displaying her feelings to anyone paying attention. Ms. Connie couldn’t stop smiling, even tried to take up for him.

“Enough,” she murmured putting away the book and those memories. She’d made a decision to let him go and despite how yucky she felt, she’d stick with it. But damn, it was hard when he looked as good as he had that night. His tailored dark navy suit fit him like a glove, he’d had his hair and goatee trimmed, his green eyes simmered when he stared at her, sending a shaft of heat to her core. He’d wanted her that night. She applauded his self-control. If they had been anywhere other than a crowded room, she’d have been on her back, or on the wall, somewhere with him stroking her goodies.

She groaned as moisture pooled between her legs. Frustrated, she hit the wall, wincing at the pain.

Why couldn’t she be more like him and move on? He’d never convince her he wasn’t screwing around. Although she never saw him with anyone, or heard of anyone he’d been with, she knew his sex drive was too high for him to go long without fucking. In that area, she knew him well.

Red had been her first in everything. He'd taught her how to please him, and showed her how she needed to be pleased. Excitement thrummed through her body as she remembered some of the things they'd done, some of the places they'd made out. In the park at dusk, on his jobsites after hours, on the deck, he was adventurous and kept things exciting.

They'd had some hot times.

She shook her head trying to remember when that'd ended. Once she got pregnant, it was like a switch. Funny she'd think of it like that. The spontaneity stopped. Her head hurt with all the ramifications of that path, so like every uncomfortable thought, she shut it down. Why the hell was she thinking about him anyway?

Dropping onto the sofa, she pressed the remote to watch one of her favorite programs. She sat in the family room to watch TV. Alone. She had a big house, a nice car and her bills were paid. But she was still alone. Her mom's caustic words resurfaced, opening the gateway for her reflections.

"You don't want to wake up one day, alone, wondering what happened to your life. All the preaching in the world can't comfort you at night when you're hurt and alone."

Had she made the right decision to break up with Red? She'd *felt* he wasn't ready to commit. Her words had been harsh. The pain in his eyes stabbed her heart. Closing her eyes, she saw the night it all started falling apart as the memories rushed over her.

They'd been in this room. The girls were upstairs asleep when she lit into him. "I want you to stop getting drunk all the time, Red," she snapped. "The girls are old enough to know something's wrong. You can go a day or two without drinking."

He looked at her, a frown on his face. "I just came home from work, I'm tired. What's wrong with me having a cold brew?"

"Not every damn day. You're turning into a fucking lush." Her face was hot with the force of her anger. She knew her attack was unfair, but she was tired. Home all day with twins, constantly in motion, constantly meeting their needs. He walks in, puts up his feet and chills. In that moment, she hated him.

"A lush?" his voice deepened. "Did you say I was a lush for drinking a beer after working in the fucking sun all damn day?"

"You ain't deaf, you heard me." She walked into the kitchen, leaving him in the family room. Her heart ached and she had no way of explaining. These were her children. She loved them, but felt trapped. At least he left everyday and worked around adults. She envied him that. A niggling thought teased her mind. *It's more than that.* She squashed it, afraid to examine anything else.

"What the fuck's the matter with you? That's not even a word you'd say." Red stood behind her, his body vibrating with his anger. "For the past two weeks you been ragging on me every fucking day when I come home or in the mornings before I leave." He narrowed his eyes. "Talk to me, tell me what's really going on."

I can't, it's too selfish. I want more from my life, I need more from you and I don't know how to change things. “I already told you. Stop the fucking drinking everyday in front of my kids. I don't want them around that bullshit.”

His head snapped back as if she struck him. He spun and walked out the front door. In her heart, she called him back and apologized a million times. Instead, she collapsed on the kitchen floor and cried. That was the first night they slept apart in eight years.

Chapter 2

Red sat in the driveway of the two-story brick home contemplating his next move. His partners in Three X Construction, Ross and Smoke, refused to allow him to quit over what they termed bullshit. He'd finally hopped in his Hummer and drove around to clear his head. At least that's the shit he'd told his boys. The look on both their faces called him a liar. Hitting the steering wheel, he yelled out his frustration.

Why'd he always have to be the fuck-up?

All his brothers had strong careers working for themselves. As the youngest, he'd had less responsibility and stayed in the most trouble.

Smoke had called him out days before for straddling the fence in his non-relationship with his babies' mama and ex-girl, Denise. She'd been right. He needed to grow up. Ever since the fundraiser a few weeks ago, she'd been on his mind more than usual. That was hard to understand since she was buried so deep inside him, she was never far from his thoughts.

The red sparkly dress she'd worn that night had his balls tensing and his cock straight hard. He lost his mind for a second when he saw her looking up at that asshole. Smoke had tried to stop him, but he was on autopilot. Nobody touched his woman. Fuck that they'd had a disagreement. She was still his. It was all he could do to keep from throwing her over his shoulder and taking her to a dark corner. He'd make her remember why they'd been so good together.

When he heard her complaining to Ms. Connie, the construction company's office manager, and Cherise, something snapped. She'd broken up with him on a bullshit tip and wouldn't talk to him. Lord knows he'd tried.

That was probably why he sat, like a lump of coal, in her driveway at nine pm. He had a shitload of mess on his mind and didn't want to be alone. He'd bypassed his townhouse, as well as Smoke's offer to crash at his beachfront condo. Now, like a jackass, he sat on the outside wanting in.

Pathetic.

That's what this insatiable need to be around her was fast becoming. He inhaled and glanced at his watch for the tenth time in the past twenty minutes, hoping to clear his head in preparation for a titillating exchange with Denise. She wasn't easy, but matched him perfectly. You'd never know she was a preacher's kid the way her mouth went off. Thinking of her mouth, led to visions of her full lips, which made him hard. He swallowed, pushing away his desire and righting his pants.

Unlocking his door, he stepped out of his black Hummer and pocketed the keys as he moved slowly toward the door. A car sounded in the distance, the hum of a neighborhood settling for the night calmed his jangled nerves. The mat proclaimed 'welcome.' Somehow, he doubted it extended to him.

After ringing the doorbell, he stepped back so she could see him. He suspected she knew he'd been outside the moment he arrived. It probably tickled her that he took this long to knock

on her door. Probably thought he'd been scared. He wasn't sure how far off she was on that. Not of her, but the whole situation with someone sabotaging the company, his role in it and since he was being honest, their relationship or lack thereof, worked his nerves.

His hands stroked the cotton lining in his pockets searching for additional warmth as he ducked his chin into the collar of his heavy Burma jacket against the night chill. Light footsteps neared the door. Without conscious thought, he rocked side-to-side, digging in his pockets further.

"Red?" a muffled voice asked surprised.

"Yeah." Who the hell else would be showing up this time of night, he wondered.

"What?" The chain he installed rattled as she disengaged it. "What are you doing here?" She finished unlocking the dead bolt and looked through the storm door at him in surprise.

I need you to hold me and tell me everything will be okay. "I need to talk to you," he said.

"You couldn't have called?" she snapped. One hand held her blue fleece robe in place as the other unlocked the last barrier between the cold and warmth. She swung open the door and stepped back.

"Yeah, I could've called, but I wanted to see you and the girls. I hoped to catch them before they went to bed." *Liar.*

He relocked the storm door and then the heavier door before glancing at her again. In truth, he needed a moment to pull it together. Seeing her dressed for bed fucked with him in ways he didn't want to explore. Well he did, but that would lead to blue balls.

At five feet six inches, compared to his six foot three frame, she wasn't very tall, but she'd been blessed with beautiful clear mocha-colored skin, straight white teeth, a fantastic set of high sitting, perky breasts and a nice round ass. He'd been drooling over her body for the past eight years. Even after the girls were born, she'd snapped back into shape and still looked good.

Damn good.

Inwardly he groaned. Looked like he'd suffer with blue balls regardless.

She nodded and walked toward the family room. A quick glance showed she hadn't changed much in the living or dining room since the last time he'd been here. The large rose-colored sofa and love seat dominated the formal areas with beautiful abstract artwork she picked out right before the girls were born. The familiar large dining room table and heavy cream-colored chairs she'd just had to have were in their normal place. Nodding he glanced to the staircase and halls, appreciating it still felt like home.

Muted sounds of the television program she'd been watching drew his attention. Bringing back memories from an earlier time when they'd stay up late watching the comedy channel or some of the drama crime series. Seemed like years instead of ten months.

He smiled. They'd had some good times. Stubbornly, he refused to accept they were forever finished. She loved him once; he'd make her love him again. First, she'd have to talk to him. For some reason, she refused to discuss their relationship.

“Still watching those crime shows I see.” He nodded at the television while taking off his coat and laying it on the chair. The fireplace blazed sending warmth in the barely lit room to his frozen digits. He sighed in appreciation.

“This isn’t a crime show. It’s about a medical examiner, a woman. I like the stuff she does, how she solves problems.” She clicked a few buttons on the remote and turned to face him.

“Okay, what’s up?”

After sitting, he’d laid his head back on the top of the sofa and sunk into the soft fabric. This had always been his favorite seat in the house. He opened one eye at her.

How to play this, he wondered. Straight shooting didn’t necessarily work with women in general and this one in particular. He glanced at her heart-shaped face and slanted dark brown eyes trying to gauge her bullshit meter.

He gave up, too tired and mixed up inside to think up something new.

“I quit the business tonight.”

Her brows rose to comical proportions. “You what?” His voice hit an interesting octave.

“You heard me. I quit, or at least I tried to quit,” he corrected, wiping his hand over his face realizing his five o’clock shadow felt more like ten.

“I don’t understand. Stop playing around and tell me what happened.” She sat up and clicked off the television.

He placed his hands behind his head trying to decide how much to share. “There has been some crazy shit happening on the job sites, and we’re being investigated about a body found on the lot next the one we’re working on in Big Lakes.”

“I heard about that on the news. Some woman was killed and buried in a field or something. That’s where your job is?”

A quick glance in her direction confirmed his suspicions. She was on her Perry Mason-Colombo kick. She was a detective, lawyer junkie and no doubt, she’d try to figure out the culprits in this fiasco. Better her than him. He just wanted it over, shit, he wanted to come home. The townhouse he’d bought was a temporary solution in his mind. He missed his family.

“Yeah.”

“Where were you when this went down?” The look she sent wasn’t sympathetic in the least. He’d come to the wrong place if that was what he needed. And yet, here he sat.

Like he thought earlier, pathetic.

“I was next door at the job. We’re in the final stages. Landscaping, concrete work and stuff. The cops came out poking around. Somebody called them.”

Her mouth dropped open. A perverse thrill shot through him at catching her off guard.

“Somebody did what?” She leaned forward; not realizing her robe gapped open affording him a tantalizing view of creamy brown skin. His heart raced at the familiar sight. *Down boy, blue balls on the horizon.*

He closed his eyes and savored the stolen glimpse of perfection. “You heard me. Somebody called and gave the cops some type of bogus tip about drugs being on site.” His eyes opened, he glanced at her. “At least that’s what they told us.”

“You think they lied?” Her eyes curiously lit.

He scowled in her direction. The excitement in her voice was misplaced. Police coming anywhere near a group of ex-cons was no reason to become animated.

“You ever known them to tell the truth?” He waited.

“No, not really.”

“A’wright then.” He settled back on the sofa, glad to have things in check.

“But, why would they lie?” Her frown deepened as she tugged her earlobe.

“Don’t know.”

“Somebody trying to fuck up y’all business or something?”

He turned in slow motion at her question. Denise had a sixth sense or something. She would’ve made a good detective. How in hell had she put that together so fast? He stared at her as she bit her bottom lip.

Inwardly, he groaned. That motioned signaled she was in deep thought and had always challenged him. In times past, he’d flip her over on the couch and proceed to refocus her attention on him. His hand shook in need as he pulled it through his hair. It didn’t take much for him to reach the edge of his control. Coupled with everything he’d been through tonight, having flashbacks of her with her legs open killed him.

“Yeah,” he said on a whisper. This time when her eyes rounded and her mouth dropped, he felt a different kind of pleasure, more like pain. Liquid fire poured through him. Tonight wasn’t a good idea. He tried to remember the last time they’d been together. One, no two or possibly close to three months. He looked at her, surprised she hadn’t jumped him either. Maybe he wasn’t the only one in need right now. He didn’t know everything, but he knew she was long overdue. His mind refused to think she might have gotten what she needed elsewhere.

“Really?” the shock in her voice regained his attention.

“Yeah. Some weird shit’s been happening for a while and we’ve been so busy on jobs, we haven’t had a chance to check stuff out. Remember Ross and that Pam shit.” He and Smoke had scurried around checking out some leads, to no avail. They were at a dead end and more than pissed that someone had tried to play one of theirs.

She nodded.

“He was smart enough not to go into the house, plus he hadn’t talked to her before that day in over four years.” Personally, he thought that saved Ross’s ass. There was no record of them communicating before that unexpected call. He gave his boy high points for smarts under stressful conditions.

“I wondered about that. How’d she get his number?”

“Nobody knows, at least nobody’s talking.” He closed his eyes remembering that time weeks ago. He and Smoke had been beyond angry at the obvious set-up. Ross had been more concerned over his girlfriend Cherise’s reaction than anything else. He’d missed her college graduation. Plus she’d discovered his involvement in the murder and the unknown fact of him having a daughter on the news. It had been a rough time for the couple.

“Why would anybody want to mess with Three X? I mean you guys work hard and give back to the community. You hire ex-cons, pay ’em good, they have families and from what I saw at the last company picnic Ms. Connie threw, those families are doing well. Shit, the company is keeping a lot them from becoming repeat offenders.” She shrugged. “I don’t get it?”

“Join the club.” His head hurt from thinking about it. He wanted to wake up from the nightmare his life was becoming.

“Did you know the woman they found?”

He frowned. “What woman?”

She stood, wrapped her robe tight again and walked into the kitchen area. He waited as she pulled out a soft drink and filled a bowl with Cheese Chex Mix. His favorite.

“You want something to drink?”

“Whatcha got?” He’d kill for a cold brew. He doubted she had any alcohol in the house, that had been one of the many things they’d argued over, his drinking.

“Water, juices, soft drinks.” Her eyes narrowed at him.

He threw up his hand. “Just asking. Some water please.”

She nodded, pulled out a bottle and handed it to him before placing the bowl of snacks on the table.

He scooped a handful of chex mix and crunched, glad some things didn’t change.

She coughed.

He gazed at her raised brow. What’d he miss?

“I asked if you knew the woman who they dug up next to the site where you were working.” She sipped her drink calmly as if she hadn’t just ripped into his gut.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I knew her. She worked at the sub place in town.”

“Oh?”

He stared at her, before crunching another fistful of mix. “What?” If she thought he’d ever confess anything about him and another woman, then *she* was on drugs. Not that anyone else mattered since he’d been with her. But he wasn’t crazy enough to expect her to calmly accept his semi-active sex life.

She sighed and shook her head. “What do you think is happening, Red?”

“I’m not sure.” His mind had gotten stuck on the recent lack of activity in his sex life. What was he doing? Why hadn’t he been with anyone the past month? It wasn’t like he didn’t get offers.

“Okay, don’t be sure. Just tell me your thoughts.” She pushed.

Red looked at the reason he’d stopped screwing around. Something happened that night at the fundraiser, probably before that. Screwing around had lost its appeal, not that he’d done much. He’d been angry when she dumped his ass and went butt wild for a minute. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and took a soothing gulp of water.

“Red, your thoughts?”

His thoughts had been all over the place. Somehow, watching her wait helped them settle and go into cubicles. To form some structure he could put into words.

"I think it's someone who's jealous of what we've done. Maybe someone from the yard or someone on the outside, I'm not sure. This seems personal, over the top."

"Over the top? What'd you mean?"

"Messing with Ross's kid, that's wild. Or trying to set us up for illegal drugs when most of the men we hire have abuse problems. Lately, we've been getting sorry workers from the Prison Build Program and have had to return to jobs for corrections more than we ever did."

She nodded.

"Then someone ordered supplies, expensive supplies from a couple of manufacturers. After we discovered the mistake, we intended to ship them back, but they were missing from inventory." He'd finished the snack and sat with his hands on his knees, bracing for the worst, her scorn.

"What do you mean missing from inventory?" she asked. "Somebody had to sign them out right?"

"Somebody did. Me." He rubbed his forehead at that confession and wished she had some alcohol in the house.

"You?" Her face scrunched in that funny face she made when she was confused. After all this time, he still knew her moods, expressions and MO.

"Yep. I came down one weekend for a piece of equipment we needed on the jobsite. When I signed it out along with some other materials, I signed for the marble and granite as well." That mistake left a bitter taste in his mouth. They'd set him up, knowing he wouldn't read each line like Ross and Smoke always did.

"The person who did that knew you'd rush in and out. You know that, right?"

He nodded, appreciating how in sync they were at that moment. It wouldn't last, or extend to other areas. But it still felt good.

"You're right."

They sat quietly for a moment.

"You think the thing with Pam is apart of all this?" she asked, looking at the blank television screen, nibbling her fingernail.

"Not sure, maybe, somehow it's all connected. At least I think so." Closing his eyes, he thought about the situation with his company. They were in trouble, he felt it deep, but didn't know what to do. "Smoke's not so sure. Ross has been so busy setting up house with Cherise and Lenora, I don't know what his take is on that yet." He scooped the last Cheese Chex square from the bowl and popped it into his mouth.

"That's a lot of trouble to go through. I mean Ross and Pam didn't really know each other. I can't see her contacting him so someone could kill her."

Nodding, he hadn't thought of each layer, just the overall deal. Put that way, it didn't make sense to use Pam. That was a stretch; so much could've gone wrong. Quickly he reran the information he knew in his mind and came up blank.

“You’re right. I can’t explain it, but it feels like it’s all connected somehow, you feel me?” He glanced at her sitting with a pensive look on her face. She was really thinking this through. It surprised him. Maybe he shouldn’t be, though. Denise was many things, but stupid wasn’t one of them. Besides, she had a vested interest, so to speak, in the company’s well-being, since he took care of her and the girls.

He’d transferred the house, as well as her car, into her name when she broke up with him. She received monthly child support, which paid the mortgage as well as all the bills for her and the twins.

“Pam and Ross,” she shook her head, drawing his attention to the loose curls she wore up top and large earrings. “There’s something not right there. It’s like someone targeted that connection or something.” She stared at him. “Flushed it out, made it public.”

He frowned at the light of excitement in her eye and leaned forward following her line of thought. It made sense.

“I mean, think about it. She hadn’t talked to him since the DNA test four years ago. Why would she even think to call him? Why not her parents? Her best friend? Or someone who actually knew her kid. From what I heard she was a good mom.”

A disturbing thought ran through him, chilling in its implications. “So, if you were having problems and needed to get away to pull it together for a sec, you wouldn’t call me?”

Her mouth dropped open before her eyes slid to the floor. “This isn’t about you,” her voice dropped as she rubbed her housecoat between her fingers. “Or us, Red. Our situation is different.”

Damn, she hadn’t answered his question. He couldn’t believe she’d bypass him. As much as the thought of a negative response disturbed him, something inside demanded she respond. “I know this isn’t about us, but I still want you to answer me.” He held his temper in check, not wanting a blowout, which would be imminent, if he said the wrong thing.

She sighed, a flash of pain or sorrow crossed her eyes, it didn’t last long enough for him to be certain. “The truth is, I don’t know. I guess it depends on the kind of trouble or problem. My first thought for someone locally would be Ms. Connie or maybe Cherise. If it required more time, then my parents or yours.” She shrugged, straightening her shoulders as if bracing for combat, before continuing. “You work all the time. With your schedule, I probably wouldn’t think of you first.”

Although what she’d said made perfect sense, it still sent a shaft of pain through his chest. He’d never thought about it before, but he wanted her to think of him first for anything she needed for her or the girls. Her answer kicked him on so many levels. When had she stopped needing him? That hurt more than he wanted to admit.

He nodded. “I understand.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The quiet lay heavily on his shoulders, pressing, weighing him down. Had he really lost her? She wouldn’t reach for him first? Oh hell no, that shit had to be corrected. They’d known each other since they were eighteen, or nineteen and had been through so much together. What really pushed them apart?

“What happened to your shoulder?” Denise pointed to purpled spot on his chest where his shirt gaped open.

“Smoke.” He watched her reaction through lowered lids.

“Smoke? Your partner? He hit you?” She leaned to the side, trying to get a better look without coming closer.

“I tried to quit and leave town.” He shrugged, snuggling into the sofa. “He objected.” Actually, Smoke kicked his ass and wouldn’t let him leave until Ross arrived. The two of them threatened to tie him down until he found the mind he’d obviously lost. No need to give her more ammunition to break him down.

“You were really trying to leave?” Her voice sounded weird. “I mean you said that earlier, but I didn’t think, I mean you talk so much trash.” She shook her head. “You still leaving?”

He looked at her.

She looked lost, surprised and mad all at once. He didn’t know what ticked her off, but decided to answer her anyway.

“I was mad at all the shit happening,” he said slowly, feeling his way. “I’m not leaving. That’d be a punk-ass thing to do. I can’t bail cause we’re having problems.”

“You did it before,” she muttered.

“What?” he snapped. The red demon in him shouted for her to repeat her comment so he could correct her earlier assumption.

“Nothing, just surprised you actually thought about leaving.” She stood. “Didn’t think you’d do that.” Her voice low and uncertain.

He watched her pick up the empty bowl and water bottle; take them to the kitchen, her face pinched in thought. Leaning back, he waited. Knowing Denise, she’d either offer her opinion or tell him to kiss her ass before throwing him out. It was hard to tell.

“It’s getting late.” She returned to the room. *Ahh, she was throwing him out. Not tonight, he was too tired, too needy.*

He opened one eye and then the other, gazing at her. Her hand clutched the lapel of her robe; she kicked the carpet with her slippered foot and licked her lips.

What the hell? He wondered why she was so nervous. She couldn’t be upset about the bruises. Lord knows she’d seen him worse through the years. What had her so keyed?

He blinked as a scorching thought crossed his mind. Maybe she needed something from him. His frustration flipped, to sexual.

“I know,” he said, watching her. “I’m tired and wanted to sleep down here so I can see the girls in the morning. Eat breakfast and take them to school after.” They gazed at each other. *Come on, Denise tell me what you really want, need.*

Her eyes slid to the floor, before snapping back up at him. Her mouth opened and then closed soundlessly. She nodded. “You can sleep in the spare bedroom down here.” She pointed toward the hall. “You know where everything is.”

Well damn.

“Yeah,” he said deflating as he stood trying to read her mood, her expressions. This wasn’t the first time he’d come by and crashed at her place. But he couldn’t remember the last time she hadn’t cussed him out before she agreed to let him stay. He’d been prepared for a blistering retort.

“I’ll check around, make sure everything’s locked up after I get my bag from the car.” His eyes dropped to her ass, he moistened his lips.

She stiffened and then nodded.

No smart-mouthed comeback, no sassy remarks? Tonight was one for the books, he thought. Slowly, she walked up the stairs. He stared at her ass and she didn’t correct him. Something was definitely off.

He shook his head and went outside to get his bag. If he were a different kind of man—a crazy one, and wanted his ego handed to him shredded, like cheese on a platter. He would’ve brought the bag in with him. Denise had taught him a long time ago not to take anything for granted, especially her.

Chapter 3

Denise tossed in her sleep. Troubled, as doors opened in her dreams she'd kept tightly locked when awake. She flinched as the nightmare overtook her.

Red walked in the living room. "I hate arguing with you," he said miserably. "Can't we just talk this out, work through whatever's wrong?"

His pain was her pain. She hated what she'd brought them to. Forgiveness sprung in her heart. "Wherever you slept last night, you need to go back there." She said instead, her voice hard, unyielding. Sleep had taken its time coming the night before and she resented him for it.

He gritted his teeth. "I slept in the room downstairs." She moved away, shame lancing her heart, followed by relief so great she felt dizzy.

"Damn it, talk to me, what can I do to make this right?"

Twisting, she stared at him. "Give up the drinking."

"You want me to stop drinking altogether, or just beer?" he peered at her, his face red.

As unfair as it was, something in her wanted to push him, see how far he'd bend. "What didn't you understand? I don't want any alcohol around my kids."

"No." He spat with a mulish expression on his face. She hadn't expected him to be so cut and dry.

"No?"

He shook his head and walked away. "No."

Even in her dream state, she wasn't sure if it was his flippant answer or his dismissive attitude that made her fly off the edge and issue an ultimatum.

"What the hell do you mean, no? Choose now, motherfucka, your damn booze or your family, because you damn sure ain't staying here drunk and shit." The moment the words left her mouth, she saw the crestfallen expression on his face, her heart shriveled.

She fucked up.

"What?" He whispered, a look of disbelief on his face. "What're you saying?"

I'm sorry I hurt you, but I don't know what to do. I'm hurting inside. "You can step if you don't want to do the right thing for us."

He shook his head. "You're saying you'll break up with me if I drink beer?"

Her teeth pulled in her lower lip. She straightened. "Yep, that's about right." She paused. "You need to grow up, Red, and stop smoking and drinking all the time."

"So now I need to grow up. I work eighty fucking hours a week and you tell me I can't have a muthafucking beer." He yelled and slapped his chest. His breaths came in spurts. "Who the fuck do you think you are, huh? My mama don't talk that shit to me." He walked to the side of the room, his anger tangible.

"You don't want me, huh?" He didn't give her a chance to answer. "You wanna treat me like one of the kids. No, oh hell, no." He spun in her direction, walking slowly. "Fuck this shit. I love you, girl, but I'm not about to let you punk me like this." His fist slammed the wall. "I can't drink in my own house," he whispered incredulously. He turned and stared at her. She shivered at the anger she saw, but remained firm. They argued back and forth. "I should give you what

you want. I should leave,” he finally said staring at her, red faced. Even now, deep in sleep, she couldn’t believe the words that flew from her mouth that severed their relationship.

“Don’t talk about it, be about it.”

Sunlight filtered through the mini-blinds, its warmth caressing her face. Sleep had not been her friend, as different scenarios of her relationship with Red kept her awake.

She curled around her pillow trying to steal a few moments of rest denied to her last night. Delicious aromas teased her into alertness. She shot up, grasping the covers around her pajama clad waist, nose tilted as she breathed in deeply.

“What the hell?” The smell of bacon and something else brought her fully awake.

Benjamin O’Connor, or better known to all who loved or hated him, Red, was going to be the death of her. What was she thinking allowing him to stay overnight? He’d looked so lost, and confused. Vulnerable even, she’d been catapulted back in time when things had been good for them.

The thought of him leaving scared your ass. That’s why you kept him here. Damn conscience. She couldn’t blame it on his bruises. They were normal, although coming from a shorter Smoke, surprising. Or the drama with the company, there was always something going on. His questioning her about his role in her life surprised her. They normally skirted touchy emotional issues.

Confessing he’d been about to leave town, without her and the girls, floored her. That alone had contributed to her sleeplessness for a few hours. No wonder she dreamed about him. She couldn’t fathom life without her big Red. Lapeer, Michigan, was now her home because of him.

She sighed and rolled onto her stomach, looking around their room, now her room. Would he have left them? He never said, but it sounded like he was trying to leave. She shook her head to clear the pain of that image. Without an invitation, water pooled in her eyes. Eight years, they’d been together, no way would he just walk off and leave her with two kids. Anger rose and then punctured. What could she say? She’d thrown away the right to stand up to him about his whereabouts. She closed her eyes, wishing she hadn’t been so self-righteous, so sure she had him wrapped around her finger, so sure he’d fall in line. Instead, he’d accepted her ultimatum and moved out.

The patter of feet grew louder. Denise wiped her eyes and prepared for an enthusiastic wakeup call.

“Mama,” Shantel yelled and jumped on the bed.

“Don’t jump on her,” Shannon, the more temperate twin instructed, as she ran and pushed repeatedly on her shoulder.

Denise smiled and turned over slowly and pulled both curly-headed scamps into her arms. They squealed their pleasure as she dumped them onto the bed and tickled them unmercifully.

“That tickles,” Shannon said, trying to block Denise’s fingers.

“Yeah,” Shantel said, copying her sister’s actions.

“Well,” Denise drawled, wiggling her eyebrows comically. “I guess I can let you go this time, but next time—” She paused dramatically. “—you’ll have to pay the toll.”

“How much is the toll?” Shantel asked, her hazel eyes shining in mischief. Denise knew she was ready to jump again, so she held her hand tighter.

“One hundred tickles,” she answered and tickled them again. The three of them rolled around the California king-sized bed, laughing and playing. She’d forgotten about the smell of food until she noticed Red standing in the doorway, arms crossed and the weirdest look on his face. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was in pain. The look disappeared the moment their eyes connected.

“Daddy,” Shantel yelled and jumped from the bed. Red caught her as she launched into his arms.

“Shannon forgot. She didn’t tell Mama you were here.” The brat said with a straight face.

Denise held Shannon in place as she fought to go after her sister. “Uh-huh, I was going to tell Mama, but you jumped on the bed and got us caught. So I didn’t have time to tell her.”

“It’s okay, pumpkin.” Red soothed both girls and sent her a wink. “Breakfast is ready. Let’s eat before it gets cold.” He glanced at her.

She pulled the cover up to her waist, knowing he’d seen everything a multitude of times, except those few pounds she’d put on lately.

“Need help?”

Her head snapped up. She frowned, not understanding his question. “Help?”

“Getting out of bed.” He’d cupped his mouth with his hand and whispered the last since the girls had walked down the hall.

She shook her head at the heated look he sent. Her body screamed, hell, yeah. But her mind and heart, both of which had been hurt by this fine specimen, brutally informed her to back him the hell up.

“Nah, I think I got it.” She shooed him out of the room.

He laughed and closed the door.

Denise stared at the doorway, amazed. Red had been here for over ten hours and they hadn’t argued. “Now that’s some wild shit,” she murmured, sliding from the bed. Quickly, she showered and put on some sweats.

The scene in the kitchen caught her off-guard. Her mouth dropped. Red entertained the girls with an Irish fairy tale. They sat, totally engaged as he hunched in to become the elf, expanded his chest for the prince and batted his eyes for the princess. It had been so long since she’d heard him speak with an Irish accent, she relaxed and laughed along with the girls at his antics.

He’d always been able to do that. Take her from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other. Their eyes met, and lingered a little longer in shared memories. Could they ever get back to that place, comfortable and loving? She didn’t know.

She shook her head, dispelling the feeling. That road was dangerous and she couldn’t afford to regress. She’d worked hard and long to get over him, well, to live without his daily physical presence. Glances at her enthralled twins were a constant reminder of him. They resembled him so much; you’d think he carried them the eight and a half months instead of her. The only attribute of hers they carried was their bow shaped lips.

Shaking her head, she walked further and picked up a plate. Her eyes widened at the bounty, he'd cooked her favorites. Crispy bacon, cheese scrambled eggs, hash browns, raisin cinnamon toast and orange juice. She rotated slowly and met his intense stare.

He raised his glass of juice in salute.

She nodded. A vicious thrill skittered up her spine. She knew that look. Her body answered the unspoken request, just as it had for the past eight years. The man was lethal to her self-determination. Normally, she'd cuss him out, pick a fight, or make rude accusations, anything to camouflage her craving for him. Thank God, he could be an ass ninety percent of the time. It made it easier to resist, to remain strong. *Why? You still love him, he loves you. What are you doing?* She had no answer, but gave it more thought. This mellow side of Red fell in the other ten percent of his personality, from which she had little defense.

"Daddy," Shannon demanded, pulling his tee shirt and attention. "What's a bastard?"

Red spit his juice into his hand, a deep frown on his face. Denise choked on her eggs and went into a coughing fit. He whacked her back without looking.

She glared at him as the pain radiated down her side.

"Where'd you hear that word?" he asked in a gruffer tone than he normally took with them. Both girls froze, staring up at him.

"Brenna at school said her mom's says her daddy's a bastard." Shannon looked at Shantel who confirmed it with a nod.

Red grumbled under his breath and shot her a look. Sending the girls to school had been one of the things she'd done when he moved out. It took so much pressure off her; she'd wondered why she hadn't done it before, in spite of her daddy's protests. *"I stayed home with you until you went to middle school," her dad said. "It's important children have good role models and a stable home."*

"Uh, that's not a word that you should use to describe another person," Denise said feeling her way. Red may have thrown the ball to her, but he'd forgotten these two girls were sharp and they'd question everything until satisfied.

"Why not, Mama? Is it a bad word like shit?" Shantel asked.

Denise's face heated, as she stared, shocked. Did that word really leave her daughter's mouth?

"What I want to know is where you're getting all these words," Red snapped. "You go to a Christian preschool, for God's sake." He put his hand in his lap, she was sure it fisted. "Now girls, tell Daddy the truth. Who said those kinds of words to you?" He made an obvious attempt to bank his anger. But his blazing eyes told the tale. Since she saw it, she wondered if the twins did as well.

Shannon tilted her oval face and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Are you asking about Papa or at school?"

"Papa?" Denise shrieked, her hand flew to her mouth. Surely, her daddy hadn't spread his venom to her babies. She refused to look at Red. The heat of his stare scorched her cheeks. "Did—" She cleared her throat as a roll of fear hit her hard. She knew her father hated her

relationship with “that white man.” Surely, somewhere in his heart he’d keep his opinions to himself, and not try to sway her children against their father.

“Did Papa or Nana say words like that to you?” *Please, please God, not my babies. Let them at least honor the fact that they’re children.*

Shannon nodded, a smile on her face. “Papa said something about bastards and Daddy drank the cow’s milk free, he wasn’t going to pay for it.”

Shantel laughed. “Papa’s funny, you have to pay for milk, Mama always pays for our milk.”

Denise’s heart dropped past her stomach to her feet. She felt an inch tall. Her daddy had said similar words to her. He’d yelled that Red would never marry her, would leave her now that he’d had his way. The hairs on her arms tingled, her vision blurred as she dropped her head in shame. Betrayal bit deep. She’d trusted them to watch her kids when she visited their home in Miami last year. Her mom had been real sick and begged her to visit. Since she knew how her dad felt about her relationship with Red, she didn’t want to go, but Red encouraged her to go see her mom, warning her she’d never forgive herself if it turned out to be serious. She only left the twins at the house alone once, the afternoon she’d met one of her friends for lunch at the mall.

“Why won’t Daddy marry you, Mama?” Shantel asked, looking at her first and then over at a red-faced Red.

“Did your Papa say something about that?” Red asked through tight lips.

Shantel shrugged. “Yeah.”

Denise wanted to scream. At that moment, she hated the Reverend Brown for placing that look of uncertainty in her daughter’s eye. He had no right to criticize her in front of her kids. A quick glance showed the capricious twin still waiting for an answer.

I don’t know. “We, uh, it’s not that. It’s more like—” She stopped and looked at him. It *was* a damned good question. “Ask your daddy.” She stared at him as he blinked rapidly, now that three pairs of eyes were on him.

Beads of sweat dotted his brow. *Um hmm, how you like me now? Answer the question.* “Red, are you okay? You’re sweating.” She sent him a smug smile.

He stared at her for the longest minute. Her smile dropped as the stare lingered and heated. “I don’t know,” he whispered before turning to look at the children. “I love your mama and I love you, both of you. You’re my world.” Mint green eyes captured her in their depths. Her heart raced at his declaration, the shell she tried to build around it, cracked and fell apart, leaving jagged edges.

“I always have, always will love that woman.” He pointed at her. The twins giggled. “I need her in my life,” he said, turning to Shannon and Shantel. “As much as I need the two of you. If anybody, and I don’t care who, said I wouldn’t marry your mama, they’re wrong. I’d marry her anytime.” He looked at her.

She blinked away moisture at the sincerity in his eyes.

“Any place.”

Her heart filled with joy at his sweet words. It was too late, of course, her picky mind tried to reassert. He should’ve said it when she got pregnant, or after the girls were born, or perhaps

when they turned two. Those words bombarding her mind sounded suspiciously like the Reverend Brown.

She offered him a small smile. He'd finally said what her starved heart needed to hear.

Sitting at the counter, she half-listened while basking in the glow of his late proclamation, as Red talked to the girls about his day, patiently answered their multiple questions and enjoyed the light banter. Until the Shannon dropped another bomb.

"Why can't you come with us to the breakfast Friday?"

Denise cringed. She hadn't mentioned the annual parent's breakfast at the twin's preschool to him.

"Yeah, Daddy, it's for parents. Why don't you wanna come? You said you'd marry Mama," Shantel said.

Denise kept her eyes glued to her plate, ignoring the heat of his stare.

"Marrying Mama and going to breakfast are big time different." He tapped the tips of their noses causing them to laugh. "You know Daddy wouldn't miss your breakfast, I'm sorry I forgot. But I'll take you to school that morning to make sure I'm on time." Exaggerated kissing sounds punctuated the air. The girls giggled, happy.

Denise bent further over her plate.

"Breakfast two mornings in a week with my favorite girls, that's what I'm talking about." He smacked his lips.

Denise looked up.

He rubbed his hands, smirking.

She ducked under his look. He'd always taken the blame with the girls, for any parental oversights. That just made her feel worse. They both knew she hadn't mentioned any school events to him. First, her parents badmouth her to her kids and now this. The cards weren't falling in her favor. The barriers surrounding her heart fell further, leaving her exposed.

Finished, she stood and placed her dishes in the sink. She'd take care of the kitchen after she got the girls off. If ever she needed some quiet time to rethink her life, today was the day.

Chapter 4

Red arrived early for a meeting with his partners at Smoke's condo. After punching in the combination, the gate opened smoothly, allowing his Hummer entry. He'd always liked this condominium complex. The layout was simple and you were never far from anything. Smoke's waterfront unit was on the top floor and had a cool view of the lake. He'd been tempted to buy the exact unit in an adjacent building. But for all the activities, the complex was primarily for adults. He needed a place where his girls could walk outside, play and have fun. Since he gave Denise the house, he'd bought a three-bedroom townhouse in a similar, but more family friendly area.

Parking in Smoke's other spot; he chuckled at the thought of Ross's grimace when he'd have to park a short distance away in a visitor's spot. Smoke never brought his company truck home. He opted to leave it parked at their building in the gated area. The idea had merit, especially if you only had two parking spots and wanted to have company. He'd started doing the same thing lately.

Taking the elevator up, he nodded at a scantily clad woman and her friend headed in the direction of the indoor heated pool, basement level. He waved.

Smoke opened the door before he knocked and stared at him.

After a moment, his face heated. "You gonna stand there blocking, or do we start round two?" Smoke had gotten the best of him the last time, but he'd been drunk. Alert and sober, the fight should be about even. The problem with having bad-ass partners, is they really were kick-your-ass-tough. Despite, his shorter stature, Smoke was mean and fought with one goal. To make sure his opponent didn't walk away. He'd gone easy on Red, and he knew it.

"Round two?" Smoke chuckled and moved to the side so he could walk in. "My knuckles are still sore from round one. Give me a couple of days to recover and then talk that shit." He smiled and tapped Red's fist.

Red took it for what it was—an olive branch. He knew Smoke would kick it with him again at the drop of a hat, but gave him an out. That's what friends did; they built you up, even if they were the ones who knocked you down.

"Cool."

Smoke headed for the kitchen. Red was always amazed at his partners' varied taste. The condo looked like a home out of a designer's magazine. He couldn't explain it, but Smoke was a paradox. Smart, he knew wines, foods, and clothes. The man read all the time. But in public around people, it was like he dumbed down. He deferred to Ross in business even though they all made the decisions. Ross counted on both of them, but Smoke was the one he consulted on both business and personal matters.

Red wasn't jealous, just accepting. He liked his beer, a good time, a willing woman and hard work. Every now and then, he liked to get buzzed. His tastes were simple, his needs few. Although they were all different, they had a strong bond. They were family.

"What's your poison?" Smoke asked.

“Beer.”

Smoke tossed him a cold can and headed toward the door. A minute later, Ross walked in, a frown on his face. Smoke pounded his fist and walked to the kitchen,

“You did that on purpose.” Ross pounded his fist.

“What?” Red asked, although he suspected this was about the parking.

“You saw all the spots were filled and instead of taking the close visitor’s spot, you took Smoke’s other one.”

He hadn’t noticed that or he would’ve done what Ross mentioned. They normally looked out for each other that way. Instead of admitting he’d been distracted, he shrugged as Smoke gave Ross his beer.

They moved into the media room and sat in the theater chairs. Ross placed a DVD into the player. Moments later, the house they’d just completed played. Each room, along with a commentary of the workmanship, materials utilized, and teams. Red felt a strong sense of pride at the work they’d done. The owners were petitioning for their home to be included in the Parade of Homes later that year.

The scene changed to the adjacent lot, where the police discovered the dead body. The men watched the investigation in silence. The voice changed, it was the Lieutenant’s from the crime scene. Red was impressed at his partner’s contacts. While it played, Denise’s take on the situation crossed his mind. She’d been collecting Perry Mason, Sherlock Holmes and Murder She Wrote movies for years. She ate this stuff and had some good hunches.

When the tape was over, Smoke sat forward, arms across his knees and stared at the blank screen. “Shit.”

“That’s about right,” Ross said, leaning back, tapping his fingers against the armrest.

“Somebody’s seriously trying to fuck us over. We’ve been behind on this and didn’t see that coming.” Red slammed the armrest next to him.

Smoke glanced at him and then the chair.

“This is personal. This isn’t some random ‘pull a company apart’ stuff. They chose a company of ex-cons and want to put it out of business.” Red stared ahead, feeling his way.

Ross nodded. “You’re right. I get the same vibe. Much as I hate to admit it, it has to be somebody who knows how we flow. Maybe somebody we fired or some shit.”

“What about that guy we fucked up a while back for stealing, what was his name?” Smoke snapped his fingers.

“Cameron?” Red scoffed, remembering the soft man who’d come out of prison forever changed. “No, he wouldn’t think to do this on his own. But, he’d do it for his lover, whoever he might be. Or, if somebody told him what to do, he might be able to carry it out.”

Smoke shook his head, leaning back. “You’re right. I forgot about his little problem.” The three of them sat quietly for a moment.

Red’s guilt over quitting and messing up propelled him to his feet. Ross and Smoke looked up at him.

He swallowed.

“Listen, I owe you guys an apology— “

“Naw, man,” Ross said.

“The fuck he don’t. Let him finish.” Smoke balled his hand under his chin, with his elbow on the chair and stared at him.

Red glared at Smoke and glanced at Ross. “Asshole here is right. I do owe you both an apology. You don’t quit family. That was a punk ass move. Won’t happen again.”

“Key point, Red,” Smoke said standing. “Family. You don’t walk off cause you’re pissed or having a muthafucking bad day. We been through worst shit than this, and for you to quit. Man, that was foul.”

Red stared into Smoke’s eyes and read the pain there. It humbled him. “You’re right. It was a foul, punk ass move. No matter what, I shouldn’t have gone there.” He had no other words to explain the shame he felt for his actions. He’d over-reacted and made another mistake.

The weak link. He hated that feeling. It was time for him to step up his game, pull his weight.

“Will you do it again?” Ross asked into the quiet. “I mean, we need to know we can count on you. There’s some serious shit going on out there and to lose you is like losing heart. It’s fucked up.”

Red looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He could hear Denise’s “amen.” They had every right to question his loyalty. He’d been ready to bail. He swallowed and faced two men who’d earned his respect. No man, other than his father, could take either of their places in his heart.

“I swear that shit’ll never happen again. I may not deserve it, but you can trust me to be here. To see this out.” He stared at Ross, who’d stood, nodded and clapped him on the shoulder.

Smoke grabbed him around the neck, pulled him down and spoke into his ear. “Don’t ever scare me like that again. I will kill anyone who messes with you, but I can’t protect you from yourself.” Smoke squeezed before releasing him.

He stared into his eyes and he saw the truth of that promise.

“That goes double for me,” Ross added, arms crossed, head bowed a few feet from them.

Words failed him.

His respect for Smoke and Ross hit another level. These men would sacrifice everything to keep him straight. He swallowed hard, knowing he’d do whatever necessary to stop whoever was after their company.

He nodded, thinking over everything he’d learned. Everything Denise had said. “I talked to Denise the other day.”

“‘Bout damn time,” Smoke snapped, while retaking his seat.

“About everything that’s been going on here.” He ignored Smoke’s interruption. “She made some valid observations. First off, someone thinks I’m the weak link in this trio.” He waited for them to object. They merely looked at him. It sucked, but he moved on.

“The woman murdered is someone I fucked, they knew I’d rush out without examining the invoices, I have a reputation of partying hard, get high recreationally—the cops come to the site looking for drugs when I’m there.”

“We know all this, and I know you didn’t tell Denise you fucked the waitress,” Ross said stoically.

“Hell no, I didn’t tell her that. I may not be at the top of my game in some things, but I’m not crazy. Although she’ll find out eventually if my involvement hits the news.”

“It will,” Smoke said.

“I’ll have to deal with that then. But we’re getting off track. I think we can use this to our advantage.” Red sat in his chair and rubbed his hands together. Some of Denise’s detective show enthusiasm must be wiping off on him. Excitement bubbled beneath the surface of his skin.

“Spit it out, man.” Ross returned to his seat.

“Let’s face it, neither of you can go to some of the places I can to get information. I still hit some of the low spots and have eyes and ears there. After the body bag in Big Lakes, I’ll have star status in some of those dives.” He looked at each of them. They looked apprehensive, but listened intently.

“What’s the angle?” Smoke asked. Red appreciated his acceptance of the facts. Smoke was too GQ and Ross didn’t bullshit at all. You piss him off, say something wrong and he’d either blow you off or knock you on your ass. He only played the game for work.

“I want to know who’s after Three X, if there’s a contract out, anything.” Red looked at both of them.

Smoke shook his head. “That’s too obvious. Try this.” He looked at Ross before returning to him. “See if you can get information regarding Pam’s death.”

Ross’s head snapped up.

Smoke continued. “Find out who she was dating. We need the connection between her and this shakedown. Someone got to her, gave her Ross’s information, had her call and set him up.”

Red nodded without looking at Ross. Damn, Denise had called that one. “Someone targeted that connection between Pam and my man here. That info went public immediately.”

“Damn,” Ross said, sitting back in his chair. “I wondered how she got my number, it didn’t seem right. I didn’t know her well enough to know if she played games like that or not. Damn, to use my kid? These motherfuckers will pay for that shit.”

“What would *she* gain by making the connection public?” Red asked. “It doesn’t make sense. You were her gravy train. Every month like a clock, she got a check. Why would she blow that?” This whole jigsaw puzzle was missing a few pieces.

“Maybe,” Smoke said slowly. “Maybe, she didn’t know the real deal. Maybe she was told one thing to get her to go along with everything.”

“That’d work,” Red said. “Cause I can’t see her cutting off the greenbacks on purpose.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” Smoke said. “Question?”

Red and Ross looked expectantly at him.

“Why now?” Smoke looked at Red and then Ross. “Why the fuck did they want the connection public now? Not to mention the pattern.”

“Pattern?” Ross asked.

“Yeah,” Red said slowly, thinking fast. “I’m not the only one with a dead chick from my past.”

“Shit,” Ross exploded.

“Maybe this isn’t about you being the weak link, Red.” Smoke sat back. “What if the goal is point the blame at each owner of the company, drag us down individually and then collectively?”

Red closed his eyes at the look of abject horror on Ross’s face. “Smoke,” Red said hollowly as the vileness of the situation struck hard. “You fuck anyone who might come back to haunt you?” He and Smoke stared at each other.

“Quite a few.” Smoke said and looked at the blank screen.

Chapter 5

Denise and Red drove separately to the breakfast, which put the household in an uproar. The girls wanted to ride with both parents. Red had looked at her, accepted her subtle negative shake and proceeded to calm the two small divas in training.

“You can ride with me to the breakfast and ride home with Mommy.” He wiped the tears from Shannon’s face.

“You’re not coming home with us?” Shantel asked, wiping away her tears.

He glanced at the stubborn tilt of her head. “No, baby, I have to go to work. But you’re coming to my house this weekend and we’ll have fun then. So stop crying. You don’t want your face to look like this.” He made a silly face.

They laughed and finally made it out the door. Denise sighed. He was so good with the kids. So patient, understanding—he never yelled at them. But, he’d read her like a book and then gave a review when he felt she deserved it. What had she been thinking, giving him an ultimatum? The man had never been a pushover.

She’d hoped he forgot about the breakfast. Now she’d have to keep her temper in check as the horny moms made plays for him. Some would be subtle, others sneaky and some would cross the damn line. Not that she had any rights, they weren’t a couple, he’d left the ball in her court after the declaration to the twins, but she still didn’t care to see that shit.

“Damn, that man is fine,” she said in the silence of her car. He’d worn a pair of navy blue dress slacks, and an oxford light blue shirt with thin red lines. The shirt fit tight around his chest and hugged his thick arms. He’d been able to get his hair to lie flat, but she knew it’d curl at the ends on his shoulder. She’d fallen for his forest green eyes the moment they’d met in that club, eight years ago. His eyes conveyed so much of his emotions; it’d been hard for her to ignore his dance request. Even then, she’d known he’d be special in her life.

A few moments later, she pulled into the parking lot next to Red’s black Hummer. “Big ass car,” she murmured, preferring her smaller BMW. He and the girls waited inside the foyer for her. She’d worn a fuchsia wraparound blouse and a short print skirt that highlighted her figure and complemented her skin tone. Red had stared long and hard at her at the house before he went into damage control mode. With his sunglasses firmly in place, she couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“Mama, we beat you here.” Shannon giggled before she grabbed her arm.

“Yeah baby, I drove the speed limit.” She didn’t need to glance at Red to feel his mocking stare.

“Daddy drove slow and we still won. We got here first.” Shantel said, pulling Red towards the large room for the breakfast.

“Yeah, I drove real slow.” Red smiled with a devilish leer as he passed her.

She watched his rear move in a seductive stroll. Her heart raced as recollections of just how slow he could move flipped through her mind. Shit, her panties dampened and her nipples hardened as suppressed memories flew from the safety deposit box of her mind.

She groaned and closed her eyes.

“Come on, Mama.” Shannon tugged her forward.

Denise wasn't ready. Her defenses were down. What the hell was happening to her? Was it time for her period? A quick calculation and she realized it was ovulation time. *Shit*. Literally, she was in heat, wanting, no, it was more primal than that, she needed to get laid. A serious workout to clear out the cobwebs.

She cringed at the timing. Everything was happening too fast, his confession of love, her aggravation with her parents, most of all, it had been a long time since she had sex. As she sat next to Shannon, she tried to remember her last sexual romp. Of course, it'd been with the hardhead sitting next to Shantel, but when? She bit her lip in concentration.

It'd been way before the fund-raiser, and part of the reason she'd attended. That'd been a narrow escape. Red almost had her dropping her thong in the parking lot. If the sitter hadn't called when she did about Shannon having a temperature, she'd have released her guard and everything else. So, it was at least two, oh hell, it'd been almost three months. No wonder she was in this condition, add to that her fear of him leaving and she was a mess. Lord have mercy, because the man sitting next to their daughter wouldn't.

Glancing around, she smiled at the director, the teachers and some of the parents. As usual, there were more moms here than dads. Shannon introduced Red to their teacher. Shantel had moved onto his lap. She eyed her daughter with envy. His lap was a special place.

He gazed at her and smiled. Gradually, a sexual heat replaced his platonic smile as he watched her. Red had always been able to read her. Embarrassed, she stood and walked to the restroom at a fast clip. The man was a natural predator and he'd be on her in a sec if he thought she'd give it up. He was her weakness and he knew it. If only she could move past him, meet someone else. Anybody that could make her body sing soprano.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled and fanned her hot face to pull her thoughts and wild libido in check. She knew it was too late, he'd seen her need, his stare down proved that. The question on the table now was how to proceed. There was no other man in her life. She had no interest in women, and this was not a job for her rabbit. It was major tune up time. Her pride rose, warned against giving in, reminded her of past pains and was crushed by her overriding need to be ridden fast and hard.

Calmly, Denise patted her face with a paper towel, infusing a stern voice in her pep talk. “You're a grown ass woman with needs. Just use him.” Chin up, eyes alert, she nodded at herself in the mirror pleased with the modern woman returning her stare.

Men did it all the time. She could do this. She left the restroom and returned to her seat feeling Red's eyes on her the minute she entered the breakfast room.

Leaning down to hear a secret from Shantel, she missed her daughter's words as her body responded to the heat from his eyes. It was if he sent a telepathic caress to her breasts and they tightened in response. She clamped her thighs together. The man was a bloodhound on the scent of her arousal.

She refused to look at him. Nope, it was going to be hard enough to make it through breakfast with wet panties.

“Would you like coffee or juice?” The woman had several cups on a tray. The girls had taken cartons of milk.

“Juice, please.” She took the offered cup, sipped the bittersweet liquid that barely resembled any fruit.

“Water, if you have it.” Red’s deep voice penetrated her musings. “Denise.” She stared ahead resolutely.

“Mama, Daddy called you.” Shantel reached over and pulled her arm.

Her brow rose as she glanced in his direction.

“Ross mentioned something about Cherise and a wedding. She called you?” His voice lowered for privacy in the crowded room.

That caught her off guard. Cherise had invited her and the girls to travel to Lansing with her and Nora, Ross’s daughter, later this month for a wedding. Somehow, Cherise had been roped into the maid of honor position by an ex-cousin and felt the need for reinforcements. She’d agreed to go with her.

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat and gazed at him. He licked his lips. She lost her thought when his eyes darkened. “Yeah, the girls and I are going to go down with her and stay for the wedding.”

“Ross said something like that. You know the bride?”

“No, I’m going for Cherise and Nora. The girls will pretty much be together during rehearsals and the wedding.” They’d agreed it’d be easier for Nora to hang out with her and the girls, instead of strangers while Cherise was at the altar with the bride. At any rate this conversation was for the girls and anyone listening. His eyes latched onto her extended nipples, her dry lips and tight posture. He knew the signs.

“Ross is going to try and make it from his continuing ed classes.”

She nodded, knowing Ross wouldn’t allow Cherise to be alone at a wedding. She’d told Cherise to reserve two rooms instead of one. She hoped the woman had listened.

Denise turned to the plate placed in front of her. Pancakes and sausage. The director had two students say grace and they began eating.

“I want to talk to you about something that came up the other day at a meeting, if you have a few minutes later,” Red asked.

Hell no, her mind recoiled. “Okay.” She nodded. Not good, but necessary. She’d talk to him in the parking lot and then get the girls home, maybe head over to Cherise’s for a little while. Catch up on everything. She clutched her hands to keep them still and closed her eyes. Grabbing her purse, she searched for a pair of sunglasses as one of the students recited some poem. After finding a colored lens at the bottom of her bag, she remembered Shannon broke the other lens the other day. Shantel had another secret to tell her, she bent down and her eyes clashed with Red’s.

“I want you,” he mouthed, and blew her a kiss.

If she weren't so horny, so keyed up, she would've laughed at the juvenile display. Instead, the corny line went straight to her core, stoking her fire.

Damn man. She rolled her eyes upward.

He laughed, unfooled. He'd probably counted the days since the last time they'd been together and knew she was overdue.

Hurriedly, she placed a kiss on her daughter's brow and latched onto her hand as the presentations ended. A quick glance to the side door proved her escape route was clear. The director had a last minute announcement.

Unbelievable, that's the only word she had at this moment. The school surprised the students with a playground bonanza and asked the parents to pick up the children at three o'clock. That was five hours from now. Red moved close to her as the girls jumped up and down in excitement, oblivious to her panicked state.

"Congratulations."

Denise turned and stared at the Director, fighting through the storm of emotions rolling inside. The heat of his palm sent tendrils of pleasure through her body as he prevented her from being run over by an overzealous student.

"I'm sorry, what'd you say?" she asked.

The director smiled, leaned forward looking at her and Red. "I said congratulations, Shannon told me her mom and dad was getting married."

The noise in the room disappeared into a vacuum. The racing of heart penetrated the silence as her brain commanded her lungs to breathe. She gasped. Sound returned. Her face tight as she realized her stretched lips were frozen on her face.

Total humiliation swamped her. Red accepted the enthusiastic words with a nod. His strong arm around her waist steered her through a throng of smiling faces. She paused, needing to go back and set the record straight. A tug kept her moving.

"Wait, I have to tell her it's a mistake," she whispered, trying to remove his hand. They were drawing attention. People were smiling at them as if they were lovebirds. *My God, how many people had the twins told?* How could she explain although he said he'd marry her, he didn't ask, nor had they made arrangements to tie the knot. Call her old-fashioned, but she wanted the proposal as well. Preferably, on his knees.

"No, leave it alone, Denise." The warmth from his hand soothed her back as he guided her in silence to her car. Inhaling, his natural scent roamed freely through her nostrils, curling and teasing her memories. A familiar longing unfurled and tormented her.

"What?" she coughed looking up at him, trying to regain her composure. "What'd you want to tell me about Smoke?"

"Later."

"Later? Why not tell me now?" She crossed her arms and leaned on her car door. Her body thrummed as he walked up on her and bent down, muscles bulging in his arms as he placed them on either side of her head. He'd boxed her in.

“I’ll tell you what we discussed after we fix this. I’m in no condition to talk. My cock’s so hard my balls are probably blue. And if your nipples get any harder you’re going to hurt someone. Now either get your sexy ass in your car, or we can go in mine and come back for yours when we pick up the girls.” The dark cadence in his voice, infused with a needy Irish lilt sent her mind in a tailspin. Her core throbbed.

“I’m not having sex with you.”

“Yes, you are.”

Narrowing her eyes at him, she tried to muster up a fiery comeback, an angry retort, a cutting denial. Everything fizzled under the sexual heat of his stare. She ran out of reasons to refuse him. To continue denying what they both wanted, needed. She wanted to reunite with him in more ways than sex. But, she’d start there.

She nodded and walked around to the other side of the Hummer. The baby-making songs of Tyreese heightened the sexual tension during the short drive to her home. She squeezed her thighs together and gazed out the window as his soulful voice declared she was the ‘One’. Red pulled into her driveway. He opened her door, assisted her out and grazed her cheek with his finger.

She shivered.

They walked in a snug embrace to the door; the first time in months. She reveled in his strength. Loved that he asked no questions, did nothing to make her think about what they were going to do. Later, she might claim she wasn’t thinking, which would be true.

He took the keys from her, opened the wood barrier and disarmed the security system. After entering, he pulled her tight against him. Tipping her head up, he kissed her lips, took the lower one into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue, and a quick bite.

She moaned, relishing the small pain before he took her mouth and tongue, deepening the kiss. The familiar sensations, his taste, his powerful thrusts, fed her hunger. He wrapped her arms around his waist and picked her up without releasing her mouth. Heat spiraled through her, centering in her core. Her body, no longer under her control, trembled in need.

“Shhh, baby. I got you.” Red rubbed her back as she slid down his front, onto the bed. Her head fell back, as he kissed her throat and shoulders. She gasped as his rough palms slid up her thigh pulling the skirt up. His thumb flicked her cloth-covered nub. She jerked in reaction.

He bent forward, and nibbled where his thumb had just been.

“Ahhhh...” she moaned as shots of pleasure zinged through her system. He pulled off her thong and took long leisurely licks at her pussy. Her hips rolled in response as his tongue penetrated her tight passage, thick fingers replaced his tongue and she thrust against his fingers in earnest.

“So close,” she murmured. Her head rolled from side to side as she gyrated fiercely on his fingers. One hand held his head close to her pussy as he licked and suckled her clit. Her body was on fire. She bucked, trying to get more.

He quickened the pace, fingers moving faster, thrusting deeper inside her wet cunt.

“Ohmigod, Ohmigod,” she screamed.

He sucked her clit hard and stroked her secret place.

She exploded. Her body shuddered under the impact. Waves of pleasure flooded her system. Her breath caught. She floated and opened her eyes. He watched her with unmistakable hunger. While she'd been coming down, he'd put on a condom and leaned forward, entering her in one thrust. Her head flew back as he filled her.

Her body received him, welcomed him, encouraged him to take her. He did. With strong, deep thrusts, her body sang as it joined him in an orchestrated coupling that went back to the beginning of time. When a man took his woman, conversations weren't required or appreciated. It just was. His primal claiming was hard and strong. Her body recognized what her mind refused.

She was his. Her walls clenched in agreement.

He shivered.

A quick slap to his ass to remind him of her claim, as well. He pulled her leg higher and speared deeper. The slapping of flesh the rhythm of the hour, it sounded heavenly.

"Baby, sooo good," he grunted as he slammed into her.

A squeeze of his ass her only acknowledgement as she rose to meet his thrust. There were times when a man could lay a gentle fuck on his woman and other times required a hard fast, throw-it-down-so-she'll-remember screwing that made you speak another language. The man had to know his woman well enough to decide which one to pull out of his bag. And this man knew what she needed.

Denise seized as her body was thrown into orgasmic bliss. Pleasure radiated from her core at the blessed release. Her body hummed it's satisfaction as it spasmed and then relaxed.

Red roared as the feeling spiraled from his back and slammed him forward, his seed hot and ready to confirm life, contained in the latex he wore. Contentment settled over him. He rolled over, his body sated for the moment. He threw his arm over his face, needing a shield to prepare for the guilt trip Denise had been throwing out the past few months after they made love. She had no problems letting him take care of her needs, but she made him feel like crap when she lashed out when they were through. He wondered how much more of her rejections he'd take.

Her hand grazed his chest. He froze, not knowing what to expect. Her mercurial moods often caught him off guard.

She sighed. "I'm sorry."

He flinched. That was new. Not quite what he was expecting. "For what?"

"For getting us to a place that you freeze when I touch you. You shrink back when I want to cuddle. I'm sorry for bringing us to this point."

Red stared at the ceiling, not quite trusting this rational Denise. No woman had the power to hurt him as she did.

"No comment?" she chided, throwing her leg over his thigh.

"I'm not sure what to say. Apology accepted?" he rubbed her toned leg enjoying the feel.

"That'll do." The sounds of their breathing filled the air. "I miss this." Denise rubbed his chest.

"I miss you, baby." He turned so he could face her, rubbing her leg and back. Real, soul-searing confessions must be on his agenda this week. "I miss this too, but I miss not being able to talk to you on a daily basis, play with my kids, be with my family more."

She stroked his face, her palm warm against his stubble. They stared at each other. "There's been no one else."

He swallowed. Although he knew he'd been the only man in her bed, it sounded good to hear her confirm it. "Thanks for that. And there's been no one else that mattered for me, either."

She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment and then released them. Instead, she pulled him close. "Thanks for being honest. No lies between us, okay?"

"Okay." That was new. Normally that was the get-the-hell-out point of their conversations. Were they really going to have a serious discussion about their relationship?

"You hurt me."

"When?" He moved back so he could see her face.

"When you left. You left the girls and me. That hurt."

He rubbed her back. "Baby, you put me out. You pushed me against the wall and told me to leave."

She punched his chest. "So you decided to listen. Since when did you do anything I asked you to do?"

He stared at her; a spark of anger coursing through him. "Are you saying you never wanted me to move out?"

She tried to move back, he followed, determined to find the underlying cause of their break-up.

"I meant it at the time. I just...I don't know." She ducked her head. "Things were so crazy; we were young with not one, but two babies. We had to grow up and be parents."

"Newsflash baby, we were parents," he snapped not bothering to hide his aggravation. "Tell the truth, you wanted me to be like *your* parents. Hell Denise, your daddy's a preacher. There's no way I could be him."

"Un uh, I didn't want you to be like him, I wanted you to stop getting drunk." She sat up and looked at him.

He sat up as well. "I stopped getting drunk, remember. What you wanted me to do was stop drinking. And that wasn't fair. When we met, you knew I drank, smoked and got high. Hell, we got high together. Then all of a sudden, you demanded I change into someone I haven't got a clue how to be." He stared at her, the familiar ache burning his gut. "Admit it, you stopped loving me." The root of his pain stood exposed, he wished he could retrieve it, bury it again.

"What?" she shook her head. "What're you talking about? All I wanted was for you to stop getting drunk around the twins."

"And stop smoking, getting high and give up my beer. Be real Denise, you wanted me to change into your daddy." Why she'd want anyone to be like that prick, he had no idea. The man didn't have much of a church, or a personality. How could a grandparent say those types of

things about his own child to her children? He wished she'd allow him to address that shit, but he doubted she would.

"Of course you couldn't smoke around the babies. They could have gotten a contact high." She stared and turned. That was a weak comeback and they both knew it. Why wouldn't she open up and talk to him?

"Denise, when I saw you at that club, what eight, nine years ago, I wanted you. I've never stopped. But I'm still the same, loud, uneducated man you met then. I smoke, I drink and I get high on occasion. That doesn't mean I'm not a good parent or a good man. You wanted me to choose and I got no idea how to do that." He laid it on the line, placing the ball in her court.

"I wanted you to choose us." Her voice dropped so low, he barely heard the words.

"Over who, myself? Who would come to you then? This shadow of me?" He stroked her arm. "Do you realize what you're saying? It's one thing to say don't smoke in front of the kids, or don't let the kids see you drunk or high. It's another thing to say give up everything you've been doing the past fifteen years or leave. Baby, you gave me no warning, no 'can we work this out,' no nothing. Just got up and declared it was your way or nothing. It seemed too easy for you to walk away and that about broke me. How could you cut me off after everything?" His throat clogged and his jaw clenched as he asked the question that burned inside the last ten months.

Her eyes watered. "It wasn't like that. I wasn't over you, I can't get over you. I just wanted...I just wanted, I guess normal. A normal family."

"Normal ain't the Cosbys." He pulled her up and rested her head against his chest. "My daddy to this day raises more hell than anyone in the neighborhood. Hell, I think he has a personal relationship with the judge. He drinks hard, fights quick with that damned Irish temper." He squeezed her waist. "But come Monday morning, he's at work. My mama never worked outside the house. One thing my dad drilled into his five sons, take care of home. He provided everything my mama needed. Everything."

"I know. You aren't your dad, Red. He doesn't cheat on your mom."

"I never cheated on you." He drew back stung. "You threw me out of our house for doing the same things I'd been doing since we met. Do you think I believed that was the reason you put my ass out?" He looked down at her.

She frowned. "Yeah, what else?"

"I thought you didn't love me anymore. That's the only reason I left." He said quietly staring into her eyes. Her shock went a long way into healing the pain of rejection he'd suffered lately.

"You said that before, but I didn't think you were serious. Why?" Her face puzzled. "How could I stop loving you?" She sat up with a baffled expression.

He shook his head, he'd try one more time to get her to understand his point. After that, he'd drop it. His heart could only take so much. To think he'd been wrong all this time was too much to process. "Denise, you got high with me, right?"

"Yeah, before I got pregnant."

"We got drunk and smoked together, right?"

She nodded, looking at him.

“What changed other than you got pregnant?”

“I changed.”

He nodded, “You changed. I didn’t. But you kicked me out of your life. People don’t kick you to the curb for bullshit like smoking, drinking or getting high. We did that together. You knew I was no threat or danger to our kids when I was high.”

She nodded.

“So what was the real reason you kicked my ass to the side?”

She stared, mouth agape.

“You stopped loving me,” he whispered.

“No,” she shouted, jumping up, straddling his lap. “No and double damn, hell, no.” Her hand stroked his face. “I was seventeen when we met, a virgin in more ways than one. You...” she paused and kissed his lips. “You rocked my world. I’d never met anyone who didn’t give a damn about what people thought. You were the only white guy in the club, but that didn’t stop you from walking over and pulling me on the dance floor.” She shook her head. “I’d never met anyone so full of himself.”

“I ain’t white, I’m Irish, and didn’t I back my shit up?” He placed his hands behind his head to keep from grabbing her. He needed to know why she left him. It’d torn him apart; he didn’t know how to understand their break-up. Sure, he’d fucked around, but none of it meant anything. She mattered. Hopefully, now he’d find out what happened ten months ago.

“Stop bragging,” she smacked his arm. “You backed it up. Of course, I can’t be too sure since I’ve nobody to compare you with.” She laughed at his scowl. “Not that I wanted to, you know.” She shrugged.

“Why. Did. You. Break. Up. With. Me?” he asked seriously.

She squirmed on his lap. “I had this idea of what or where we should be in our relationship. I admit I got high and liked it, but the moment I got pregnant, I quit. I felt like if I gave it up, you should too. Since I stopped drinking and smoking, you should too.”

He stared at her.

“So you really broke off everything because I didn’t do what you wanted me to?” He shook his head in disbelief. “Is that what you’re saying? You dropped everything because I didn’t stop smoking or drinking beer?”

“At the time it seemed like a good idea. I had this notion that if you loved me and the girls, then you’d want to do what was best for us as a family.”

“And in your mind that was me giving up what you gave up?”

“Put like that it sounds childish and immature.” She pouted at his pointed stare. “Seriously? I think I was scared. Think about it. Our relationship hit the ground at breakneck speed. You got in my drawers, what? The second date?”

He nodded, trying to see where this was headed.

“My first time ever, was with this I-don’t-give-a-damn big ass white guy. He drank, smoke and got high, everything my daddy preached against. Not to mention the tattoos and the fact he’d gone to prison.” She shook her head.

He tensed at the mention of his prison time. It’d been before they got together, he’d been real wild back then and would’ve eaten her for breakfast. He wasn’t a nice person.

“We were off and on for what? Two, three years? Then I get pregnant. All of a sudden, you buy this house, the cars, and we become parents. But what’s wrong with the picture?”

He tensed, a light bulb went off in his mind. *Marriage*. That seemed to be the word of the day. He’d messed up and would bet his job that’s what she really wanted before but was scared to tell him. Ten months ago, he wasn’t sure he could’ve said it with as much conviction as he’d said earlier today. Nevertheless, he’d marry her in a heartbeat.

“I still got high?” he said watching her reaction.

“No. We were playing house. We had two small lives that depended on us and we were playing house. You didn’t want to change, I didn’t really want to change, but had no choice. I resented that, and took it out on you.”

He mulled over her confession. Women thought so differently than men did. Why the hell didn’t she just tell him that up front.

“Why— “

“If I had tried to explain all that at the time, it would’ve come out wrong. Red, I didn’t know what was bothering me, not exactly. I just knew I didn’t like the way things were. The kids were so demanding, not on purpose, but it was hard. We kept working at being together but it rubbed me the wrong way.” She threw up her hands and tried to move off him.

He grabbed her legs, holding her in place. The thought about marriage wiggled stronger into his mind. “Baby, you think,” he hesitated as she looked at him. He coughed clearing his throat. “You think maybe because of the way you were raised, in the church and everything, that it rubbed you wrong living with me not being married?”

She threw her head back, frowning at him. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Think about it. Your parents were hurt when you dropped out of college.”

“That was before I met you.”

“No, you’d made a decision to take up a trade, but hadn’t dropped out of college. You were only seventeen when we met, and pretty smart.”

“I was eighteen, and Mama knew I didn’t want to go to college. Daddy kept pushing. I just wanted to learn computers or train to be a cop. He was against both of those ideas. Nothing I wanted to do with my life mattered.” The mulish pout she got when things didn’t go her way made an appearance.

He stroked her arm. “So you went rebel.” His Georgia Rebel so full of fire and life. He couldn’t imagine life without her.

She pushed his shoulder. “I just decided to live my life the way I wanted.”

“You still haven’t settled with a trade even after school, that’s one of the things your daddy’s mad about.”

“No, he’s mad ‘cause I let a white boy make me pregnant and take care of me.” She smiled.

It was an old cause of disagreement with them. The Reverend Brown did not care for Red one iota and had made that very clear, often. Red couldn’t stand the sanctimonious, hypocritical asshole either, but kept that to himself.

“I ain’t white. I’m Irish.” He smiled and then sobered. “He’ll get over it. My kids are here to stay and I’ll always take care of them. I wanna take care of you as long as you let me. This brings me back to my thoughts.”

“Uggg,” she grimaced. “You’re like a pit bull.”

“Maybe. Think about this seriously before you put it down. I love you. You know that. But you broke up with me on some bullshit and I will not go through that again. Let’s use some of your detective skills and find the root of our problem. Okay?”

“It wasn’t bullshit. I felt that way at the time.” She pulled her hand from his, glaring.

“Yeah, it was bullshit. And I think you said that to cover what you really felt. When you asked what was wrong with the picture earlier, it came to me we were playing house like a family but weren’t married. Did it bother you that we weren’t married? Or that we’d never discussed it?” The more he thought about her actions, the more certain he was that was the root of their problem.

She opened her mouth, stared at him and closed it. “We never discussed marriage?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“You don’t want to get married?”

“I already said I would marry you.”

“Why didn’t we discuss marriage before?”

“I told you when we first started dating I wouldn’t get married until my thirties. You said cool. That was the most we’d ever talked about it.” He paused. “I’m sure your parents had questions about why I didn’t marry you after you got pregnant. You never said. But after hearing what he said in front of my kids.” He paused. “You are going to check him about that foulness, right?” He stared at her, prepared to take on the challenge himself if she couldn’t bring herself to deal.

She nodded.

“Okay, did they pressure you?”

He allowed her to slide off him and sit quietly on the side of the bed. She wrapped her arms around her waist, vulnerable. It pissed him off to see her like that. He wondered what her parents had said to her.

“Daddy said you’d used me. And no man would pay for the cow after he got the milk free. Believe me, that was one of the nicer comments he made. He called me a whore, a loose woman and a bunch of names.” She chuckled when he tensed. Absently, she reached back and patted his shoulder in an awkward comforting gesture. “He got really creative when he got to you.” She glanced at him.

He shrugged. Her dad could kiss his Irish ass for all he cared. Smug bastard.

“Mom just asked why we didn’t get married, repeatedly by the way, since you’d bought the house and car. In her mind, that’s what married people did. Daddy assured her you’d get married one day to some blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl and try to keep me barefoot and pregnant on the side.”

Red snorted. “He doesn’t know you at all if he thinks you’d ever go for that.” He’d sat up in disgust at the verbal abuse she’d taken from her parents without any support from him. What kind of people did that shit? They would be the in-laws from hell. He’d sic his mom on her dad; she’d straighten him fairly quick.

“No, Daddy doesn’t have to know me—or you for that matter—to be right, in his own mind, of course. I don’t think he likes white people that much.” She glanced at him and then at her hands resting on his lap.

“His loss, baby. You’re a phenomenal woman. You never shared any of this with me. I think eventually, their poison slipped through some emotional cracks and bled into our relationship,” he said, pulling her close as she mulled over his words.

“Maybe. It’s hard disappointing him and trying to be happy on my own terms. I was too young and I guess I brought into some of what he said.”

I knew it. Being right gave him no pleasure. He’d been separated from her for ten months. He stroked her back as she wept silently. In a million years, he never thought it’d make this much difference. In this day and age, people had children all the time without being married. With her upbringing, he should’ve realized this might be a problem for her. He could be such an ass.

“I wanted you to ask me when you were ready. Not because of what my parents think or even what I want.” She stood, teary-eyed, and kissed the palm of his hand. “I need you to want to marry me like you need to breathe. And you’re not there yet. So we’ll wait.” She released his hand and walked naked into the bathroom.

Either her hips hypnotized him with their swaying action or her words had stunned him into silence. He sat on the bed watching the empty doorway to the bath. *Need her like air?* Is that possible? He wasn’t sure, but he was sure she wasn’t showering alone. He jumped up and joined her.

Chapter 6

Two showers later, they'd picked up the girls, fed them dinner, put them to bed and finally got around to discussing the issues at the construction company. Denise lay on his chest, surprisingly light of heart and eager to delve into another mystery. They'd worked well together getting to the root of their problems. Together they could take on the world. They'd start with his company.

"What did you men discover in your talk?" she asked sitting up against the headboard.

He smiled and filled her in on the patterns they recognized and his ability to get info from some old sources.

"That's great. I'll go with you," she said agreeing with his course of action. "I'm sure some of the women from before still hang out around there. I can talk with them while you talk to the guys." She leaned over and picked up her cell.

He blocked her hand. "What? What do you mean you'll go with me? What if something goes down? This ain't TV, Denise, you ain't Angela Lansbury."

She flipped him the bird. "I know who I am. I also know I'm going with you tomorrow night to the club. I *will* talk to some of our old friends, many of the women down there wanted to hook up with you and I'll run interference so you can talk to the guys." She snorted and punched in a number.

"Cherise?"

Red got up from the bed, cursing under his breath.

"Yeah, this is me. I need a favor. Red and I are going undercover." Quickly she filled Cherise in on their plan for the next night, securing her agreement to watch the girls. "Okay, I'll bring them over around four in the afternoon." Her girl was down and hated she couldn't go.

Denise jumped up, excited about the adventure and working with Red. She ran to the closet. None of her newer things would do. She needed a lycra dress or something tight and showy. Bent over, she didn't see Red enter the closet, but heard his heavy breathing.

His feet stood directly behind her. She snapped upright, holding a dark green tube top in front of her chest and batting her eyes. "What'd you think? This'll fit right in with what everyone else'll be wearing."

He snatched the stretchy bit of cloth. "Not you. Everyone knows I'd never let you wear that shit out in public."

She tingled at his words, loving how he claimed her. The behemoth had a point, badly stated, but valid. "Right, so what if I wear something like this?" She pulled out a black short-sleeved dress that dipped in the back and front with red piping. It fit nice and wasn't as revealing as some of the outfits they'd see tomorrow night.

"Try it on, let me see." He sat on the bed with a mischievous grin and leaned back on his forearms.

Boldly, she stripped off her housecoat displaying her red thong, her only garment.

His breath hitched as she took her time shimmying the dress up over her hips and up her waist. She turned and bent forward, touching her toes before looking back at him.

His lust-glazed eyes darkened as she rotated her hips, turning to face him. The material stretched and moved with her, hugging every curve like a lost lover. She pulled each breast up to its proper place, filling the dress out. Hands in her hair, she faced him. Delighted tendrils raced up her spine as his eyes drunk her in.

“What’d you think?”

His eyes did a slow perusal, top to bottom, lingering on her breasts. Her nipples tightened in salute.

He licked his lips.

She squeezed her thighs as moisture pooled between her legs. Only this man, she thought.

“It’s aw’right,” he drawled.

She stomped her foot and turned to the closet when he caught her from behind, pulling her against his hard shaft. His lips kissed her neck as she bent to give him better access. Strong fingers pulled her tight nipples through the fabric, as sparks of pleasure hit her core.

“I like it,” he whispered. “Make sure you wear a bra and panties though. I don’t want anybody to see what the material’s hiding.” He peeled the dress from her shoulders, bestowing kisses everywhere his hands touched.

Finally, she turned in his arms, sexually frustrated by his teasing and pushed him away. “I’ll do it.” She slid the dress and thong off and tossed them to the side before reaching for him.

He smiled, the dimple in his cheek deepening. “Hungry?” He took her hands and held them behind her back in one of his. Taut nipples inches from his mouth, he licked as she squirmed, trying to break free.

“No fair, I thought I was going to get a chance to taste you.” He pulled hard on her nipple, heat speared straight to her core. His other hand played between her thighs, dipping in her juices. Her senses were on overload as she released herself into his care. Talented fingers played her pussy like the finest musician, her moans an accompaniment, softened by his kisses.

“That’s it baby, I got you. Whatever you need, I’ve got you.” He promised as his fingers stroked her sopping wet tunnel. She felt it building, her walls tightened, her back bowed as her legs clamped tight, squeezing his hand. The storm of pleasure shook her ragged as her body embraced its release.

Beads of perspiration dripped from Red’s brow. She smiled and licked the salty fluid. He pulled her close, attacking her mouth. His fingers made their way from her cunt to his mouth and then hers. The kiss turned carnal as she tasted herself on him. He grabbed her thighs, bent her forward licking and laving her juices. She moaned at the ferocity of his hunger. His hands shook as he held her in place.

Her man had gone to another level. Her chest swelled knowing she’d taken him there.

Without warning, he flipped her over. Her boneless body flopped on the bed, legs wide apart. He stared at her face, his eyes dipped lower to her breast. The demon in her forced her to lift the chocolate mounds as an offering, delighting in the flaring of his nostrils when she pulled

and rolled the stiff peaks. He leaned over her, one arm on the bed, the other hand found her wet, empty pussy. His brow rose as he inserted two fingers, and stroked slow. Maddeningly slow. Her hips arched and bucked against his fingers, they never broke eye contact.

He pulled the two fingers out and sucked them long and hard, while watching her.

She swallowed hard. One callused hand grabbed her leg and lifted it high to his shoulder. *Oh shit.* Her mouth opened slightly at the tug.

He smiled, leaned forward and sheathed his cock to the hilt.

Denise's eyes closed at the full feeling. Sublime—the only word to describe being one with this man. He pulled back. Panicked, she grabbed his hips to keep him close. He slammed home again, and again. She rose to meet him as they danced in rhythm to find the ultimate fulfillment. She glanced at him. His eyes were closed and the weirdest look encompassed his face. Sort of pain and joy combined. He took her other leg over his arm, deepening the thrusts.

Her breath hitched as he plundered. Slapping sounds of flesh and their grunts of encouragement the music of the evening. He did that twisty thing with his hips, on a double pump and her body exploded. She arched forward as her walls clamped down and milked his cock. Red shouted into the pillow his release as his body twitched and shivered on top of hers. She licked the sweat from his shoulders as he let out a breath and relaxed before rolling over.

“You are going to kill me, woman,” he growled low into her ear. “I hope you didn’t wake my kids with all that screaming.”

She smacked his cheeks and rolled over, barely able to move. “In a minute, I’m going to shower and check on *my* kids to make sure you didn’t scare them with that loud ass roar.”

He rubbed her back. “Good idea,” he mumbled into the sheets.

Chapter 7

Although it was early evening, the club was darker and smaller than she remembered. It had always been sleazy, but when you're underage and want to act grown, you go where they'll let you in. She and Red strolled in, grabbed a small round table and sat down. He went to the bar and returned with a rum and coke for her and a beer for him. She stared at the drink for a minute and then glanced up at him. He smirked, saluting her with his bottled beer.

"You wanted to do this teamwork, Detective," he whispered into her ear.

A quick sip settled the dare in his eyes. She tilted her head and listened to the music. Things hadn't changed much, other than the steep cover charge. The dance floor was miniscule, the tables close together and the drinks watered down.

Oh well, time to do what she came to do. Ironically, in a place like this, the way to get attention was to act as if you didn't want it. So she sat, looking down at the table. A hand brushed her back; she looked up slowly and saw an old friend, Brenda. Without making eye contact, Brenda headed into the ladies room. After a moment, Denise looked down at her dress, pretended she'd spilled something on it and walked to the ladies room.

Brenda walked out the stall. The two of them stared at each other for a full second and then let out small screams and embraced.

"How you been, girl?" Brenda asked, looking her up and down. "Last I heard, Irish knocked you up."

"Ain't that the way of the Irish?"

Brenda's eyes bugged and then they laughed again. "You still crazy." Her face sobered. "Call me." She shoved a piece of paper Denise's hand. "Things have changed round here, not for the better. You guys need to get up outta here. There's a lot bullshit going down and you don't want to get caught up in it."

Denise stared at her, looking at her friend for the first time. Although they were similar in height, Brenda was thinner. Not the voluptuous woman she knew. Her eyes were dull and her weave, looked like, well, weave. She'd never seen her girl not well put together. She looked tired, drawn out. Her heart leapt for her former classmate. "What? We just got here."

Brenda shook her head and walked to the mirror. "I can't be seen talking to you, so call me later tonight." She stared at Denise in the mirror. A sad, small smile teased her lips. "You look good, Dee. Stay the hell away from here and take your man with you. I'll talk to you later." She winked and all but ran out the door.

Puzzled, Denise looked at the number before pushing it into her bra. It wasn't like her girl to be so scared. What'd she mean no one could see them talking? Something bad must be going down.

Red. Her heart leapt, as blood pounded through her veins. Feeling dizzy with the urgency, she left to find him.

The door opened again, she looked up hoping it was Brenda. Instead it was whoredom personified. Tameka. The diva wannabe had never liked her. She walked in on five-inch heels, a stretchy dress barely covering her flat ass and large tits, her platinum blond hair had strands of purple that matched her contacts and eye shadow.

Tameka looked like a clown instead of the Ms. Fabulous she thought she portrayed. A giggle tried to escape. Ruthlessly, she tamped it down.

“Hey,” Denise nodded and walked toward the door.

“Denise?” She blinked those ridiculously long fake lashes. “Girl, I thought that was you when I saw Irish out there. How you been girl?”

Denise’s hand was on the door. The phoniness of this woman made her flesh crawl. “I’m okay.” She opened the door and walked out.

“Stuck up bitch.”

Denise snorted. That was the real Tameka she knew.

Someone had taken their table, so she walked around looking for Red, disturbed by Brenda’s comments. A feeling of dread slithered down her back. She quickened her pace, frustration mounting at the people in her way.

He wasn’t at the bar, or in the poolroom. Heading towards the exit, thinking he may have stepped outside, she heard a pop and then another pop with shouts. Turning toward the sound, she refused to believe its significance. *Red*, his name locked in her throat as she looked around frantically.

“Oh fuck, somebody’s shooting in here.” A shrill voice yelled. Screaming voices, mad dashes to the exits in the poorly-lit space and the unlikely coincidence in timing held her immobile.

Denise stepped to the side against the wall, mouth opened in shock as she took in the mad scene. Across the room, Brenda walked at a fast pace and pointed to the left before exiting. Pivoting, she beat back the fear threatening to topple her and headed in that direction. Tameka moved in front of her.

“Where you headed?” Frost dripped from every word the puffed-up woman spoke.

Denise ignored her and walked to the side, trying to find Red. Tameka stepped in front of her, blocking her entry with a smile on her made up face.

“I asked you— “

Denise’s hands shot out, punching the woman in the chest, knocking her on her ass before walking around her at a fast clip. Her heart racing, she ignored the curses and threats from the downed woman. “If he’s hurt, I’mma come back and kick her ass,” Denise murmured. Thoughts on finding Red propelled her down the dark corridor to the back of the building.

Brenda’s warning fresh in her ear, she pulled out her cell, dialed 911. “Hello, I’m calling from Club Neo downtown. Someone’s been shot.” She hung up knowing they could find them by tracking her cell.

Just as she cupped her hand to call out his name, her foot hit something. Stumbling, she looked down at a pair of Tims. Her breath caught, Red had been wearing Timberlands. Her hand

covered her mouth as her eyes dragged upward, fear pummeling her throat. He sat on the floor, leaning against a grungy wall.

“Red,” she screeched, before tempering her tone at his frown. He sat with his eyes closed, if it weren’t for the blood staining his shirt around his shoulder, you’d think he was chilling, resting. Numb fingers dropped her bag, tears ran down her face, as she frantically looked around, there wasn’t a soul in sight. Her knees hit the debris-littered concrete as the bartender ran over to them. Her body shook as she took in his blood-soaked shirt. Without thinking, her trembling fingers reached toward the spreading red spot, if only to prove to her mind, her eyes weren’t lying. *This couldn’t be happening. God please, not like this, not like this.*

“Red?” she whispered, needing him to open those big eyes of his. Yell, cuss, have a drink. Right now, everything she’d ever thought he’d done wrong seemed miniscule. She’d take her man any way she could, as long as he was alive.

“Damn, some fool done fucked up and shot Irish,” the bartender said, running over to her. “His peeps gonna shut us down.” He touched Red’s brow and looked at her. “Did you call the cops?”

She nodded. Too numb to talk or feel. *Someone shot Red.* The thought ricocheted through her, bringing fear, wrenching pain, and then anger. Scorching hot, kick that ass anger. “Oh hell, No!” She touched his forehead as she opened her phone.

“Smoke, somebody shot Red at the club.” She nodded, wiping her eyes, forgetting he couldn’t see her. “Yeah, that one.” He eyes were glued to her lover the entire time. Strange how the coin flipped. When she was honest with herself, she could admit it hurt deeply that Red never asked to give her his name, marry her. As much as she wished it otherwise, her daddy’s remarks hit hard and sank deep. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know he loved her, she knew. But a part of her couldn’t reconcile him loving her and not wanting to marry her. Eventually, those thoughts turned cancerous, she broke up with him, because she wanted the fairytale, her version of it, at least. And because he didn’t hop onboard, she relegated his love for her to the ranks her daddy decreed. *Stupid.* So much pain, so much time lost, and now she might never get the opportunity to show him how much he meant to her.

He was her world.

Red offered her a weak smile and nodded to her. Her cheeks hurt from the width of her smile, dizziness bent her forward, next to his lips. The sirens were close. Instead of kissing her, he whispered in her mouth.

“Tango, tell Smoke, Tango.” His words dry and raspy against her chin. She nodded.

The bartender directed the police to the back where they were. Paramedics stooped next to Red’s shoulders, asking him questions. Relief that he could talk overwhelmed her. He glanced at her. She dialed Smoke again.

Turning to the wall, she whispered what Red had told her. The thought that someone could probably die tonight because of what she’d told Smoke slid across her mind. One look at the blood on the floor, and the tubes placed into her man’s arms squashed her qualms.

###

“Denise, I specifically told you not to call my mama,” Red fussed. “Now she’s upset. Daddy’s pissed he can’t get here. She sent the four stooges to check out things here ‘til daddy can get his parole officer to let him leave town.” Red’s mottled face would’ve been comical if not accompanied by the bandage on his shoulder.

Cherise’s brow rose at the last. Denise could’ve told her Red came from a colorful family. She shrugged, sucked her tooth at Red, and turned to Cherise. Ms. Connie had gone immediately to Ross’s to watch the girls so Cherise could be with her.

“You called his mama?” Cherise smiled as they sat in the corner.

“Of course,” Denise said. “Red can fuss all he wants, but that’s all he’ll do. His mama might cut me.” She looked straight-faced at Red.

“Mama won’t.” He paused, thinking. “Well, she’d be a little mad, but she wouldn’t hurt you. Well, not much.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “That’s not the point. I asked you not to tell her and you did. That’s wrong and you know it.” He snapped.

She shrugged. He’d been a bear since he came from x-rays. The bullet had gone straight through the fleshy part of his arm. They’d stitched him up and gave him pain meds. They wanted to keep him a couple of days for observation. Red insisted they just wanted to keep him because he had good insurance. Denise was ecstatic, but not stupid, so she called his mama. The woman didn’t play when it came to her youngest son.

Cherise chuckled.

They sat talking, keeping him entertained for another hour. A somber Ruby, Ross and Smoke walked into the room and just like that, the enormity of the situation hit them all like a hammer. Someone had hurt one of theirs.

“How you doing, Big Guy?” Ruby asked pulling a chair close to the bed.

“Flesh wound, no biggie.”

Denise snickered at his bravado.

Ruby shook his head.

Smoke stood near the door, hand cupped over his mouth, watching. Ross stood near Cherise, massaging her shoulder.

“Any idea who took a shot at ya?” Ruby asked, sliding closer.

Red closed his eyes and then looked at Smoke. “Nah, I couldn’t see. It was so dark. I turned to go back to the main room and they took a cheap shot. Good thing they were half blind or poor shots.” He snorted, glancing at her and then Ross.

Denise’s mind raced. He didn’t mention Tango to Ruby. What the hell? She glanced nervously at her hands. Something was off. Now she knew why she couldn’t find Red earlier at the club, he’d been in the back getting high. She’d forgotten he’d warned her he might need to do that to get some Intel.

Red’s bark of a laugh drew her attention. He looked toward the doorway. Denise shook her head at the sight. How in the world had these four huge men passed the nurse’s station? Five was already over the room quota.

His brothers didn't return his laugh. They looked him over while fanning out, checking everyone in the room. All four were tall as Red, broad-chested with the signature O'Connor mahogany-colored hair. When they saw her, they smiled and each walked over, kissed her on the cheek in greeting.

It felt good having this kind of back-up.

"Now that you've slobbered all over my woman, you can head home. Tell Ma the doctors will be releasing me tomorrow." He patted his stomach while looking at his brothers. The oldest, Frank, looked at her with a raised brow.

Denise hated he put her in this position. Red knew she'd lie for him in a heartbeat to anyone but family.

"Hey, don't look at her." Red's face colored, living up to his nickname. "Denise, you don't answer to them. Damn it!"

"So you're not getting out tomorrow, then. Is it the next day?" Frank glanced at her. His dark green eyes locked her in place. Of all the brothers, he resembled their mother the most. His features weren't as sharp or harsh as the others were. He owned a successful landscaping company and gave Red his first job. They'd spent many days in the past teasing her man over his earlier ineptitude.

She nodded sheepishly.

"Smoke, Ross, Ruby, good to see you." Frank nodded at each man. They returned it. Silence sat heavy in the room for a moment.

Denise could see the tension bubbling beneath the surface. They wanted to talk but wouldn't get real low with her and Cherise in the room. She eyed Cherise.

"I'm going to get the girls, baby." She walked around the bed, capturing Red's eyes. A flicker of something went through them, she couldn't be sure what. "I can come back later tonight if you want."

Before she finished her sentence, he shook his head. "Nah, take care of the girls." He looked at his brothers. "Where y'all staying?"

Donald, his middle brother shrugged. "We came straight here. I'll ride with Dee to pick up my princesses and stay at the house." The twins were identical, often wearing the same colors and styles. She could tell them apart. Blaine, a financial analyst, wore a more cynical expression on his face and his hair was shorter. Of the two, he was more social. Donald, the attorney appeared more conservative, wore his hair longer and economized on his words.

Blaine, Donald's twin nodded. "Me too. We'll make sure everything's cool til you get back home." They walked to the bed, pounded his fist and walked behind her and Cherise.

Denise turned at the door and smiled at him.

Red winked. Ross came back into the room after walking Cherise to the elevator.

"So tell me the truth, how do you feel?" Frank asked, looking down at him on the bed.

"Like shit and pissed the son-of-a-bitch got me like that." He clenched his jaw in aggravation. He'd started smoking and talking to one of his old friends, Romeo, in the back. They'd just taken a pull when Romeo leaned in and told him to watch his back—some bastards

were waiting for him. He couldn't believe it until he stepped out the back room and saw Tango and two other punks waiting with a pistol. He'd thrown his drink into their faces, which fucked up their shot, and moved to get out the way.

The fucked up part. They knew he'd be there. How'd they know that shit? He opened his eyes at the men in the room and for the first time questioned if he could trust them with his life. On a subconscious level, he knew Ross and Smoke would be out for blood, so he must trust them. He'd be surprised if Tango was still among the living. The look on Ross's face when he entered the room had been deadly.

Undoubtedly, he wasn't the only one bleeding tonight. His brothers just got in town. That left Denise and Ruby. It should be a no-brainer. Denise loved him and Ruby thought of him like a son. But someone had told those assholes he'd be there tonight.

Smoke watched him, pulled up a chair and crossed his legs. Ross pulled up a chair on the other side of the bed and sat, leaning back in the chair. His brothers looked at the two men who sat as silent vigilantes and shook their heads.

"Give me the keys to your place. We'll crash there tonight and be back in the morning. Hopefully, you'll give us something we can do something about." Frank stood next to the bed and picked up Red's keys. "They spilled blood. That has to be addressed."

Red nodded, knowing his dad would kick ass if they came back without addressing that foul shit. His family could be bloodthirsty at times.

Roark, the brother closest in age to him, and the most similar in appearance, stood next to the bed and stared at him. "I want a name." His voice low and gravelly. "If he is still among the living, I want him. If not, I want his partners, anyone will do. Give it to me in the morning, don't make me ask Denise. I don't want her to know I'm gonna kill a muthafucker in her city. She thinks I'm nice."

Frank snorted.

Red stared at Roark and knew he'd have to give him somebody. Although his brothers appeared cool on the outside, their clenched jaws and balled fists told how pissed they were. If it were anyone other than Smoke or Ross, they'd never leave him tonight.

He nodded. "I hear you." He pounded his fist.

Frank stopped at the door. "Is your car still at the club?"

"Nah, man, we got it," Smoke said.

Roark nodded. "Good."

"Yeah, it's all good." Ross stretched in his seat. For the first time Red noticed his split and reddened knuckles.

Chapter 8

Silence stretched in the room. Ruby shook his head. "I can't believe someone did that shit, Red. What was the name of the club?"

"Climaxx," Smoke said.

Red opened his eyes and looked at Smoke. They hadn't gone to the Climaxx, it was next on their list.

"I thought you guys were going to go to Big Daddy's, what happened?" Ross sat forward.

Red's mind whirled; he hadn't mentioned Big Daddy's.

"Isn't that the club you recommended, Ruby?" Ross turned and looked at their older partner.

"Yeah, a lot of guys from the yard hang out there. I figured that'd be a good place to start."

"I've heard some good things about that place. It would've been a good spot to get some info." Smoke said.

Red remained silent, allowing his partners to play out whatever was going on.

Ruby relaxed in his chair, smiling. "You remember Cameron?"

Nausea climbed Red's throat as he remembered the backstabbing thief.

"No. Who's he?" Smoke asked.

Red looked down on his lap.

Ross stared expectantly at Ruby.

"He was one of the men I sent to you a few years ago. He works at Big Daddy's. He could've helped you some."

"Helped me how? I fired his stealing ass," Red snapped.

"You fired him?" Ruby looked appalled. "Why? When?"

"A while back, Ruby. He didn't work out." Ross stepped in to smooth over the awkward moment.

"He never said anything. All this time, he never said anything." Ruby muttered in his chair.

"Well, let me get a nurse for a blanket. You need one, Ross, Smoke?"

Red's eyes widened. He didn't want Ruby staying here tonight. He needed to know what the hell was going on. He glanced at Ross.

"Naw, I'm good." Ross stretched his legs.

"Me too, Boss," Smoke said, stretching. The visiting hour's announcement came on over the loudspeaker. A short woman bustled in, glaring at his visitors.

"You heard the announcement. You gentlemen need to leave."

Smoke glanced at her. "We're staying."

She huffed as she walked to his bed. "Only two can stay. No more. That's the policy."

"Thanks." Ross crossed his legs.

Ruby's cheeks reddened. "Surely, it won't matter if one more person stays in the room."

“Out Sir. It’s bad enough the policy allows two family members, and Mr. O’Connor has already assured me these men are his family.” She glared at Ross and Smoke. “Although, the family resemblance is questionable.”

Ruby raised his arms in surrender and looked haplessly at Red. “Son, I’m sorry about this. We were supposed to put our heads together tonight. Maybe in the morning?”

Red nodded. Anything to get the man out the room. Right now, he wasn’t feeling too trusting. “Morning’s good for me.” He gestured to Ross and Smoke. “You guys, okay with in the morning?”

Smoke yawned. “Yeah, I’m tired. How early?”

Ruby looked at his watch. It was after eleven. “Eight okay?” He chuckled at Ross’s groan. “All right, all right, I’ll be here at nine and then we can put our heads together.”

“Thanks for coming, Rube,” Red said, looking at the older man intently. When had he stopped trusting him?

“You don’t thank me for caring about you, Red. Never that.” He nodded and walked out the door.

Red sat up, opened his mouth.

Ross raised a finger to stop him.

Smoke stood and walked around the room.

The fast patter of feet drew near their door. The nurse walked back in, a huge grin on her face. “He’s gone and so is everyone else. We’re ready to move you now.”

Red’s jaw slackened as he was summarily moved to another private room on the same floor, but a different wing. Two men he’d never seen before flanked his door and stood in front when he went inside along with his partners.

The Lieutenant from Big Lakes walked into the room.

Red’s eyes widened further.

“Hello, Mr. O’Connor. It seems someone really has it out for you.” Her expression said she could give a shit.

“So it seems.” He glanced at Smoke and then Ross before relaxing into the interview.

“Smoke feels this attack on you is somehow connected to my murder case. That’s why I’m here. Do you think this is somehow connected?” She arched her brow, waiting on his answer.

“To tell you the truth, I have no idea. I haven’t really had a chance to think about what happened earlier. If Smoke thinks there’s a connection, then there may be.”

“You trust him like that?” she smirked.

“With my life.”

She blinked at his quick response. “Okay, let’s examine the facts as I know them.” She looked at him. “You dated the waitress, she winds up murdered and placed in the field next to where you work.”

He nodded wondering where all this was going. He was tired, the pain meds had worn off, he’d only stayed alert to talk to his boys, not relive his past.

“You come home, go to a club with another woman.” She looked at him.

He clenched his jaw. Denise wasn't another woman.

"At this club *you* get shot." She turned to Smoke. "I don't see any connection. Perhaps it was a random shooting and your friend was in the way."

Smoke shrugged. "Your call. I promised if anything happened I'd let you know."

She stared at him a second longer and spun to face Red. "Mr. O'Connor is there any information you have that can assist me in this investigation?"

Red shook his head. "No ma'am, not right now. I got shot a few hours ago and the pain's kicking my ass. I'm going to buzz the nurse for something." He pushed the button, getting little satisfaction from the sympathetic grimace the Lieutenant sent his way.

"Of course." She placed a card on the table near his bed as the nurse walked in. "Please call me when you're feeling better, if you have anything to add to the investigation, that is." She glared at Smoke and walked out.

"You need your rest, Mr. O'Connor," the nurse said, checking his I.V. Satisfied, she gave them a nod and walked out.

Smoke had one of the men walk in to sweep the room for bugs. Red's brow rose before he slumped onto the bed. A slight beep had him opening his eyes to see the little gadget the man held in his hand. They swept the room twice more before everyone was satisfied.

"What the fuck's going on?" Red asked when the door closed behind security.

"Soon as Smoke called me, I contacted a security company and had the hospital have a room set aside for you. We needed the police to confirm you were involved in an ongoing investigation. The security company will have men on the door around the clock until you leave and can watch your own back. I want you to be able to sleep without worrying about who's coming in the room," Ross explained.

Red's mouth snapped close. "You watch as much TV as Denise. It never occurred to me that someone would come here to shoot me. My sleep wouldn't have been interrupted. I appreciate everything and all that, but the minute Denise sees those guys on the door she's going to go ballistic."

"Tango said some punk paid them a thousand dollars to kill you tonight." Smoke stood and looked out the window while Red sputtered.

"What? A thousand?"

"Stop being an asshole," Ross snapped, his temper unleashed. "It's not funny. A thousand's a million to someone who ain't got shit."

Red sobered at the reality of that statement.

Smoke pulled his chair near the side of the bed. "You okay? No bullshit, straight up. Are you okay?" Ross moved behind Smoke, staring at him.

Red looked at both men and smiled. "I was scared shitless I'd bleed out on that dirty floor. Didn't want my woman to see me down. The music was too loud, I wasn't sure anybody heard the noise. I think Romeo scared them off."

"Romeo?" Smoke asked.

“Yeah, from the yard, been out a couple years.” Red moved to get more comfortable as the pain meds kicked in. “We smoked a joint in the back and he told me someone was waiting for me, warned me to watch my back.”

“How’d he know they were waiting for you?” Smoke asked.

Red shrugged. “I nodded and walked out, right in front of Tango’s pistol. I threw my glass at them, their aim was off and I got clipped in the shoulder. Clean shot, went straight through.”

“Who found you?” Ross asked.

“Denise. She’d been looking for me and walked into my feet on the ground.” He chuckled without humor, the meds lightening his mood. “She dropped to the floor and touched my face.” He scrunched his face in thought. “She was crying, though. I told her to tell you Tango. Knew you’d figure the rest out.”

Smoke nodded. “How many were with him? With Tango?”

Red frowned. The drugs had him feeling loopy. “Three. There were three, two black and one white. The white guy was short with a baseball cap pulled low, hair on his face. Tango and his partner were about the same height.”

Ross frowned. “Three?”

Smoke nodded. “We have someone to give your brother in the morning.”

Red’s heavy lids barely opened. “Who?” He yawned. “Tango?”

“Naw, Tango left already,” Ross said. “Him and his partner. But the white guy, try and remember everything you can about him so you can feed him to your brother.” Ross settled down in his chair for the night.

Chapter 9

Two days later, Red was at Denise's with the girls. His shoulder hurt like fire, but he could still move, get around. His daughters were excited to see him and had dozens of questions. Denise and his brothers ran interference so he could get some rest. Later, Smoke, Ross, Cherise and their daughter, Lenora joined the welcome home party. Denise and Cherise corralled the girls upstairs, so the men could talk.

"I found that punk," Roark said, "the white boy with the guys that shot you. Name was Cleo, he claimed he was buying a rock when the stuff went down. Said he only knew them as dealers." Roark closed the notepad he had and looked at the seven men in the room.

"You believe him?" Frank asked.

"Yeah, not that it mattered." There was silence for a heartbeat.

"What about Romeo?" Ross asked Smoke.

Smoke sat in the overstuffed chair near the sound system. "He said he heard the noise from some fellas who'd just been released from the yard. He couldn't believe it, so he asked a couple of questions and the guy just told him, somebody was looking for you. When he saw Red, he told him what he heard." He rolled the toothpick around his tongue.

"You believe him?" Frank asked.

"No."

"Me neither, too compact. Too tidy. He's hiding something." Ross tapped his leg.

Smoke and Red looked at each other before glancing at Ross. "Roark, why don't you and Donald pay Romeo a visit later," Red said, not wanting Ross to go after the man. He was too close to the edge. It took a lot to move his partner to violence, but when it did, it wasn't pretty. Red could almost feel sorry for Tango. Almost. "Chances are he's hanging in the open, so he can be seen with whoever. He's wily and slick." Red grinned at the light of challenge in his brother's eyes.

Roark pulled out a ten-inch blade and stared at it. "Where can I find Romeo?"

Smoke asked for his pad and wrote the information on it.

"How does he look? How will I know him?" He looked at Red.

A scream rent the air as Denise ran down the stairs, phone in one hand, mouth covered with the other. Her large eyes wide and fearful. Red slid forward, prepared to catch her.

"What's wrong?" He stood, stopping her.

"It's, it's Brenda, my girl. She was at the club the other night." She paused to catch her breath before speaking on the phone. "Tell me where you are, I'll come get you."

Red tensed, and shook his head.

His brothers stood.

"Okay, Bren...ohmigod, Bren. Don't move, hide in the restaurant, stay around a lot of people." She tried to walk around Red, but he held her in place, wondering what the hell had happened to cause this type of reaction from Denise.

“What’s wrong?” He asked the moment she disconnected.

Glassy eyes looked at him as she took deep breaths, shaking in his arms. He pulled her close. She relaxed and then pulled away.

“No, I don’t have time. They’re after Bren.” She stared at him. “They’re after Bren.”

Red nodded slowly as he pulled her close. He tried to remember her girl from a ways back. If memory served him right, she and Denise had been pretty tight. He didn’t realize they stayed in contact.

“Who’s after Bren?” Smoke asked his voice calm.

She swallowed and shuddered against him. He stroked her back, calming her as much as his sore shoulder would allow.

“Those fools after Red.” She leaned into his shirt, shaking her head. “I forgot, with everything going on. I forgot. How could I?” She sighed and looked at Smoke. “We have to help her, Smoke. This is all my fault.”

Red’s hand stopped rubbing her back. “How?”

“She told me to get out of the club when I first saw her. Said things had changed from back in the day, foul stuff happening. Told me she’d call me or me call her, I can’t remember which. She was scared for anybody to see us talking.” She inhaled. Her face frowned in anger.

“But that skank Tameka saw her come out the bathroom while I was in there. She said some stuff and I ignored her.” She looked up at Red. “She pointed me in your direction as she ran out the club.”

He frowned. “Tameka?”

“No, not that bitch,” Denise snapped. “She tried to stop me from going back where you were. I knocked her on her ass. Brenda. Brenda pointed to where you were. When she told me to get out, I went looking for you. I had a bad feeling.” She rested against his chest.

“Where is she?” Roark asked pulling his car keys. Donald stood next to him.

Denise turned. “She’s at the Red Lobster near the mall. I have to go with you; she’d never get in a car with you, not knowing who you are.” She stepped back, her eyes watery as she silently begged him not to interfere.

His heart dropped. For all he knew, this could be a set-up. Everything within him rebelled at her being in danger. Frank stood and clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ll ride behind them, make sure everything’s cool when Roark and Dee go inside to get the friend. I have some questions and I think we may be getting closer to some real answers.”

Red released her arm. She gave him a kiss and ran to catch up with his brothers.

“Yo, Frank.” He called as his brother reached the door and pounded his chest.

Frank nodded. “I’ll bring her back safe.” He walked out behind them.

###

Denise jumped out the car before it stopped moving, ignoring Roark’s yell and dashed into the crowd heading for the entrance of the restaurant. After pushing past the patrons waiting for service, she scanned the rooms, looking in each area until her eyes fell on Denise. Her elation

was short lived when she noticed the look of terror on Brenda's face. Some man, she could only see his back, towered over her friend.

Denise shivered. Things were spiraling out of control. Without thinking she stormed to the table, grateful for Roark's appearance behind her. The relief in Brenda's eyes' went a long way in calming her personal fears. What if they'd gotten here later? She didn't want to think of the consequences for her girl.

"Come with me, Brenda," Roark said, his deep voice slicing through the conversation in progress. He stood heads above the young punk who'd been threatening her friend. Brenda looked at her and stood, backing up so she didn't touch the cretin who stood there huffing with narrowed eyes.

"You leave with them, you best keep going." The punk moved a step in Brenda's direction and froze. Roark told them later he placed a blade next to the guys crotch as he whispered a threat of his own. Brenda's eyes glowed as Roark told his part of the tale. She'd have to watch those two.

Later in bed, she offered a word of thanks that everyone she loved was safe.

"You okay?" Red rolled over and looked at her. She took his hand and kissed the back of it, so grateful he didn't cause a scene over her leaving earlier.

"Yeah, just trying to figure out this mess."

He groaned.

"No. This seems like a lot of work for someone jealous of the business." She leaned up on her elbows and looked down at him. Grateful once again that he was all right. She'd been so scared, scared she'd lost him, scared she'd been too late. Bending forward, she kissed his chest, his chin and then took his lips.

"I love you so much," she murmured, her heart full. "I know you have to deal with this, but please be careful. We need you, me and the girls." She bit his lower lip. "All of us love and need you, so be careful, baby. Okay?"

He nodded before pulling her down for a mind-blowing kiss. "I love you too. I wasn't sure how you'd take all this. Thanks for understanding me and loving me in spite of it all."

She nodded thinking he didn't give her much choice. Not really. At the core, this was her man. Fuck with me or mine, I fuck you up. It would be a waste of time and energy to expect him to change. Cherise had said as much to her earlier about Ross.

"I asked him to let it go," Cherise told her, shaking her head. "He said he couldn't. That even if they hadn't shed blood, he'd still need retribution for the other stuff. I have a feeling his position is non-negotiable."

Denise told her they were all like that. "Mess with one, you got the posse on your ass." Cherise smiled and said he'd told her that when they first started dating.

She brushed her finger across her forehead, smiling as he purred. "I know better than to try to stop the Irish train."

He smiled and blew her a kiss.

"What I don't get is the inconsistency."

He opened an eye and looked at her. "Huh?"

"I mean think about it. Brenda said Pam was dating some white guy named Gary. Somebody new in town, did drugs. She said Pam was really into him. He coulda been an ex-con, someone sent to set things up or someone who genuinely liked her."

"The cops don't know about Gary."

"We don't know that. They don't tell you nothing. Besides, where is he now? Did he kill her? Why?" She'd sat up and leaned against the headboard, her thoughts whirling. The dots weren't connecting.

"Then someone infiltrates your business and sets you up. Stealing merchandise, calling the cops on a bogus tip and murder. One successful, the other not." She glanced at him. "For which I'm eternally grateful."

He smiled, but remained quiet.

"Not only are they all over the map, but they seem to be one step ahead of everything y'all do. You said they knew we'd be there at the club that night. How'd they know that shit? I didn't tell anybody. I didn't have Brenda's number until that night, and she didn't have mine."

"I didn't tell anybody either. Ross and Smoke knew cause we planned it together. It's weird. Ross had the hospital room scanned for bugs and the same here before we started talking."

She gasped. "What? Did they find any?"

"In the hospital. It was the police detective's."

"Who?" She said loudly.

Red explained everything from that night.

"You don't trust Ruby?" Unbelievable. Their mentor had been with them since the beginning.

"Yes and no." She arched her brow.

He sighed and pulled her arm across his chest. "Ruby's a good man, but sometimes he talks too much. It's possible he let something slip that he shouldn't."

She nodded knowing this to be true. "What about the gang activity in the club? You think that's a real threat?"

"Baby, one of them shot me. Of course they're a real threat." He paused and looked at her. "I think they went after Brenda because their guys are missing and they wanted retribution through you. They knew she had access to you. Frank sat in a car in the lot and noticed another car follow you and Brenda here to the house. He got the tag info and gave it to Smoke and Ross."

She shook her head, pissed. "They followed us here to the house where my children are? Do I need to send them to our parents?" The idea of facing her daddy with this news set in her stomach like curdled milk. No way would they head back to Florida.

"Not yet. We'll know tomorrow." He closed his eyes as she stared at him.

"You know, y'all can't just take out everybody. Someone's bound to get suspicious."

"What you talking bout?" He stared at her, a steely glint in his eye. This was Irish, the kick-ass-now-talk-later man she'd heard about. He'd mellowed by the time they got together. He

admitted he'd been guilty and sent to prison for assault and battery. True, he wore a social veneer. They all did. But underneath was a man who didn't play, not when it came to his own.

She sighed, knowing pursuing that line of discussion was a waste of time."What about Tameka? Don't you want to pick her up for questions?" The thought of torturing that overblown witch pleased her very much. He must be rubbing off on her.

"She's gone."

"Gone? As in left town?" She hoped that's what he meant, because although she didn't like the woman, she'd hate to have her downfall on her conscience.

"Yeah. Frank went to her place and found it basically empty. She left in a hurry, left a few things, not much."

"Why would she do that?" she asked, not realizing she spoke aloud.

"Because she's involved somehow. Once word got out Irish picked up Brenda, a lot of them went into hiding. Having a knife on your cock in public has an impact on how you view things."

"You didn't pick up Bren." She frowned.

He chuckled. "They call all of us Irish. Can't tell us apart."

Chapter 10

The next day, Roark invited Brenda to travel with them to Pennsylvania when they left until things calmed down. She accepted so fast, Red snorted before winking at his brother. It was obvious there was some chemistry between the two.

Red, his brothers and partners met at the construction office. Ruby was curiously absent. Ms. Connie made sure no one was in the building. Even so, Ross had it swept for bugs. It came back clean.

Ross and Smoke laid out everything they knew on a time line. The seven men tried to find connections. Things looked scrambled, the dots weren't lining up.

"We're missing something," Frank murmured, staring at the board.

"Motive?" Smoke asked.

"That would help," Ross quipped.

"Timing." Donald leaned forward. "Something had to be happening around these times. Something that needed a distraction, because that's what most of these are."

Silence permeated the room. "Think about it," Donald said, looking at Blaine, his twin, and the other men. "Out of the blue Ross is pulled away and detained. What was happening? Not just on his personal calendar, but your business calendar?"

Smoke nodded and leaned forward. "All three of us dropped everything and headed for Detroit. Ms. Connie was so upset, no one watched the office." He nodded. "Makes sense."

"Nothing much was happening, though. We were finishing up that job and getting ready to take a break for a month." Ross scratched his beard.

"All right, let me put it this way," Donald said looking at them. "What would someone do to you or your business if you were far away, and couldn't protect it?"

"Shit." Red snapped, standing and walking around, his blood boiled. "Muthafuckers trying to take it."

"Could be," Roark said. "With someone in the office, they could be siphoning off work, sending the best workers from the Prison release programs to a bogus company, leaving you the leftovers." He shrugged. "It's possible."

"Ordering materials on our dollar, taking them for jobs and getting paid off our name and hard work." Ross's face had reddened to the color of a cherry tomato.

Not good.

"Who? Who wants it that bad they'd put their life on the line like this?" Ross asked, his eyes wild.

Smoke stood and clamped his hand on Ross's shoulder. Red walked over and hovered near the other side knowing his shoulder wasn't completely healed, but he wanted to help Smoke contain Ross should the man break loose. The two of them knew how much of his life Ross had put into building this company. They also knew the lengths he'd take to protect it. He must be real close to the edge to talk openly about taking someone out. None of them did that.

“We’ll find out, Ross,” Smoke said, calmly. “I think the first person we need to talk to is Cathy, Ms. Connie’s assistant. She claims no knowledge about the paperwork with Red’s signature, but we know she’s lying. Someone’s betting her connection to Ruby will save her ass.”

Ross growled. “They bet wrong.”

Red and Smoke looked at each other. “I can pick her up,” Red offered. They didn’t want Ross near her or anyone at this point. The veins on his neck were jumping and his jaw clenched tight. The man held on by sheer will.

“NO,” Ross snapped, looking at him, his eyes feverish. “We’ll all go and she will tell us what she knows.” He picked up his keys.

“Wait a minute.” Frank stood looking at Ross. “That’s only one thread to pull. Look at the timeline again.” He pointed to the board. “Who knew about the waitress in Big Lakes? The body placed near the job. Could it be a coincidence or part of this scam?”

Red, Ross and Smoke stared at the board. “I’d just found out about the material theft the day before here at the office,” Red said. “I wasn’t in Big Lakes.”

“Which saved your ass, since the time of death was ten o’clock the night before.” Smoke said as he chewed his toothpick and stared at the board.

“Yeah,” Red agreed. “None of us was in Big Lakes. But the moment the police came, I called Smoke.”

“And we came running,” Ross murmured, sitting at the table studying the board. He turned to Smoke and then Red. “So which was it, they wanted us out of Lapeer? Or in Big Lakes?”

“Maybe both,” Roark said, looking at the board and then at Red. “How long did they hold you in Big Lakes?”

Red shrugged, “a few hours.”

“Then what’d you do? Stick around the area or head home?”

Red looked at Smoke. “We stayed a few more hours and came home. It was getting to me, the thefts and then seeing her in the ground.” He closed his eyes remembering Felicia. That shouldn’t have happened to her, she was nice.

“After you returned, how long before any of you went into the office?” Blaine asked.

Smoke rolled the toothpick around his mouth. “Not the next day, we had some things to deal with.”

Red swallowed remembering their fight. “We met the day after that at your place, Smoke,” Ross added, arms folded across his chest.

“At least two days before we actually came back here,” Ross said. He smiled, his first real one of the day. “But the security cameras were installed before we left. I haven’t checked them, we can see if there was any activity those days.”

“Where are they?” Donald asked, relief evident on his face.

The news made Red exhale. Finally, they might be getting a desperately needed break. If they saw who was involved maybe they could determine motive and nip this thing in the bud. Everyone followed Ross and waited as he unlocked his office. It looked the same as far as Red

could see. Where had Ross installed the monitors? His brow rose as Ross booted up his computer and typed in his password. Instantly the monitor filled with various views of the building.

“Now, let me type in the dates.” Ross clicked the keyboard and similar views came on. “Any special time we should look for?”

“Isn’t this motion activated?” Blaine asked.

“Yeah,” Ross said excited. “I forgot. It only comes on to record when there’s movement.” After five o’clock, when everyone went home, there was a beat of silence, no activity.

“There,” Frank said pointing at the screen. A smallish figure walked from the front of the building into the warehouse where the inventory was housed. A floppy hat covered the face, they wore large jumper like janitor uniforms. The light came on and the rear doors rolled up. Two men walked boldly inside, clipboards in hand.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Smoke said. “The muthafuckers are shopping.”

“No,” Ross said tonelessly. “They’re stealing and someone on the inside’s helping them. Note they came from the front. That means they had a key.”

“And the pass code to disarm security,” Red added. His heart dropped. Only Ms. Connie, Cathy, and the three of them had that information. The thieves took their time, no fear of discovery. “Ross, I’m glad no one knew you installed this system,” Red said, watching the monitor for signs of recognition.

“Me, too,” Ross said, his voice terse as he watched the monitor. He finagled the screen and zoomed in close. The person who opened the door for the thieves stood nearby, not assisting further in the theft. He froze the picture.

“Who are you?” Ross murmured, zooming in on the walk and posture of the unknown accomplice. “Anything about him look familiar?”

“Too big for Cathy or Ms. Connie,” Smoke said.

Red released a breath. He’d prayed Ms. Connie hadn’t betrayed them. It would’ve rocked the foundation of their business. But that didn’t mean they hadn’t given them a key or the alarm codes.

“That means someone else has the alarm code and a key to the building,” Blaine said into the silence.

“Probably a relative, someone your office manager or assistant trusts.” Donald shrugged.

“What about an old office worker, could they have left and kept the key? Did you change the pass code after they left?” Frank asked.

Ross pulled his hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Ms. Connie handles all that. Although, I don’t ever recall remembering a new pass code or getting a new set of keys.”

“Fuck.”

“There’s something familiar about the way that guy in the back’s moving,” Red said. “See how his back leg is dragging a little. We had someone work for us who did that—I can’t remember his name.” He stared at the monitor, trying to recall the inmate’s features.

“Andre,” Ross said quietly.

Red moved forward. "I'll be damned. You're right. That's him." He looked at Smoke. "I told y'all he disappeared after the accident with Cherise."

"That's right. He rammed my woman," Ross murmured, watching the men.

"I think the man helping him is Smiley," Smoke said. The men wore caps low over their faces and had turned their collars up. They weren't completely stupid. But the accomplice moved with a slight bend on his side. A souvenir from prison living.

Ross and Red nodded. Recognition set in. They'd met Smiley in the Prison Build Program. The man had great potential but was weak, easily led by others. He took short cuts so he could goof off with his partners. He was another one forever changed by prison life, enjoying his position of primo bitch for one of the lead gang members. That made him think of Cameron, the ex-con they'd given a serious beat down for stealing from them. Both men had similar personalities and inclinations.

"What if Smiley and Cameron are involved in this together?" Red asked. "Both are followers, and thieves. Ruby said Cameron never mentioned we fired him. It's possible those bitches are in this somehow together."

Smoke looked at him for a moment, a smile climbed slowly on his face. "There's our connection. Good looking out, Holmes." He turned to Ross, who stared pensively at the computer. "Cameron and Smiley require strong handling. There's someone writing the script in this scenario. Smiley won't break—he mixes things up too much, but Cameron might with the right incentive."

"A stronger lover?" Roark asked from the side.

Smoke shrugged. "I don't know about that, he's a pain slut, can take a lot and loves it. From what I hear, he's heavy into the BDSM lifestyle. In prison, he changed loyalties a couple of times. The only way he'll roll is if you top his Top."

Red had heard about that type of stuff happening in prison. A man had to be strong enough to hold onto his bitch unless someone stronger would take his place. It had little to do with love or sex, at least for the sub. It was about status and protection. Somehow, Smoke's words sounded like a different version than what he'd initially thought.

Donald had been quiet. "Is there a local dungeon?" he asked, looking at his twin Blaine.

"Yeah, a few miles out of town," Blaine said, returning his stare.

Red turned and looked at his twin brothers, both older than him by a few years. Dungeon? What kind of question was that? And how the hell would Blaine know anything about where it was located, they'd only been here a few days. Another thought punched him. *The twins were into BDSM?* No one had mentioned that to him. Then again, why would they? He checked out the vibes they threw off. Were they saying what he thought they were saying? No way. He would've known.

"Unfortunately, this take down can't be public," Smoke said, stroking his chin. "Word would get out if you used that place. We'll have to take him without anyone knowing and secure him somewhere private. Then you can work on him." He paused and stared at Blaine and then Donald.

“But let me make sure you understand. Death means nothing to these men. They have no fear of prison and will fight you to the death in the blink of an eye. You can’t threaten anything from him. You’ll have to out-master his Master’s control, own him. He’ll give himself and the information to you if he believes you’re better, stronger.”

Donald nodded. “I know. You find a place, put him there and I’ll break him.” There was confidence in his stand and each word.

“Ruby said he works at some bar,” Red said, feeling left out. He had a strong desire to make himself useful. He pushed the revelation of his brothers’ lifestyle to the back of his mind, with a sticky note to tackle it later. “Maybe we can grab him when he leaves.”

Blaine shook his head. “If he’s owned, someone’s watching out for him. You’ll have to grab him in the bathroom, take him out the window or back somehow.”

“Owned? I thought that was a figure of speech.” Ross frowned, looking at Blaine.

“Smoke said they’d obey and not break down. There are different types of dominance relationships,” Blaine explained. “I think what we’re dealing with here is called a total power exchange or TPE.” He looked at the blank faces in the room. “The person gives the Master complete authority over him. They become his servant or slave.”

“Slave?” Ross blurted, offended by the term.

“Think of a time before enforced slavery in the US,” Blaine said, trying to calm the angry expressions in the room. “Early Europe for example, servants worked on estates and were a part of the household. They worked for nothing or very little in exchange for protection and a place to stay. They were given chores, told what to wear, how to fulfill the homeowner’s expectations, where and when to go places. Both parties had certain responsibilities. The title servant and slave were interchangeable until the horrible practices of forced servitude in this country.”

“Servant sounds better than slave, although I can’t imagine anyone willingly giving someone else complete control over them,” Red said.

“Well, then you haven’t seen some marriages that come through my office,” Donald said. “A lot of men believe they own their wives and have for years.”

Red laughed. “Not Mama or Denise. She’d kick someone in their balls if he tried.”

Blaine nodded smiling. “No, not Mama or Denise, for sure. It takes a certain personality, a frame of mind to serve.”

Donald stood and stretched, still not looking at Red. “The hold over this guy has to be broken, or as you say topped. It’s hard, but can happen, especially if the Master has more than one sub. We’re betting on that. Look, time’s wasting. You need to think of a way to grab this guy quietly. You can bet his Master has his finger on the pulse of everything going on around his property.”

Red’s head rang at the comments from his brothers. Property? Owned? Master? Slave? What the fuck?

“I got access to a place. It has the basics, cross, bars, ropes, chains. You need anything special?” Smoke asked as he punched in a number.

Red held his head in his hand and looked down so no one would see his shock. Smoke was into this shit? He needed to climb out the rabbit hole, get back to Kansas. Nothing was as he thought. He stared at the floor, afraid his face would give him away.

“No, we have what we need and anything else, we’ll pick up.” Blaine looked around the room. “Anybody got any ideas how to get Cameron out the building?”

“We got that. How much time do we need, Smoke?” Ross asked while staring at the monitor. The zoom was still on the inside person.

“I’ll let you know later today as soon as I get the layout of the building,” Smoke said, clicking off the phone.

Chapter 11

Denise, Cherise and Brenda sat in one of the bedrooms upstairs at the O'Connor homestead. Red had insisted they go to his parents for a few days. Since arguing with the hardheaded man didn't work, she along with her friends, and children boarded his Uncle Nate's plane for Pennsylvania. The plane had been in the hangar since his brother's arrival and was ready to go at a moment's notice.

Once they arrived, Red's mom and aunts took possession of the girls telling them to go upstairs to rest. She and Cherise smiled. They'd been resting on the flight over, nevertheless, they decided to use the time helping their men shut down the criminals out to destroy them. She got angry every time she remembered Red on the floor, blood pouring down his chest. The bastards would pay.

To placate their women, Ross gave them a simple task: get information on the past employees of the company. Cherise's mom agreed to use her contacts and ran background checks on every name he'd taken from the files.

They were examining each file and making notes, hoping to find something significant.

###

Red dumped an unconscious Cameron on the bed at the cabin Smoke secured. For a moment, things had gone awry at the club. Instead of Cameron going into the bathroom where Smoke and Julio waited, he'd come outside. Frank had taken the extra syringe and took the big man down before anyone made a sound.

After informing Smoke, Red left with Frank, taking Cameron to the first stop. They stripped the man of everything, put it in a bag and tossed it to Smoke who'd just arrived. Frank ran a scan over the man's body and just as Blaine suspected, under a tattoo was a bump. Quickly they dug out the small gadget from the inner thigh and handed it to Ross.

Ross and Smoke headed in different directions to slow down anyone in pursuit. Another scan without beeps, and they took off to the cabin. Red's eyes widened when Blaine and Donald walked in to pick up their toy, as they called Cameron. This was the first time in a long time he'd had to look close to tell them apart. Shirtless, with dark leather pants, military boots and leather bands criss-crossing their chests, he barely recognized them. Their hair was gelled back, making it seem darker, more sinister.

"Damn," Red whispered.

Donald smiled while Blaine examined the cut between the man's legs. "Not too deep, good work."

Frank nodded. "Where do you want him?"

Donald picked up the unconscious man, threw him over his shoulder and followed Blaine down to the basement. "We got this," Donald said. "Just make sure we're not disturbed. It'll take a li'l time to see if he has triggers, and the level of competency his Master has."

Blaine turned and looked him squarely in the eye. “No one interferes, Red. We’ll break him and get the information you want. Smoke gave us a list of questions. Afterwards, you may even be able to question him further. But not until we clear it, is that understood?”

Not recognizing this side of his low-key brother, Red nodded and looked at Frank, who shrugged. Blaine left them alone to deal with the silence and a million questions flying around his head.

“Who the hell are those guys who look like my brothers?” Red whispered, unsure why. But the twins freaked him out. Were they going to fuck Cameron? When would he escape this rabbit hole?

“You’ve been gone a while, baby bro,” Frank said sliding down into the chair. A semi-automatic across his lap. “Things have changed.”

“No shit,” he snapped sarcastically. “Are they gay?”

Frank laughed. “Not in the least, although they might top a man to gain obedience or trust. If anything, I’d say bi, although sex isn’t what they get from their lifestyle.”

Red opened his mouth and then snapped it shut. “Mama know about this?” That one thought flew around his head and landed.

“Probably, I don’t know.” He peered over at Red. “Why’s your face so red? Embarrassed?”

He exhaled, wishing he could be as blasé as his older brother. There was something disturbing knowing his brothers were downstairs with a known gay male. Intellectually, he knew they were doing it for him, for his company. But, he’d always looked up to his brothers, seeing them like this fucked with his mind.

“Not embarrassed, surprised. I feel like a stepchild, a part of the family, but not included.” He slid forward in his seat. “I had no idea they got off on this dominance stuff.”

“Obviously you haven’t been to their home in a while.” The offhanded comment had him spinning in his seat.

“No, why? Something happening there?”

Frank sighed and rested his hand on his thigh. He stared at Red. “This is who they are. They live the lifestyle 24/7 with live-in slaves, servants or subs, whatever you call them. If this guy is broken they’ll probably take him back so he won’t fracture.”

Red’s mouth dropped. “What?” he whispered too stunned to think. Surely, he hadn’t heard correctly. Slaves? Servants? No way.

Frank nodded. “They explained it to me a while back. Mastering another person is serious and can’t be done lightly. The men and women at their home serve them completely. They *want* to serve them. It’s not slavery, isn’t forced. These people want to serve and the twins take care of them.”

“That’s why they built that big ass house in the country?” He’d asked them why they moved so far away from the city and they’d said something about privacy.

“Could be, I don’t know.” He shrugged before looking at him. “They’re my brothers no matter what they do. I accept it and them.”

Red swallowed the rebuke. "Hey, you knew already. I just found out, so I'm allowed my what-the-fuck minute."

"As long as it's just a minute."

###

The basement door creaked open as the sun came up over the horizon. One of the twins walked out a piece of paper in his hand. Red sat on the opposite sofa, peering at him. No blood that he could see. What the hell had he expected?

"Here are the answers to the questions." He handed Frank the paper and leaned against the wall.

Frank took it watching Blaine. "Tired?"

"Yeah, he couldn't tell the difference between Donald and me, so we've been able to take small breaks. Luckily, his Master wasn't as well trained as some we've seen, but he had him linked in some fascinating ways. If nothing else, I learned something new." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

Smoke and Ross came from the back room, nodding their greetings. Frank handed them the paper.

"Gary? Who the hell is Gary?" Ross asked.

"Brenda said Pam was dating a man named Gary." Red dropped the reminder, watching Ross tense as the room went silent.

"Is it possible that's not his real name?" Smoke asked, looking at the paper. "I don't remember anyone with that name from the yard."

"Good question, I'll ask," Blaine said nodding. "Maybe there's a tattoo or some other defining mark that'll distinguish him." He left the room.

"Okay, so there's a rogue company using our name, taking jobs in other parts of the state. Cathy has been helping them," Smoke read from the paper before looking at Ross and then Red. "No big surprise there. She dated Smiley, doesn't know Gary tops him."

"Did he mention Ruby?" Ross asked.

Smoke scanned the paper. "Ruby's name's not on here. But maybe a question in that line wouldn't hurt." He grabbed his pen and wrote on the paper.

Red watched the fight seep from Ross. They all hoped their mentor wasn't involved, but Ross had known the man the longest, had the strongest connection with him.

"Tameka was dating Tango," Smoke continued reading. "Gary's mad at losing three men. The white kid who's missing was his cousin."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't give a shit," Red snapped. "Why is the muthafucker going after Three X Construction?"

Smoke read further. "He says the hit against you was personal. Tango thought you were after his girl, Tameka."

"What?" Red yelled.

Ross looked at Smoke, his eyes crinkling. "I told you that man-whore rep would fuck you up one day."

“Asshole,” Red said, grateful Denise was miles away. She’d string him up for sure.

“I wonder if this is the same Gary who dated Pam,” Frank said. They looked at him, surprised. “Well if he isn’t after your company, why was she killed and Ross dragged into her murder? So they know about the rogue company, even allow their people to work it, but they aren’t actually involved in the fake company.”

Smoke snapped his fingers. “Someone’s paying them.”

“It has to be someone this Gary trusts a lot,” Roark said. “He took a big chance taking on a company with your reputation.” Everyone looked at him. He scoffed. “Think about it. If your company fails, who gets hurt? I know Red’s set for a long time, I handle his investments. You two are probably in good shape as well.” He paused, looking at Ross and Smoke. “But your employees, those ex-cons, no one will hire them. They’ll lose their homes and many will become repeat offenders. The first thing they’ll do is go after the bitches who fucked over them.”

“We didn’t mess over them,” Red cried out, surprised his brother would say such a thing.

“They know that,” Ross said, reflectively. “Don’t forget, you got shot.”

“A lot of them were there when the police showed up in Big Lake,” Smoke added. “They were murmuring then. Damn, this could get ugly if they decide to take this in their own hands.”

“I’m surprised they haven’t approached you before now,” Roark said.

“We’re closed for a month,” Ross said. “All three of us have been so busy, if they tried to reach us we wouldn’t know.” He leaned into his balled fists. “So now we have to factor in a possible uprising from the ranks. This is getting complicated.”

“We need to find out who hired Gary’s thugs and nip this in the bud before this month is over,” Red said, his mind racing over his most vulnerable employees. His brothers could be over the top, but they retaliated with good reason. Some of his workers would burn down the bar just because Cameron had worked there.

“Next abduction, Gary.” Ross stood, took the paper from Smoke and read it over. “I want a name or location. Who’s the next target? The next job?”

Blaine—or was it Donald—walked upstairs as Ross placed the paper down. “Okay,” he breathed. “Gary lives in a house near the beach. He’s an ex-con, but supposedly not from Michigan. He has a tattoo similar to the one Cameron has between his legs, which might mean he has a Master or was a slave at some point.”

The cadence of his voice assured Red this was Blaine. “Which means?” He stared rudely, getting pissed at all the bondage stuff. Hell, no one had factored in slaves and servants in this whole mess. They were working blind.

Blaine returned his glare. “Which means the Gary who’s topped him may not be the head guy. He might be working for his Master, topping other guys to serve them both. If the head guy’s locked up, he could have servants carrying out his plan.”

Red’s eyes widened. Nobody did that shit. “Are you kidding me? Could somebody be that tied to another person?”

“Yes,” Blaine answered, staring him down.

“What the fuck do y’all do these people?” Red asked, facing Blaine’s glare.

“We don’t do anything to them,” Blaine snapped, red-faced. “There are people who have a sincere desire to serve and others who need to be in charge. I’ve explained this already. The bond between Master and servant can be extremely strong. Stronger than a lot of marriages.”

“I don’t—”

“Forget it, Red,” Smoke said. “You don’t understand, let it go. Whether you accept it or not doesn’t make it more or less real.” He looked at his business partner. “For the first time we have some serious information. I don’t like the implications, we may have a nutcase from when we were incarcerated running things behind bars. That’s not cool, but we’ll work with the hand dealt.” He paused, looking at Red and then Ross. “Failure’s not an option, right?”

“Not even,” Ross snapped.

“For real,” Red agreed. His head still spun at the wild implications of his brothers’ lifestyle. *Slaves, submissives, servants, masters, geesh.*

“Can you think of anything that happened during that time to cause someone to hold a grudge?” Frank asked.

They all sat in living room area on stuffed chairs, the sofas and a few dining room seats, trying to muddle through the mess. The more information they gathered, the less it made sense.

“Hell, that was over 13 years ago,” Ross said, his voice strained, tired.

“Yeah, but in prison time is meaningless, especially if you have a long sentence,” Blaine said.

“True,” Smoke said, frowning. “There were those pissed because Red and I hung out. I was supposed to join the black gang, and him the white gang. We didn’t, and they didn’t like our decision.”

Red nodded remembering the fights before they transferred to another prison to enroll in the Prison Build Program. “That was intense, but no one person sticks out from then. Maybe, one of the guys in the building program, they were always ragging on us. Hated that Ross had a company waiting to take us.”

“Shit, this could be endless,” Ross snapped. “Who the hell knows why someone would target our company from back then. It could be anyone who woke up one day feeling like God. We need more answers.”

“Why not get some help?” Roark asked “Let your workers ask around. You may as well engage them, assert some control. They are going to get involved one way or the other. This way you tell them your side, get them working as a team, add another layer of confidence and control.”

“I hate this getting so big,” Ross groaned.

“It’s already big,” Red said. “It became big the day Pam died. Got bigger with Felicia’s death, and them shooting me. Let’s face it, we could use some help.”

Ross nodded and stared at his hands, a defeated expression on his face. It pained Red to see him like this. He promised himself to make sure whoever started this madness paid extra for what they’d done to his partner.

Smoke looked at Ross and then at him. "Let's just bring in the older workers, the ones we can trust, who have a valid stake in the company. Get them on the streets, see if they can pull some threads, get some names, information, anything useful."

"I think they'll be glad to help," Red said, glancing at a silent Ross before his cell vibrated with a text message.

"Smoke, where's the computer you set up? Denise wants to talk on the web cam." Red stood, looking at the phone. Ross stood as well, his face lightening.

"Back here," Smoke said, walking down the hall. "Let me set it up so you can talk."

At the hall entrance, Red stopped and looked back at Blaine. "No disrespect intended. I appreciate everything you and Donald are doing. We cool?"

Blaine nodded tiredly, "yeah, we're cool." Red nodded and headed to the room with the electronic equipment.

A few moments later, Denise and Cherise waved at him and Ross from the monitor. Brenda sat in the background reading some papers.

"Hey, baby," Red said, staring at Denise. She wore her hair pulled off her face, displaying her high cheekbones, pert nose and juicy lips. His pants tightened in remembrance of those lips on certain parts of his anatomy.

She blew him a kiss and winked. "When we finish going over this stuff, I need to talk to you alone, okay?"

He smiled, returning her wink, loving this naughty side of her personality. "For sure," he said huskily, his mind turning the corner to the intimate conversation he anticipated. They'd taken phone-sex up another level for years when he was out of town on jobs. Once again, she was on point, giving him what he needed to chill.

"Alrighty, now that the nasty stuff's out the way," Cherise said, smiling before winking at Ross. "Let's get this show started."

"Yeah, but I need to spend some time talking to you later, too," Ross said, his voice low. Cherise froze, staring. "You okay, babe?"

"I'm good, at least better now. But I need some alone time with you," Ross said, sidling closer to the monitor.

"And you called that tame 'let's get busy' rap from Red nasty? Girl, that man's eyes are about to light your drawers," Denise said. Brenda joined as the three women laughed at a red-faced Ross.

Knowing his partner had had a rough day, Red decided to help him out and get things back on track. Without a doubt, Denise could keep them entertained, but they needed to find out what information the women discovered.

"What'd you find, baby?" Red asked.

"Okay, yeah," Denise said. Turning to the side, "stop laughing, Bren," she said, chortling. "We need to focus so we can go home." Sitting straight, she wiped the moisture from her eyes, inhaled and looked into the cam again. "We went through the background reports of all the names on the list Ross gave Cherise."

“Of which there were thirty-seven former employees either fired or they quit,” Cherise said, looking up into the cam. “Did I mention thirty-seven? You owe Mama, baby. She sent us this information and told us how to dig deeper for the ones we sensed were threats.”

“No problem, I’ll take care of her,” Ross said, winking at her.

“Where’s Smoke?” Denise asked. “We need him in here, and anybody else who needs to hear this info. Let’s do it one time.”

Cherise nodded. “I know that’s right.”

Red looked at Ross, who shrugged, and left to get Smoke. It seemed the women were running things, for the time being anyway. Denise had that look on her face, the one she got when she’d yell out the killer on the mystery TV programs she watched all the time.

“Smoke,” Red yelled. “Frank, Roark, you guys come on back, Denise and them got some information.” He walked back into the room, sat down and waited. Denise and Cherise were looking at folders, placing them in a certain order as if they were in court. A surge of pride filled him as he watched her put her ‘case’ together. The door closed, she looked up and smiled.

“Hi Frank, Roark, Smoke,” Denise said before being shoved to the side by a suddenly animated Brenda.

“Hi Roark.” Brenda sounded breathless.

Denise rolled her eyes.

Cherise smiled.

“Hey, Brenda, everything good?” Roark asked.

Red looked at his nails hoping they’d finish greeting each other already.

“Yeah.” She looked at the other men in the room as an afterthought. “Oh, hi, everybody,” she said, before backing up to return to her seat.

Red and Ross chuckled. Frank shook his head. Roark kept his smile in place.

“Now on to what we found out. Out of all the names, there’re only five considered possible threats. The others are either dead, in foreign countries or locked up insane.”

The last pronouncement had Red looking at Smoke, who shrugged before returning to the monitor.

“The first guy is Gary Browning.” She moved to the side. “Show them the picture, Cherise.” A photo of a youngish looking, effeminate male graced the monitor. Denise’s voice continued in the background.

“He worked for the company about ten years ago for a couple of weeks. Criminal record includes B & E, minor theft and indecent exposure. He’s been locked up twice since he worked for you.” She paused as Cherise straightened the picture.

“Does he ring a bell?” she asked, papers shuffling in the background.

“Not to me,” Ross said. “You guys?” he asked without turning.

“Never seen him before,” Smoke said.

“Me, neither,” Red said. “Was he in the Build Program?”

More papers shuffling and then a gasp. Cherise put the picture down and picked up a sticky note. She shook her head. "No, he's Ms. Connie's relative. Maybe he worked in the office with her, since the note says she fired him."

"I didn't know that," Ross murmured. "I wonder if he had a key."

"A key?" Cherise asked.

Denise looked at Red and then Ross. "What's this about a key?"

Red shifted in his seat, not ready to get into this discussion. At least this couldn't be attributed to his negligence. Lord knows, he had enough on his plate.

"Whoever's been robbing us has a key to the building," Ross said so fast Cherise blinked. Denise's mouth dropped open.

No one spoke.

"Have you changed the key since the last robbery?" Cherise asked slowly. Red turned away as Ross's jaw clenched. He wondered if that was something all women learned in a manhandling 101. *Ladies, to really get under his skin, talk to him slow, like he's a child.*

"Yes," Ross bit out. "The locks and combination have been changed." Red waited for him to explain that the outer door key hadn't been changed, but the moment it was used an alarm would be sent to them and the security company. This way they could have a face-to-face conversation with the thieves before calling the cops. Ross had devised a great plan.

"Oh, good," she breathed and returned to the papers on her lap.

"The next one was a surprise." Denise paused and looked at Red.

He nodded for her to get on with it.

She licked her lip. "Well this guy's name is also Gary. Gary Feenstone, although his nickname's Ice." She looked at Cherise, who chuckled at the name. "He worked for you for about a month. I think he was a brick and mortar guy, along with general carpentry. Now, he didn't come from the Build Program. Actually, he had no references, no nothing."

Cherise held up his picture. "He's been in prison twice. Only once since working for you. Car jacking, B&E, rape and sexual assault."

"I don't remember this asshole, either," Red said.

"He seems familiar," Ross said, leaning close. "When did he work?"

"About eight years ago," Denise said. "But here's the thing. When Brenda did the family tree thing, we had a last name match with him and Rubinowitz. He and Ruby are distant relatives."

"Thar she blows," Smoke quipped.

"How distant," Frank asked.

"A second cousin of another cousin type thing. I'll fax it to you or try and email the file," Cherise answered, taking the picture away. Red watched Ross's jaw clench.

They went through the other two relatively quickly. "And now for the grand finale," Denise said. "We have the third Gary for the day."

Smoke groaned.

Frank chuckled.

Red shook his head as Ross stared at the picture filling the monitor.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Smoke murmured as the room grew quiet. The picture on the monitor was of a large, muscle-bound, bald, tattooed man, with a bulbous nose, high cheekbones, slashing brows and dark eyes. The viciousness of his nature showed bright through the monitor.

“This is Geary Pendleton, spelled G-E-A-R-Y, nickname, Top,” Denise said. “He is incarcerated at your former prison, graduated from the Prison Build Program, worked for you about five years ago. Criminal record includes assault and battery, assault with deadly force, assault of an officer, rape, B&E, DUI, driving with revoked license, kidnapping and sex with a minor. Ugggh.” Denise spat. “He’s bad news.”

“He had a bad temper and a bad rep,” Smoke said into the quiet. “Worked here about two, three days, is that right?”

“Yeah, according to his record, he can’t hold down a job,” Cherise said. “Has a revolving door in and out of jail.” She paused. “I don’t know if this is important, but the rape victim wasn’t a woman.”

“Ouch,” Denise whispered turning her head.

“You remember him, Red?” Smoke asked, staring at the floor.

“Oh, yeah.” Red nodded. “I can’t believe we forgot about old Top. He picked a fight on the job-site over some small BS, and Ross fired him. Later that night, he jumped Ross at that pool hall.” He snapped his fingers. “I can’t remember the name of hall, but he got his ass whipped southern style. Ross mopped the floor with his ugly ass.” Red laughed and gave Smoke a high five.

“I think they still talk about that ass-whooping over on Fifth Street. Folks came running, that muthafucker was screaming so loud.” Red smiled, reminiscing.

“You fought him?” Cherise squeaked, looking at the picture and then back at Ross.

“I think he kicked Top off his ass. Not necessarily a fight,” Denise smirked, looking at the picture and placing it in the file. “Soooo, Did that information help shed any light at all? Are we getting closer to locking this down?”

“When are we coming home?” Cherise blurted. “Don’t forget the wedding in Lansing is in a week away but I—” She pointed to Denise. “—We have to be there early.”

Red stared at the monitor, not sure how much to say. A cell went off, Denise and Cherise gazed backward as Brenda answered her phone and walked out the room. The door closed as Roark left the room talking to Brenda.

“Oops.” Cherise shrugged. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay,” Ross said. “First off, y’all some kick ass women. We’re much closer now with that info you just gave.”

“Good job, Detectives.” Red chuckled as the women preened.

“I think Blaine or Donald should take a look at some of those tattoos,” Frank said. “See if they match the ones they’ve seen lately. Hopefully, solidify a connection.”

“Good idea,” Smoke said before leaving the room.

“Let me bring you up to speed, tell you what we’ve learned,” Ross said. He’d gotten halfway through the update when the door opened. Denise’s and Cherise’s mouths dropped as Blaine walked into the room.

“Hey, Dee.” Blaine stood next to Red. “Let me see the picture.”

Denise nodded, her eyes wide as she took in his leather ensemble. She handed the picture to Cherise without looking at it. Instead, her gaze took in the leather straps across his chest, the arms bands and boots.

Red frowned his displeasure. “Denise,” he snapped. Her head whipped in his direction.

“Huh?”

“He’s waiting for the picture.”

“Oh, I...uh,” she looked around, taking glimpses of Blaine, who stood smiling, arms across his chest.

“She doesn’t have it. Cherise does,” Ross drawled with a bite to his tone.

“Oh,” Cherise gave him a weak smile and put the picture in front of the webcam.

Red could hear them whispering and realized they could still see Blaine. Hell, he didn’t know she was into leather.

“I can hear you, Denise,” Red said, his voice low. “Stop drooling over my brother.”

Blaine leaned forward, examining the tattoos. He pointed to one. “This is the same one both Cameron and he claims his former Master, Gary, has one as well.” He nodded pointing to another. “It seems he’s studied and has knowledge of dominance symbols. Probably a major player.” He turned and looked at Frank. “That’s not good. He’ll set them up as cattle or pawns. Probably filter down from his front line subs, with him being in charge. They turn out other slaves, or servants. Similar to gang action, but more intense, organized.” He corrected, glancing at Red. “I doubt he goes lower than one level deep. It’s hard to switch like that, dominate someone and then submit to another. Although, strange, mixed rules come out of prison.” He pulled his ear, and contemplated. “You obey to stay alive, that mentally doesn’t leave when you leave the yard. Especially if the bond is strong, tight. They definitely don’t follow, CCS, and no safe words. That’s not how it works outside.” He shook his head and looked at the symbols on the picture. “How do you take care of all of them?” he whispered touching the picture.

“What do you mean?” Red asked. “Wouldn’t he do it the same as you?”

Blaine shot him an indiscernible look before answering. “No.” He pointed to a tattoo with a roman numeral. “This symbol means owned, see the number in front?”

“Yeah, three.” Smoke said peering into the monitor.

“Think about it,” Blaine said. “He’s in prison, and is the Master of three. If each of them mastered one person, while still his servant, how many servants does he really have?”

“Whew,” Red snorted.

“This guy,” Blaine waved toward the basement. “He’s not top line, definitely not one of the three, but he was strongly committed to his Master. The bond ran deep.”

“A lot of prison connections are like that,” Red said.

“Look at this tattoo here,” Blaine, pointed to another symbol. The word ‘viele’ intertwined with ‘bitches’ made a pretty symbol with vines. “The word ‘viele’ means many or a lot in German.”

“Many bitches,” Red grumbled, his stomach roiled at the implications.

Blaine nodded. “He collects cattle, or as he calls them, bitches.” He turned to them. “He cares nothing for the lower levels, probably keeps his top three tightly bound and demands they do the same. Watch your back with those three. They’ll drop you at his command without batting an eye.” He glanced at the picture again. “I wonder how many are in prison and how many are on the outside.”

“What? They don’t have to be with him for this type of control?” Red asked appalled at the ugly situation.

“Not at all. As long as he’s able to communicate his will and handle them, they *will* respond to his triggers. If he’s in the same prison you were in, he can even have conjugal visits. A bribed guard will turn the other way as he tightens up his servants.”

“I don’t think his hold on them is sexual,” Smoke said, his voice low, thoughtful.

“No, when they have conjugal visitations, it’s all about them serving him and him giving them whatever he deems they need.” Blaine sighed. “He’ll be a hard task master, but with the type men that serve him, that’s probably what they crave. I bet he met them in prison, started mastering them early on, maybe a part of a gang, the inner circle with him at the head. From there it’s a simple matter to have each of them take a sub and train them under his tutelage.”

“Uh, hello...Blaine?” Denise said. Her face comical in her obvious shock. Red had forgotten she and Cherise were still online. She could be quiet when she wanted.

Blaine looked at her over his shoulder.

“Are you talking about dominance and submission? Is this man somebody’s Master?” She looked at the picture. Cherise stared over her shoulder before they looked at him.

“Yeah, I believe he is.”

“He doesn’t look like a nurturing person. Will his subs act like him?” Denise looked at Blaine before glancing at Red.

“He’s what his submissives need, whatever that may be. I doubt they needed nurturing in the way you mean to begin with. The men or women who serve them will have similar mindsets.” He sighed. “It’s hard to explain the strong bond, the connection between true Master/subs because you’re thinking relationships inside the box. There’s a reason it’s called an *alternative lifestyle*. Some people have different needs, separate from the mainstream. BDSM is one way to have those needs met.”

“Some say it’s stronger than hetero or gay relationships,” Cherise said, looking at Denise.

Blaine’s brow rose as he looked at Ross, who stared at Cherise. “I need to go check on some things, I’ll see if we can find out anything about this guy.” He looked at Red. “What’s his name?”

Red smiled sadly at the seriousness of the situation. “Top.”

Blaine nodded gravely and walked out.

Chapter 12

Denise and Cherise had been in Lansing for three days. Jackie, the needy bride, had taken one look at Lenora, Shannon and Shantel and begged their parents to allow them to be the flower girls in her wedding. After an hour of politely declining the request, Denise understood how Cherise had been roped into the Maid of Honor position, especially when the bride asked her to stand in for one of her bridesmaids who'd quit at the last minute. The watershed of tears and theatrics had gone a long way in touching Denise's heart.

So here, she stood in a rust-colored satin gown that fit her to perfection. One of the conditions for her walking up the aisle was she picked her own ensemble. The dress was similar in cut to Cherise's, but a shade or two darker. Denise smiled thinking of the confrontation yesterday between the bride and her maid of honor.

"You know, Cherise, normally the Maid of Honor and bridesmaids throw a bridal shower for the bride the night before the wedding," Jackie said, as they walked the twins out of the shoe store.

"Yeah, but that's between friends," Cherise said without missing a beat. "You and I aren't friends, we're not family. I don't understand why you want me and *my* friend to stand up with you on your big day."

"Just because my aunt divorced your dad, doesn't mean the familial ties are broken." Jackie ignored the friendship comment.

"Yeah, it does," Cherise said, holding Lenora's hand. "The moment my dad divorced your aunt, she was no longer related to me. She is the mother of my two brothers, but that's all."

"You never liked her, did you? Jackie stopped and placed on her sunglasses before exiting the mall.

"I never cared for *anyone* in her family," Cherise said, glancing at the pencil-thin blond. "It's not that they're white, I don't have a problem with that. They're just phony. And that bugs the shit outta me. I hope none of them get in my face tomorrow."

They'd reached the car and Denise was impressed with Cherise's calm.

Jackie narrowed her green eyes. Denise was sure she wore colored contacts. "So you're trying to ruin my big day, is that it?" She sniffed. Denise wondered if the ability to turn on and off the water was a learned skill.

Cherise buckled Lenora in the car as Denise made sure the twins were strapped in. "It's the night before the wedding we're discussing," Cherise said, her voice even. "I'm not throwing a bridal shower. Let your many girlfriends do it. You got me here for the wedding, I'll do that. But nothing else."

"Mama," Shannon said, walking over to her, pulling her out of here trance. For a rush job, the flower girls were beautiful in their ensemble. The peach-colored dresses blended perfectly with the dresses she and Cherise wore. All three girls had their hair piled on the top of their

heads with a ring of flower on top. She'd been sending pictures of them to Red on her cell most of the morning.

"Yes, what do you need?" She asked smiling as Shantel skipped behind holding her basket.

"I'm a flower girl?"

Denise looked at her, tilted her head wondering where this was going. You never knew with these two. "Yes."

"No, I'm the flower girl," Shantel said pouting as she stood next to her sister. As identical twins, they were competitively adorable.

"All three of you are the flower girls." Denise straightened the ribbon on Shantel's dress. "I know you are going to do a great job, just like you practiced last night."

"At rehearsal?" Shannon looked up at her.

"Yeah, you remember what the lady told you to do, right?"

"Un huh. But I'mma tell my daddy what the man said."

Denise froze, surprised. "What man?"

"The man in the line. He said you were pretty," Shantel looked at Shannon, who confirmed it with a nod.

She released a breath she hadn't realized she held. After the fiasco with *her* daddy, she was jittery over comments made around her children. Since she wasn't interested, she didn't bother asking what line or what man.

"Oh." She stood, brushed her dress and walked the girls over to the wedding coordinator. The red-haired woman smiled, and pointed them into the room where the bride waited with the rest of her party.

"The groom just arrived," she said. "We'll be starting soon."

Denise nodded, sent up a prayer that Cherise hadn't strangled the bride.

Last night, after they'd put the girls down. The two of them had just finished talking to Red and Ross, when the knock sounded at the door. Jackie walked in with a few bottles of champagne and a bag of munchies. Cherise threw her hands up and took a glass. The impromptu bridal shower entailed watching movies and getting buzzed.

Most weddings were beautiful, and this one was no exception. Despite everything, Jackie was a beautiful bride and if her husband's smile grew wider, he'd need a bigger face. The groomsmen were tall, athletically built, handsome white men who kept giving her and Cherise the eye.

The flower girls stole the show. At the last moment, the wedding planner changed the script. Lenora and Shannon threw out the flowers, Cherise's youngest brother was the ring bearer and Shantel walked down the aisle with a small bell saying, "the bride is coming, the bride is coming." Since they hadn't practiced it last night, everyone in the bridal party was pleasantly surprised. And Shantel, loved the spotlight.

Denise's stomach growled as they lined up to walk into the reception hall. Her escort smiled. She shrugged and walked in when their names were called. A frisson of awareness skittered down her back. The bridal party sat on the platform; she couldn't see the guests clearly, since the

rest of the room was darkened. Her feet hurt, she leaned to the side to slip off her sling backs, her face brushed the arm of her escort who sat next to her.

“You okay?” he murmured, leaning closer to her.

She nodded. “Now I am.” Straightening in her chair, she sent him a smile before placing her napkin over her lap, her eyes searching for the twins. The girls and the ring bearer sat at a table in front with Cherise’s stepmom.

“They’re bringing the food now,” her table companion said near her ear as he received a plate and put it in front of her. “Go ahead eat; I’ll get the next one.”

Denise nodded and dug in as she half-listened to the conversation around her. Cherise had just told the best man she lived with her boyfriend and no, she wouldn’t give him her phone number.

Jackie and her new husband were murmuring. Her mind drifted to her wedding. One day she’d be sitting in the middle of the head table. She wondered who she’d have in her bridal party, one thing for sure, they’d have to be friends. After the friction with Cherise and Jackie, she’d rather go to the justice of the peace rather than pressure someone to stand up for her. It said something about Jackie that at this point in her life she had no close friends. It also said a lot about Cherise’s soft heart that she’d go through this for someone she didn’t particularly care for.

The toasts were about to begin. Denise had tried to help Cherise come up with something nice, and complimentary for the Maid of Honor portion, but they’d had little success.

Cherise turned to Jackie, but looked at her. Denise swallowed realizing what Cherise decided to do. Only the bridal party could see where her eyes landed.

“Jackie, life is a short journey, to find someone who completes you is a gift from God,” Cherise said. “I am so thankful today; you found and have your best friend, your soul mate, your champion, your lover.” There were snickers from the audience. Denise smiled and glanced at Jackie who stared at her new husband. “The journey is always better when shared; embrace all that life sends your way, united together in a manner no one can separate. Be there for one another, comforting when needed, defending when necessary and loving ‘til the sun no longer shines. Be blessed in your marriage.” The audience erupted in applause. Jackie reached over and squeezed Cherise’s hand before turning to her and winking. Denise was surprised the bride picked up on the message and didn’t seem to mind.

Denise took the napkin her escort handed her without looking at him. “Thanks,” she murmured, her heart full from the earnestly spoken words. She’d shared Red’s declaration with Cherise after one of the twins blurted her “daddy was going to marry her mama,” from the back seat on their way to Lansing. Her friend had been happy, and encouraged her to gather as much information on weddings from Jackie.

This was what she wanted. Her heart longed to scream her love for Red to the world, take his name, and give him more babies. She loved him with every fiber of her being and wanted to get married. Water continued to drip from the corners of her eyes. Blotting her face, she smiled wanly at her escort, who eyed her warily.

“Now, we’ll have the wedding party dance,” the announcer said. The bride and groom were already on the dance floor, as were their parents. Denise took the twins’ hands and led them to the floor. Cherise took Lenora’s and her little brother’s hand. The groomsmen smiled as they did group dances, before the guests filled the floor.

“Daddy,” Lenora’s shrill voice split the air as Ross walked toward the dance area in his black dress suit and tie. He picked her up and kept moving. Denise glanced at Cherise, who stood waiting on the side of the floor. The two embraced and moved slowly to the music.

###

Red and Ross sat in the back of the reception hall. Veronique, Cherise’s mom, decided to surprise her daughter by showing up today with her ex, Cherise’s father. He’d been in town visiting his two sons. Ross seemed surprised to see the couple sitting amicably at the table and moved to join them.

“If I’d known you were going to be here, I would’ve headed to Colorado,” Veronique said, accepting Ross’s kiss to her cheek. “I didn’t want her to ride the white wave alone.” She nodded to the reception. Hendrick, Cherise’s dad, snickered. Ross smiled, he’d warned Red about her acerbic wit. Red had to agree with her, Denise and Cherise were the minority in the room with the exception of the two at the table.

“We left class early and all but flew up here. I couldn’t miss seeing my ladies,” Ross said, sitting an angle, stretching his legs. “Red, these are Veronique and Hendrick, Cherise’s parents.

They nodded. At that moment, the bridal party was introduced as they walked in, Red’s eyes fastened on Denise and the man walking at her side. His breath hitched at the sight of her and another man together. A tidal wave of pain assaulted him as he realized that could be his reality if he didn’t do something soon. As much as it hurt, he breathed past the pain and watched as the man pulled out her chair, something he never did. He tensed as Denise leaned into the guy, their heads were too close. Heat chased up his neck, muscles in his jaw and shoulders tensed. He felt Ross’s palm on his shoulder as the guy whispered into her ear and placed a plate in front of her.

What the fuck is that? Do they know each other?

“Calm down,” Ross spoke low. “Wait and check things out before you blow up in here. If it’s not as it should be, remember, I got your back.”

Red nodded. He hadn’t realized he’d balled his fist or sat forward in the chair. His appetite fled in the face of an unsure future. They’d talked last night. She’d shared what she deemed the comical relationship between Cherise and Jackie. Now that he thought about it, she never mentioned men being in the wedding. When he showed Smoke and Ross the pictures of the girls in their dresses earlier on his phone, the two of them left class after telling the instructor they had an emergency and left Smoke to take notes. They got dressed and hit the road, not expecting to make the wedding, but intending to claim their women at the reception.

After refusing the plate from the waiter, he continued to stare at the head table, drawn to Denise. He recognized the distracted air around her. She wasn’t engaged in the activities or conversations around her. Her mind was on something else. But what? What had captivated her mind to the point she tuned everyone and everything out? Holding his impulsiveness in check, he

squeezed his fist, wishing he could go to her, make sure everything was okay, instead of waiting impotently on the side.

“You all right, big guy?” Ross asked.

“Yeah, man, I’m cool.” Someone announced the toasts and called Cherise’s name. Ross groaned and Veronique snickered.

“She didn’t want to do this,” Ross said low for his ears.

He nodded, his attention split between the two women, until Cherise started talking. The words she uttered pierced his heart like an arrow on a mission. Even Ross and her mom gasped she landed the plane with her awesome toast.

Red looked down, afraid someone might see the water pooled in his eyes. He gazed at Denise, touched as she wiped the tears from her eyes. The audience clapped loudly, everyone moved by words they could each embrace.

His breath hitched, the need to claim Denise, give her his name, pummeled him. He shook his head, trying to make sense of the twisting, topsy-turvy, feeling inside. One thing for sure, he needed her, the thought of life without her shut him down, made him nauseous. Another thing, seeing her with someone else sent a murderous rage and the deepest sorrow through him. A weird combination that couldn’t happen. He’d step to the plate and bind them together legally. It galled him knowing that although he told her he’d marry her, he never asked. Knowing Denise, she’d hold out on that technicality.

His heart lightened as he sat making plans to bring about the only future that was palatable to him. He took a deep, cleansing breath until the announcer called for the bridal party to dance. Next to him, Ross tensed and then chuckled. Red twisted to the side for a better view and chuckled at the sight of the group dancing. Everyone applauded and the girls had a ball.

“You’d better go get Cherise, Ross before she cusses that hovering fool out,” Veronique said, drawing their attention to the best man trying to get Cherise’s attention. Ross stared at the dance area for a moment and then looked at him.

Red shrugged, his emotions all over the place. One wrong word or action and he’d go off. Even if the right words came out, he’d probably fall apart. Rollercoaster rides had never been his favorite. He hated this vulnerability. “I can’t go up there right now. Send one of the twins back here.” Ross nodded, clapped him on the shoulder and walked forward.

He placed his finger on his lips as Shannon ran to him, jumping in his arms. “I need a favor.”

Denise’s heart ached as she smiled at Ross and Cherise, wishing Red had come as well. Shannon pulled away from her and ran. “Daddy.”

Denise’s head whipped around, her heart drummed in her chest as she searched the darkened room. *Red?* Shantel took her hand, and pulled her from the dance floor toward the back of the room. At a round table sat Veronique, Cherise’s mother, a handsome black man holding Cherise’s other brother and Red. Everything seemed to stop, coming down to that moment. He was so handsome in his tailored dark suit and tie. Long legs stretched in front of him as if he’d

made himself comfortable, and intended to linger for a while. She took the long journey, looking from his feet to his eyes. Her body trembled at the need and love shining up at her.

Her Red.

He reached for her. She took his hand and sat on his lap as he inhaled before nuzzling the side of her face and taking her lips. The kiss shook her to the core; she grabbed his head, and pulled him close. Like a match to kindling, she was on fire.

He moaned.

A cough, and then a shake to her shoulder pulled her from the erotic haze. He hiked her dress up past her knees. Red's hand was underneath squeezing her thigh sending delicious tingles to her hungry core.

"Slow down girl," Veronique said choking on her laughter. "Your daughters are staring way too hard."

That comment brought her completely out of her sexual haze. Two sets of identical eyes stood in front of her, staring at her legs as she pulled the dress down. Red moved his hand in slow motion, as if he'd break their trance if he too moved fast. She tried to get up, but he held her fast over the huge bulge in his pants.

Like an errant student, her face was on fire as she watched expressions fly across the faces of her children. Something told her this would be a doozy. She braced herself for the inquisition.

"You want to marry Mama, like Ms. Jackie got married. Is that why you have your hand under her dress?" Shannon asked, her brow furrowed trying to understand what she saw. The four of them had lived together until recently, but the girls had never seen them at this level of intimacy or if they had, it didn't register.

The breeze from Red's sigh caressed her face. He patted her thigh and with his finger called the girls closer. "First off, I'm going to marry your mama; I just have to ask her. What you just saw was what happens between a man and woman when they love one another." He paused. "And they want to get married." He looked at them. "And they are older, much, much older."

Shannon narrowed her eyes. "How old?"

Red tensed and his voice deepened. "Old enough to beat my ass, because I'll whip his if he tries it with you." He turned to Shantel, whose eyes had widened at his language. "Or you. Understand?"

They nodded mutely.

"Good." He patted their heads with his free hand. "Did I tell you how beautiful you both look?" Their faces brightened immediately as they preened under his compliments.

Chapter 13

Denise, Red and the girls stayed in their own suite that night. Ross and Cherise were down the hall. Red kept her on his lap long after he'd softened, long after Ross and Cherise returned from the dance squealing in happiness at seeing her parents, long after the cake was cut and the bouquet thrown.

He walked into the bedroom wearing sweats. "The girls are finally asleep. I didn't think they'd ever stop talking about any and everything." He dropped onto the bed beside her.

She smiled and rose to go to the bathroom. "I know, Jackie fell in love with them the first day, she wants kids and hopes she get girls like ours."

"Those two out front are not up for grabs, she can make her own," Red growled from the other room.

Denise finished her night maintenance and walked out with the towel on her face, patting it dry.

"Watch it," Red said catching her leg.

She looked down and he was kneeling in front of her. Her hand flew to her mouth as he pulled a small box from his pocket and grabbed her left hand. She stared, unable to think, to speak, to move, her heart raced as her breath caught in her throat.

"Red," she whispered, water filling her eyes as he slipped the large marquise diamond ring on her finger. He bent and kissed it before placing the side of his face on her hand. He looked up at her, his eyes shiny as he pulled her to the floor.

She closed her eyes as he cradled her, tears ran unchecked down her face, cleansing, freeing. Leaning, her forehead touched his as her thumb gently wiped away his tears.

"I've wanted to do that all day," he said, his voice broken. He cleared his throat. "Much longer than that actually. I bought the ring last year. I planned on giving it to you on our anniversary."

"Baby, I'm so sorry," she whispered. "So sorry. She squeezed her eyes as her heart splintered at the pain she'd caused. If she'd been patient and not listened to others, she would've had what she wanted a long time ago.

"It's okay." He hugged her tight. "I should've asked you years ago. I've always known if I married anyone, it'd be you."

She moved closer, her head on his shoulder. Tears rolled aimlessly, wetting his skin. "I love you so much, it scares me," she whispered. "When you said you were leaving, I couldn't sleep. I thought I could move on, start over, but that night when you talked about leaving town I knew how deeply buried in my heart you were."

"I noticed you didn't argue with me that night, it kinda freaked me out."

"I was too scared."

"Scared?" He rubbed her back sending waves of comfort through her.

“That you’d leave me. I—” She inhaled shivering. “I can’t imagine life without you. The thought of you gone scared me shitless.” Her voice had dropped to a low pain filled whisper.

“Ohhh, baby.” He kissed her shoulder and held her tight rocking from side to side. “I never planned on leaving you and the girls. I’m not sure I could’ve left the company.” He squeezed her again. “That was pain, hurt and frustration talking.”

“I was still scared.” She glanced at the ring.

“I know and I’m sorry. I never thought you think I’d leave my family.”

She froze as he pulled down the strap from her shoulder and placed a kiss on the sensitive area.

“Leaving you and the girls is the same as leaving my heart.” He placed kisses up her neck as she leaned to the side, giving him complete access.

“A man can’t live without his heart, baby.” His voice a whispery caress that sent chills down her spine.

She moaned her need as she changed positions. Straddling him, she tugged a fistful of his hair, before pulling his head down to meet her lips. Her tongue darted out, dipping between his seams.

He gasped and she dove in, moaning. She reveled in his hardness, grinding her pelvis against his cock as he pulled her tighter.

They broke apart for air. He shook his head and pushed her back. “Denise Brown, will you marry me?” His words sounded rushed, her hands on his chest felt the racing of his heart. His breath quickened.

She smiled.

He shook her. “I’m not going to make love to you until you answer.” He pumped his hips. Her head rolled to the side as her eyes closed in pleasure. “This is for my fiancée. I don’t cheat.”

She opened one eye. “You’d better not.” They stared at each other. Her heart melting at the vulnerability she saw in his eyes. How could he not be sure? *You did break up with him over some BS.* Temporary insanity, she protested, even though she couldn’t fool herself.

“I’ll marry you anytime, and anyplace. Don’t you know that by now?”

He pulled his ear. “I wasn’t sure.” They rolled to the side and stood. “You took your time answering, made me a little nervous.” Taking her to bed, he pulled her in tight. “Denise O’Connor,” Red said, pulling off the rest of her clothes. “I love how that sounds.”

“I’ve always thought so.” She threw his pants to the side of the bed.

“Do you want a big wedding?” He ran his finger from her chest to navel.

She shivered, a familiar ache started between her legs. “Of course. Don’t you?”

“Whatever you want.” His fingers played with her lower lips, drawing out moisture.

“Maybe we can have it at Blaine’s and Donald’s.” His fingers stopped as he drew back and looked at her, his brow arched.

“What?”

“You think you can get some of that leather?” He stared at her. “Not for the wedding.” His eyes narrowed.

“Baby, I thought those leather pants were hot. I wanna see you in a pair, if you can get some of those wrist cuffs, that wouldn’t be bad either.”

He chuckled. You didn’t like the boots?”

“Hell yeah, but I thought that might be pushing things.” Her breath caught as his finger pushed inside her wet cunt.

“Pushing things, huh?” Her walls clenched on his digits as his thumb stroked her hardened nub. Her back arched as her body warmed with need. Her legs widened, he added a finger and stroked faster, deeper.

“Um, yeah.” Tingles shot to her core as his lips fastened on her nipples. “Oh, yeah,” she moaned, holding his head in place as he nibbled and suckled. Her clit throbbed as brushed over it before lightly squeezing. His fingers returned to her pussy on a mission, curving upward they found the bundle of nerves and stroked.

“Ohmigod, ohhhhhh,” Denise shrieked as her body shuddered at the force of her release. Red covered her mouth, swallowing her passion. As mini-shocks went through her system, he released her mouth, smiling down at her expression.

In one stroke, he sheathed her. She moaned at the exquisite full feeling. “So good, soooo good.”

Red watched as he took his time loving her with slow, deep, strokes. He bent, kissed her lips. She tried to deepen it. He broke free of that distraction. Eyes closed, he savored the moment. This was his wife, his home, his family and his right. This claiming, although before the minister proclaimed them as one, was just as solid. No one else would ever come between them.

Her walls clenched, his breath hissed in pleasure. “Nobody, Denise,” he said stroking deep. “Nobody but you.” They stared at each other as he committed his heart, body and soul to her while they were joined in a way the public would never see. Here, in this room, it was just the two of them, naked and vulnerable to each other.

“I love you, Red,” she crooned. “Nobody but you, either. Nobody.”

His balls tightened at her words, his hips pumped faster, seeking, needing release. He’d never let her go, never. She was his, alone. Each thought spurred him faster, needing to brand her in some way. “Love you, baby.” He lifted her leg over his arm and pistoned into her. She arched meeting his thrust, beautiful in her passion. His perfect match.

“Come with me,” he roared as his back stiffened, his balls tightened, as he let go. His back shook with the force of his release. Pinpricks in his back subsided as Denise released her fingernails, her body still shaking with aftershocks.

He rolled over, threw his arm over his head. “I’ll make a deal with you.”

“Huh?”

“You keep loving me like that and I’ll wear the leather pants, boots and cuffs.” She laughed. “Inside our bedroom only, though.” He corrected.

“You’re no fun. I’d like to show you off.” She squeaked when he tickled her. “Okay, okay, bedroom only, got it.” She sobered. “I want to make love to you for the rest of my life, any way you need it, baby.” Her hands stroked his forehead.

“Yeah?” His brow arched. “Now that you mention it, there’s a lot of things we haven’t tried.” He rolled on his side looking at her. She rolled her eyes upward.

“I know, I know.” She patted her ass. “With your imagination, one place our marriage won’t have problems is in bed.”

He pulled her close. “No, since you’re willing, there’s a lot we can do to keep things exciting.” He kissed her and tapped her ass.

Chapter 14

Smoke sat in the last twenty minutes of class going over the notes he'd take back to his partners. The instructor had agreed to give them full credit since they'd only missed a portion of the last day. His phone vibrated in his pocket, he pulled it out after receiving the last handout and read the text message.

Geary looking for whoever snuffed his boys and cousin and looking for Cameron. He sent someone to the office searching for clues. Be careful. Jamie.

Smoke read the text again, a humorless smile on his face. Geary finally decided to make a move. He'd wondered how long it'd take since the twins had moved Cameron to their home in Pennsylvania. Blaine and Donald had allowed him and Frank to see the man after they'd dealt with him. On his knees, the man barely resembled the lying, cheating, bastard whose ass they'd kicked years ago.

Cameron's face glowed with contentment or happiness, as he gazed upon Blaine, before bowing and lowering to the floor, submissively. Donald patted the top of his head as he talked to Frank.

"Gonna move him out to the house. He's smart and I can use him to help with some office work." As Donald continued his ministrations, Smoke would swear he heard a purring sound from Cameron.

He raised an inquiring brow.

Blaine chuckled. "He's a natural sub. We're lucky they had no idea how to tap into that side of his nature. With the right training and encouragement he'll do really well." Blaine looked at Donald, who grabbed a fistful of hair pulling Cameron's head up. The look on Cameron's face was that of pure bliss.

Smoke blinked, almost embarrassed to see the man in this condition.

"No more killing or stealing, right?" Blaine spaced each word equally apart.

"No, Master—I mean yes, Master." His eyes flew open, before dropping to the floor.

"Say what you mean," Blaine demanded, a smile on his face understanding the confusion of his servant.

"I will never kill or steal again, Master." The sincerity in his voice, coupled with the look of complete trust in his eyes, blew Smoke away. He wasn't as green as Red and knew people that lived the lifestyle, some entered D/S competitions and threw play parties. The twins were real Masters. In a few days they'd earned the respect of this servant, ferreted out and met his need. He could only imagine how they ran their home.

"Good boy," Blaine praised, patting his head. A wide smile lit Cameron's face as he waited for instructions. Blaine snapped his fingers and he resumed his position face forward on the floor.

"Learn anything else we might be able to use?" Smoke asked, glancing at the still man on the floor.

“Not much,” Donald said, moving so Blaine could replace him standing next to Cameron. “He was a lower level. I’m surprised they bothered to tag him.”

“Tag him?” Smoke asked.

“Yeah the tracking device Red removed before they brought him here. I think Red said Ross drove it to the lake and weighted it down before he threw it in. Have you heard if they’re looking for him?” He nodded toward Cameron.

“Not yet. I’ve got someone monitoring the police radio and the news. It’ll be interesting to see what they do next.”

Donald nodded. “We’ve got to leave in the next hour or so, as soon as the plane’s ready.” He looked at Smoke. “We’re not that far if you need us, any of us.” His wave included Blaine and Frank. “They spilled the blood of my brother already. Of course we retaliated. Find these assholes and shut them down or it’s going to get real ugly fast.”

Frank nodded seriously. “Pops is fit to be tied. At least when you deal with us, we’ll think things through and come up with a plan.” He shook his head. “Let me just say, my pops and uncles aren’t like that. He already hates that Red lives this far away. The idea of someone messing with his youngest is kicking his ass. We need to tell him something positive to keep him in Pennsylvania.”

“I think he’ll be okay for a while at least with what we have,” Donald said. “It’s how Red reacts that will tip the scale.”

Smoke nodded knowing everyone was concerned about his partner’s volatile personality. “Denise has him on lockdown. She does pretty good keeping him calm. I can’t control him, besides he’s grown and my friend. But we’re close and talk through most things.” Smoke chuckled humorlessly, remembering their recent fight. “He has lots of reasons to stay out of prison, starting with Denise and the twins. I’ve heard her threaten to leave him if he didn’t mellow out.”

Frank, Blaine and Donald, laughed. “It must’ve worked,” Frank said. “He’s been on the outside since they started dating. Her positive influence over him is one of the reasons we love her.”

Another text beeped, pulling him out of his reverie. *Two men sneaking up to the offices. Lumbar and me can take them, and wait for u. Advise.*

Smoke stared ahead. Red and Ross were at the wedding or reception. He glanced at his watch. It was three o’clock. Bold fuckers making a move during the day. He itched to finish this, to take out his frustration on the bitches who would steal from them.

Stand down, might be more than 2. Follow and advise. Meet u at office 1900. He sent the text, not comfortable engaging these men unless he or one of the partners were with them. The instructor signaled the end of class, he gathered his notes and certificates of completion, placed them in his satchel and headed for the exit. His car was in the shop and Julio had sent a text earlier from the parking lot outside where he waited to pick him up. His stomach growled. Maybe they’d grab a bite before he met the guys at the office.

Another text beeped. He groaned at the message, it was from his brother.

need to come for a visit.

Smoke stopped, and sent a reply. His brother was ten years younger and gave his mom a hard time. Personally, he thought she needed to give the little asshole half the whippings he'd gotten growing up.

Not a good time, lots of things going down. He waited a moment or two, nodding at some acquaintances as they passed.

expelled, mom put me out. nowhere to go.

Smoke cursed walking toward the parking lot looking at the text. His mind was on a myriad of things, so he failed to see the dark man who stepped to his right and placed the gun in his side. "Someone wants a word with you."

Smoke's mind spun. What did you say at a time like this? He looked toward the car waiting for him, noticed Julio asleep in the front seat and veered to the left. His heartbeat race as uncertainty filtered in. Had Julio seen him? Would he follow or get word to his partners? A part of him relaxed, knowing they'd be on top of this shit. Ross was already teetering the line, out for more blood. He fingered his phone as he moved slowly, punched in code and dropped it in his pocket. A dark Cadillac was parked near the side. The door opened, just as he was struck from behind and pushed into the car.

****Coming Soon:**

“Where there’s Smoke...” The Men of 3X CONStruction series, Book three
“Ultimate Breed” Book one of The Ultimate Chronicles

www.ErosaKnowles.com

You can follow Erosa on facebook.

The Men of 3X CONStruction have built a thriving business over the years and now someone is out to destroy not only their dream, but the men themselves. Our heroes won’t stand for that any more than you or I would. They hook up with strong women, who help them stand stronger. In this series, we’ll follow the unraveling thread to reveal the culprit and save the freedom of our heroes. Hopefully, the women will be able to calm the primitive natures within their men, lest they take the law into their own hands. Once in the cage, was enough.

This has been a publication of Sitting Bull Publishers. We hope you enjoyed Book two of The Men of 3X CONStruction. Denise and Red’s relationship spanned eight years, they had two adorable children and still failed to get it right at first. Good thing love’s resilient and forgives a multitude of sins.

If you haven’t read Book One in this series, “Have I told You Lately?” Ross and Cherise’s story, be sure to check it out.

Erosa Knowles is a talented up and coming author. Visit her webpage for a view of her new titles. She has a paranormal story, “Ultimate Breed,” coming out soon. Below is the Prologue and First chapter.

ULTIMATE BREED

Prologue

In the heavens, a quarrel broke out over The Ultimate's faith in his newest creation, man. Out of nothing, the Ultimate created this being and required tribute. Unlike the Greek Gods of old, The Ultimate would allow no direct tampering with his creation. He declared it illegal to walk the earth unless housed in human flesh and blood. Taking it further, he required all human flesh to have free will.

In the heavens, The Ultimate waited. Shaitan or Lucifer as he is also known, entered, bowed low and sat at His feet.

"Why are you here Shaitan?"

"I have come to pay tribute."

"Why? You have disobeyed, refusing to pay tribute to my creation. You no longer have a place here."

"Master!" Shaitan cried, falling on his face. "I can bow to no other than you. My love for you is such that I cannot give to another, that which belongs only to you."

Silence thundered through the heavens as Shaitan's word stood on the scales of justice, the truth weighed. Shaitan remained bowed, face to the floor.

"A tribute you say?"

"Yes my master. A challenge, a game if you will."

"Rise," The Ultimate ordered. "Tell me of this competition."

Shaitan grinned, but shuttered his face before he stood before The Ultimate. So far his gamble paid off. Boredom stifled creativity. Eternity lasted long; a challenge would break the monotony and offer him a chance for revenge.

"Your creation inhabits your planet, but he may choose to pay tribute to you or not. You desire him to love you on his own. Is that correct?"

The Ultimate nodded watching him closely. "Yes, I want him to come to me of his own accord. I make no secret of this."

"How will you know? How will you ever know if the creatures...pardon me," he corrected hastily at The Ultimate's glare. "I meant your creation comes to you of their free will?"

The Ultimate stared for a moment and relaxed in the chair that appeared beneath him. "You have me intrigued. What is this game?"

"Not a game my Lord, a challenge. Will your creation love you if they go through trials? Will they reverence you still as I have?" He took a moment, waiting for permission to continue. It was critical to set the stage so the game could begin. A vessel awaited him in the place of beginnings, but first he needed permission.

Chapter 1

Within the mists of unfulfilled desires, a spark of yearning, so contrary, so combustible, so critical, it hid under layers of skewed reason and political platitudes. Though starved of attention, denied exposure or an audience, this root of craving remained strong, and flourished in Skye's subconscious.

Plotting, it made an alliance with the heart, binding need with love, the two now one, inseparable. Another pact locked memories and thoughts in a fortified triangle; together the deadly trio implemented a hostile takeover of flesh.

Life took on new meaning when sickness and death banged on your door. Perceptions melted under the weight of sporadic bouts of darkness. Lofty ideals lost its captive audience when frequent falls, nausea and intermittent bleeding took center stage. Demanding change, the subverted longing refused to be ignored. As a bit in the mouth of a horse gives direction, it too set a new course of action.

Her life would never be the same. Her true destiny required fulfillment. She would nurture that which she brought forth. This child would be the fulfillment of that decree.

With a critical eye, Skye studied her extended abdomen. Her hands rubbed the mound reveling in the soft skin contrasting with the hardness beneath. The babe took exception to her preening and kicked.

Joy sizzled in her veins.

Tilted hazel green eyes crinkled at the corners, full lips stretched wide, as a smile burst forth, lighting her smooth face. Happiness bubbled up and out her mouth into giggles. She covered her mouth.

No one could know of her excitement. Waliff, the Elder warned her to keep the news to herself. Easy for him to say, he had always held his children, played with them, loved them.

She twirled in front to the mirror, watching her protruding belly. "Soon. Thank You Ultimate." She blew a kiss upward. "In a little while, I will hold my son," she mouthed the words, empty of sound in the vacant room, hugging the secret to herself.

A glance out the window confirmed the sun would set soon. Skye loved the Rockies, the clean air, the ragged beauty of the mountain peaks and the solitude. There were times she spent hours climbing, sitting and relaxing in various crags and caves. In a few hours, she would be at home in her beloved retreat in the foothills.

"Where is she?" Chloe, Skye's assistant, shrill voice intruded.

"She's washing her hands," a hushed voice responded.

Skye smoothed her top in preparation to leave, when Chloe's voice stopped her.

"Again?" This time Chloe's voice sounded terse, demanding.

Skye tilted her head, and paid attention to the dialog between the two women. Chloe sounded upset. Why? Had something happened?

"I suppose you could say again. She did wash them a few minutes ago." The dryness of the

words caused a smile to emerge on Skye's face.

The voice must belong to the new maid, Greta. She and Chloe never warmed to each other. Skye moved closer to the door, listening.

"I keep forgetting you are new from the Council." There was a decided bite in Chloe's tone. "If the Mistress is washing her hands, again and again, then there *is* a problem. She is either angry, upset, scared, excited, or any other emotion that comes to mind. Your *job* is to make sure she is in *none* of those conditions, especially being so close to her time."

The clicking of heels on the wooden floors alerted Skye her time alone was at an end.

"Mistress, you must come now. The car is downstairs waiting," Chloe called.

"They will continue to wait," Skye returned. "I must wash my hands first." Careful to hide her laughter and excitement, she turned on the water.

Moments later, she entered the outer room and turned to the new servant. What was her name? Gerine? Gretchen? No matter, it would be months before they crossed paths again.

"Thank you so much for your excellent service. I will be sure and tell the Council I appreciated your time here."

Chloe sniffed in the background.

The tall, thin woman's pinched face expanded and reddened at the same time, quite an achievement for a Fem. Her lips widened to an unseemly width, displaying the wicked tips of her incisors, as she bobbed. "Thank you Mistress, thank you."

"Mistress..." Chloe interrupted.

Skye turned in her direction, brow arched. "One moment, Chloe. Anything you need to announce can wait until I say a proper good-bye." The two women stared at each other.

Chloe's eyes slid away. She nodded. "I'm sorry. We are at your disposal."

Skye glanced at her young assistant, and wondered again, why she had not terminated the younger Fem. The servant left the room quietly without a backward glance, most likely to tell her friends about the pregnant breeder and her arrogant assistant.

"You do not do humility well Chloe. I suggest you learn fast. There are not many employers as generous as I," Skye scolded.

Chloe flinched and offered a pasty smile that fell short of reaching her cornflower blue eyes. "Have you forgotten our discussion on your language? You mustn't speak so formally Mistress. Shorten some of your words to keep from drawing attention," Chloe lectured, while holding out a heavy overcoat.

Skye placed her arm into a sleeve, accepting the olive branch. "I am too old to keep altering my speech whenever humans change. Besides, I do not intend to converse with them. My servants are accustomed to how I speak. I will be fine." She glanced out the window. The late sun beckoned. The reflections from the snow lit the ground, the day seem brighter, cleaner. Everything looked beautiful today.

Emas, her babe's father, would meet her in the car on the way to the retreat. Together they would start what they hoped would be a new trend: Vampire father and Breeder raising children together. Waliff grudgingly approved her case, but seemed wary of how the males would take

the breach in protocol. Today, Waliff's concerns fell on deaf ears. She wanted to run away from the restrictions of the city and the Council's helpers. At home, she would be free to express her joy over this child.

"I wish you would reconsider taking a cell phone. It's a wonderful device. You can reach anyone in seconds." Sarcasm crackled in Chloe's tone as she offered the phone in her palm.

Skye shrunk back from the small plastic gadget as if it were an Asp. "Spare me this old argument. I have allowed you to upgrade my office with a computer and machinery. I believe that is sufficient for now. I have a better telecommunications system," she said, tapping her head with her finger.

"Mistress, you are in your eighth month. You can't teleport. Soon you'll lose the ability of mental speak. I do wish you would allow me to accompany you." Exasperation laced the young Fem's voice.

Skye knew Chloe served as the eyes and ears for the Vampire Council. No way would she be allowed anywhere near this child. No matter how often she pleaded to accompany her, Skye had waited too long, bargained too hard, gave away too much. She would not permit anyone to steal this moment in time from her.

"Chloe, stop worrying. You need to be here," Skye said, striving for a calm and patience that deserted her weeks ago. She avoided the pleading look in Chloe's eyes, and focused on placing the wool cap over of her corkscrew curls.

"No, I don't." Chloe paused. "Here let me do that." She pushed some of the curls under the brim. "I wish I had hair like this," Chloe's voice took on a dreamlike quality as her fingers teased a few curls. Her eyes lit with a disturbing covetousness. "You have beautiful hair Mistress." The longing in Chloe's voice sounded off, a clang at the end of an upbeat melody.

Not again. They had discussed this many times over the years.

"*Your* hair is beautiful, thick and long. You are tall with beautiful skin and a lovely figure. Not short and round like me. The Ultimate has given you a multitude of gifts. Don't waste time lusting after the elusive and miss appreciating your reality." Skye said, careful of damaging the young Fem's feelings.

Chloe's hand flew to her throat. She backed away, nodding. "Of course, Mistress." She glanced out the picture window and swallowed hard. "The sky has become overcast. We need to hurry. I have called ahead and everything awaits you." Her words tripped over each other as she moved with haste and opened the door.

Skye waddled down the hall, passed the elevator to the staircase door and pushed it open. Small boxes reminded her of a time in her life, centuries ago, when a foolish Vamp held her prisoner in a crypt. It did not end well. "Good. I do not ride moving boxes Chloe. Not even for one floor. I will not return to this place."

"Yes Mistress. It's just safer higher off the ground. And usually you teleport and never use the elevator or stairs."

Skye grunted but kept moving.

"However, the movers will be coming next week and everything will be ready in the new

house for your return,” Chloe assured her while they moved toward the first floor.

The moment Skye exited the stairwell, the bubble insulating her joy popped. Euphoria drained through her system through a sensitized sieve. In its place, dread spread similar to the morning mist, light and shy of clinging.

Her body clamored on full alert. She froze. Her nostrils flared. There was an unfamiliar scent in the air. She stuck out her tongue and licked her lips.

Metallic.

She threw open her senses. Nothing definitive registered. Two steps forward, her palms itched. Her scalp tingled. Wrongness flitted through the air. Something just beyond the senses, she struggled to place it.

A look around showed her car out front, idling. No real activity on the street, not even kids playing. Was that the norm? It had been so long since she had noticed humans and their activities; she had no idea of normality in this area.

“Who’s driving today?” she asked. Her eyes squinted against the sun, which peeked through the clouds.

Chloe turned and gazed her, concern on her face. “Israel, the same driver and security detail you’ve had for the past twenty years.”

At that moment, the car door opened. Israel walked around to the rear passenger side of the car and waited.

A shiver of trepidation snaked down Skye’s spine as she tried to locate the disturbance. She stood frozen in the foyer. This close to her delivery, she became human for all practical purposes. The realization of the unreliability of her senses sent a jolt through her. The unease sat heavy on her shoulder.

She rubbed her palms down the side of her overcoat, trying in vain to rid herself of the prickling sensations. Indecision held her within its grip. What should she do? Her earlier joy seemed a distant memory.

If Emas, her baby’s father, had not insisted she stay in the city until he could accompany her, she would have left months ago. Now, the consequences of their delay might create problems no one envisioned.

“Raise your hand,” she instructed Chloe.

Her assistant raised her hand.

“Do you feel static?”

Chloe pivoted slowly, a frown marring her brow. “No Mistress.” A pause. “Define static.”

The feeling abated somewhat. Could she have imagined it? No. Remnants of the feeling trailed down her arm. But the disturbance had lessened greatly.

“Never mind, I am tired of the noisy city and long for the quiet and peace of the country. I will contact you after I arrive.” She left the secure building. Nodding at her driver, she stepped into the car, and waved at Chloe, shaking her head at the young woman’s stubbornness. Her assistant did not possess her tolerance for the sun and yet she stood in the dwindling light watching the car pull away.

Glad to be escaping to the tranquility of her mountain estate with her secret safe. Skye leaned back on the soft leather and breathed deeply. A slight stirring of air preceded Emas appearing in the seat across from her.

“Hello, Skye. Did you have difficulty getting away? Is that assistant of yours giving you more problems? I swear that Fem is odd.” His light brown eyes teased taking the sting from the words.

“No,” she answered with a large smile as the tension ebbed. The feeling of dread dropped away when Emas touched her hand. She debated and decided against telling him of her earlier concerns in the foyer. Her internal alarms had quieted. She decided it had been nerves.

“I am so happy. Finally, after all this time Emas, I am going to be a mother and raise my child.”

“All it took was a four year debate, with yourself I might add, numerous blackouts, bed-rest, and numerous treatments before you are finally following doctors orders, my dear. And, as your doctor and the father of this little one, I must say I am pleased with your progress. No more blackouts, nausea, shortness of breath?” he asked, assessing her with a slow look from head to toe.

“No, not since before this pregnancy,” she squealed, clapping her hands. Glad to be free of the debilitating problems that had beset her.

“Any bleeding?” He took her wrist, pressing his fingers on her pulse point.

“No, nothing.” Skye sat back in the soft leather seat, a melancholy sigh escaped. “I have given birth to over two hundred babies in the past three centuries and this is the best pregnancy I have ever experienced.” Her face warmed at his indulgent smile. “I have you to thank, Emas,” her voice gentled. “I know you never planned to be a father, especially after Marcus passed.” She reached over and squeezed his clasped hands, recognizing the flash of pain across his face at the mention of his beloved. “But I believe your diagnosis was correct. I have noticed that I feel jubilant whenever I think of sharing the baby with you. No other male would ever consider what you are doing for me. My health has improved. I believe it is because of my happiness.”

“I think it goes further than your joy, Skye. Many of the Breeders have been suffering similar maladies. You are simply the first to take this bold action. This child and the nurturing that comes with him are critical. I informed Waliff that your raising this child was essential to your long term good health.”

“Choices, choices,” she said, her voice thin and weak. “Do I obey the law and never interact with the babies I birth, continue having health problems and possibly die. Or do I disobey and have a relationship with my child and keep my health and sanity?” A tear trekked down her cheek, warm, free and without shame.

“I am no martyr, Emas. I want this child with every breath I take, my heart beats in anticipation of being with him.” She met his kind eyes. “Did you know I have never held any child before? My empty hands shake in terror and in excitement.” She turned, blinking back the water that filled her eyes.

“It’s okay Skye.” He patted her hand. “The Ultimate created you, a Breeder. The Council

may have had valid grounds for prohibiting a mother and child to have any contact after birth two hundred years ago. That is not the case today. It is past time the Council realized breeders *are* nurturers. It is in your DNA to reproduce and care for children, similar to a gift or calling. You have been forced to deny that part of yourself for centuries. Your body went into a downward spiral; the blackouts were just the beginning. The result, your blood counts were haywire, your immune system shot.” He took her hands and squeezed reassuring her.

She clasped her trembling lips together and closed her eyes in a silent prayer that Emas was right. “I am scared of messing this up,” she whispered. “Waliff has sworn me to secrecy. He is the only one on the Council who knows I will raise the baby with you. I’m not sure why, unless he fears the males will be upset.”

Emas waved his hand before glancing out the window. “They will be fine. Remember Skye, you and all the Breeders have always had free will in this. You agreed to the law of no contact with the children in the beginning because the need was great, our people were nearing extinction. It seemed practical at the time. You understood the emergency and delivered healthy children without complaint. As a faithful patriot, you have done a superb duty for our people. Now, you must take care of yourself. Otherwise, we will find ourselves back in the same spot we were centuries ago, only this time ignorance will not be responsible.” He patted her hand again and glanced at his watch. “I must be off. I will meet you later tonight.”

She smiled and nodded, too pleased to speak. His words brought added comfort. Motherhood was the gift she sought from The Ultimate. Skye desperately wanted to be a mother in every way. He returned her smile, and disappeared.

"You are an active one, aren't you?" Patting her stomach, she moved the child around for relief. Within moments, she closed her eyes. The drive was not a long one, a few hours at most, but she lacked the energy to stay awake.

A wisp of awareness flowed through her mind. She smiled at Emas’s blessing through their mental link. The babe kicked again. “*Ultimate bless*,” she returned the message to him and drifted asleep.

###

A screeching, careening, followed by a loud boom woke Skye. The car swerved. She pitched to the right, then left. Screaming, she fell forward to the floor. Her talons tore through the gloves, pierced the seat and anchored her. With a loud bang, the car lurched forward and stopped. Hissing and crackling issued from the front of the vehicle.

After retracting her nails, not sure what to expect she inched up and glanced out the window. Dizziness hit hard, she held her head with one hand and pulled herself up with the other.

“Ow.” Skye hissed before peering through the partition. She pushed the button, bringing the glass down, for a clearer view.

"What? What’s going on?" Her voice ragged from sleep and the hits she had taken.

Israel, her driver lay slumped over the steering wheel. Blood ran in rivulets down the side of his face. The cold seeped in through the cracks, stealing the warmth from the car.

Her hand flew to her mouth, holding back a scream. Skye shook her head, to clear her

vision, unsure of what happened. Telepathically, she told Emas of her situation.

"Get out of the car. Go into the store, find other people," he commanded through their link.

Skye blinked in confusion. Leave the car? In the winter, with the snow and ice?

Looking up over the half-drawn partition, she noticed a male in a dark coat with his hat pulled low walking in the direction of the car. The dirty mounds of snow next to the road appeared to embrace him, rather than slow him down.

Relief flooded her system. They would get some help. Even from this distance, she knew he was not fully human. His stealth like movements penetrated the fog surrounding her brain. A tingle went down her spine.

"Hunter," she snapped.

Her fangs dropped halfway and slid back up.

"Shit," she cried before covering her mouth in shock. Feeling silly, she dropped her hands. As her body transitioned to one hundred percent human by delivery time, her vampiric defenses were almost useless. Fumbling she stabbed at the button closing the partition and sent a mental call of help to any Vampire in the area.

As she tried to pull on her low-heeled boots, her hands wouldn't stop shaking. A breath hitched in her throat as the realization that with each passing second and no rescue, she could die like Israel, her driver. Vampire hunters were mortal enemies and lived to terminate her people.

I cannot cry, I must think.

Tears welled in her eyes as her baby thumped and stretched within. Her hand automatically soothed and rubbed the mound. It was so unfair. She would never get to hold him. This baby was to be hers. All she asked of The Ultimate was to be a mother, raise her children. Stiffening her spine, she refused to allow anyone to take this from her without a fight.

"Chloe," she yelled, bypassing the telepathic channel after not receiving any response.

"Ultimate, help me," she murmured.

"Where the hell are the Sentinels?" No one answered.

The hunter neared the car. She noticed the gun by his side.

Fear choked her. Air refused to enter her lungs. Tears flooded her eyes, blinding her. She could not think. Her mind succumbed to the pillaging terror and shut down.

Scooting back from the door, Skye shrunk into the corner of the car. Despite what Emas said, she could not leave the safety of the car. There were humans and strange things out there. She had no idea how to communicate, what to do or where to go.

"I will wait here Emas until someone comes for me," she said as she sent the message. The hunter yanked on the door. The locks held fast. He shot at the car.

Skye screamed and ducked, forgetting the windows had special treatment against the sun, and basic human weaponry. Her heart raced as she held her stomach protectively.

How could this be happening in the open? Where were the human cops? She trembled while silent tears rolled down her face. She waited, for either salvation or death.

"Run Skye," Emas call out.

She started and risked a peek out the window. Ultimate forbid! Emas was beside the car,

wrestling the Hunter. Vampire hunters were the only beings on earth that matched the vampire in speed and cunning. In hand-to-hand combat, either could win.

Run? How? Where? Hands trembling, she unlocked the door, tested the handle and pushed. Immediately, she heard the sounds of flesh hitting flesh. Emas risked his life fighting a hunter for her and the baby. Ultimate knew he was no fighter. She had to try to navigate the unknown.

“Move it now Skye, I will meet up with you later. Protect the child,” Emas pushed through their link. It was the impetus to get moving. She grabbed her purse. Her coat flapped as she hustled across the street avoiding melted ice puddles. The cold brushed against her exposed fingers, she stuck them into her pocket for added warmth.

The limo blocked the fight from onlookers on the opposite side of the street, but not from above or behind. That meant someone placed a powerful shield over the wreckage to avoid detection.

She had a problem processing the reality of her situation. Who could be behind this? Hunters? Questions flew through her mind as she increased her pace and walked further down the block searching for a place to wait. Piles of dirty snow and ice lined the street, making it impossible to stay dry in her low boots. Hairs on the back of her neck rose, accompanied with the now familiar tingle.

Her stomach plummeted. Another Hunter walked somewhere behind her. Close.

She waddled in the direction of a large well-lit building. Cold penetrated her feet and hands. Nerves frayed, she cursed her foolishness in not accepting Chloe’s offer to accompany her earlier. The stench of over-cooked food and musty bodies stung her nose. Her swollen feet pulsed in anger at the pounding they received from the hard ground through her thin boots. She thanked The Ultimate they had not gone numb.

“Where’s my security detail?” She murmured, glancing around for a familiar face. Holding her stomach, she quickened her pace.

She sent another telepathic call for help. *“This is Breeder Skye, I need assistance. A hunter is stalking me. I am in my eighth month. Any Valdine in the area, please help. Zero in on my transmission. Hurry!”*

Emas grunted in response to her latest plea. She sent a silent prayer for his safety. The humans walked at a wicked pace, sweeping her along with the throng. She wound up in a large store with all types of plastic people wearing clothes.

Sale signs hung brilliantly all over the building. Skye paid them little attention as she basked in the warmth of her surroundings. Placing a hand on her back, she stretched and then bent forward. Her back felt better and her breathing slowed to a respectable level. The cap she had worn disappeared during her dash from the car. Corkscrew curls flopped over onto her face, limiting her vision.

Brushing her hair aside, she stood still for a few moments and listened internally for any response to her mental cry. Nothing, silence.

Glancing at her watch, she realized less than two hours had passed since she left Chloe at the office.

I should have taken the cell phone.

A couple of men watched her. Unsure of their motives, Skye moved around the counters, glanced around, and threw her senses wide open. The two men were human. She picked up the normal gurgle of noise; people speaking in various tongues, a cacophony of heartbeats, idle chatter, but no alarming tingles from the hunter.

She debated against leaving the store or going outside for a better signal. With her vampiric powers fading by the second, she was unsure her messages got through. Desperate for help, she headed out to the open air, determined to contact a Sentinel or Council member.

“Waliff, this is Skye. I need help and I need it now. A hunter is tracking me. Israel, my driver is dead. Please send a Sentinel to pick me up.” She sent the request on his private channel. Her heart jumped when she heard static, and then nothing.

Before she knew it, the crowd swept her along again. Within minutes, she was lost. This area boasted of a few quaint shops, some smaller stores with fancy dolls in the windows. A couple of windows and doors advertised massages and psychic readings.

Skye did not need a fortuneteller to tell her immediate future or her surroundings were bleak. Anxiety clawed her stomach. Clueless, she had no idea what to do next. The baby kicked, reminding her she needed to move.

Not sensing an immediate threat, she walked at a more sedate pace, looking for landmarks to get her bearings. A street sign loomed ahead. Mentally she reached again for Chloe, intent on informing her staff of the location.

No response. Not a flicker.

Annoyed, she brushed the sticky moisture off her face, and held her head between her palms. She continued to reach out mentally to her assistant.

“Miss, are you alright?” a stout woman asked, reaching into her purse.

Skye looked at the woman, unable to comprehend the words as a pain shot through her head. She shut her eyes.

“Your nose, it’s bleeding,” the woman said pointing at Skye’s face with a tissue she held out. Slowly, Skye accepted the offering, nodded her thanks, and gingerly wiped her nose. The tissue came back full of blood. She moaned and considered sitting on the frozen sidewalk to yell at the unfairness of it all. Instead, she spun and searched for a restroom.

In all her centuries as a breeder, she had never been away from sanctuary during her last months. It was a vulnerable time for her. The Ultimate set up everything in the child’s favor when their race changed. During pregnancy, she did not require blood, sunlight did not affect her, and vampire Hunters could not detect her. At least, they were not supposed to be able.

Holding the tissue to her nose, she applied gentle pressure as she reviewed her options. She had one credit card and no cash. Her situation appeared desolate, but she and the babe had defied the odds. They still lived. At the back of her mind, a warning bell rang. *Emas should have come by now.* She shoved the words back into the dark crevice from which they crawled. This was not the time to deal in fearful thoughts.

After pasting on a confident veneer, she stepped out of the restroom, walked out of the store

and looked around the crowded street. There were a few public phones in the area. Heading for one, a tingle shot through her again.

“Shit,” she muttered, refusing to censure herself. She merely called it the truth, a shitty situation. Determined, she moved toward the phone. Before she could reach it, a male stepped in front of her flashing his credit card. Gritting her teeth, she lacked the energy to get him to leave. Instead, she waddled to the next one. It was out of service. It took everything not to stomp her swollen foot in frustration.

Sensing the Hunter, Skye returned to the safety of the crowd and moved with them down the side of the street. Seeing a break, she shuffled quickly, turning a brightly lit corner.

He followed.

Was that a bus? Her nose leaked blood. She held the tissue against it as she moved toward the large vehicle.

The tingle intensified.

The hunter grabbed her arm.

Her breath caught in her throat. She refused to let him take her baby. With a burst of adrenaline, mixed with anger and righteous indignation, Skye sent a surge of energy into the Hunter.

He dropped to the ground rolling in pain and groaning.

She flashed onto the bus.

Pain exploded in her head as she gasped for air and held her head down. The man, who had planned to sit in the previously empty seat, gave her a wide berth. Her stomach roiled, the pain throbbed.

As the bus jerked forward, she groaned. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead. She sat weak and spent, knowing she had used the last of her power to save her baby. Tapped, she had no way to communicate, no money and no idea where the bus headed.