



DIABLO BLANCO CLUB
RITE OF FIRST CLAIM

Quillia Rain

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Dedication

*For Jennifer Cole, Melody Rahl,
Elijana Kindel, and Cassandra Gold.*

*I thank you for your patience and
sympathetic ears (and eyes) as I did battle
with the most stubborn pair of lovers I
have ever created.*

*Damn those Halsey men and
Lawrence women!*

For my editor, Mary.

*I appreciate your slogging through
the morass of ick to find the gold nugget
in this book!*

*I still haven't forgiven you for
Maass's The Fire In Fiction, but I'm
gettin' there. LOL*

*And for Mom—who reads my books
even though they aren't mysteries.*

—Qwillia

Chapter One

Halloween was a time for playing and parties. And—if Lyssa Lawrence was lucky—a little magic. According to rumor, the Diablo Blanco Club's Midnight Masquerade was the ultimate party. Innuendo and speculation abounded about what went on inside those thick, stone walls on Halloween.

Like Vegas, what happened in the Diablo Blanco Club stayed in the Diablo Blanco Club, which made it the best setting for what locals and members dubbed Select-a-Sub Night. And the perfect opportunity for Lyssa to deploy her plan.

“I can do this. I can do this.” Lyssa’s steady whispers filled the interior of her car. Each word kept time with the rhythmic *click-click* of the turn signal as she hesitated at the Club’s private drive.

No vehicles were visible in front of or behind her on the narrow state road, but her reluctance had less to do with traffic and more to do with her reasons for attending the Midnight Masquerade.

She forced her foot off the brake, onto the gas pedal, and applied firm pressure, moving her sedan across the empty highway and onto the paved lane toward an uncertain future.

In the distance, she could see the glow of the parking lot security lights over the trees that lined the road and covered most of the hundred and twenty acres surrounding the Club. Whispers echoed in her head with every yard closer. *I can do this.* The nerves tightened in her chest. *Do I want to do this?*

“Get over it,” she snapped. “You *have* to do this.” She’d waged this internal debate for the last two weeks. Ever since Mike Halsey’s annual invitation to the masquerade had arrived in the mail, just as it had for the last four years.

What happens when Mike finds out what you’ve done?

Again her foot eased off the accelerator.

Lyssa didn’t doubt Mike would discover what she’d done. It was his reaction she wasn’t sure she could predict. Not that she really cared if he was upset about her finding another lover; he’d lost the right to comment when he’d chosen a job over her four years ago. She shook off the sense of unease and focused on the Club. It loomed ahead of her. Every time Lyssa approached the building, her body tingled with an anticipation she steadfastly tried to ignore. The energy she had felt the few times she’d entered

drew her.

The pull could have been due to the nature of the building's purpose. Or it might have been memories of the first night her sister, Mattie, had dragged Lyssa to the Club for a quick look-see. Within an hour of their arrival, one of the Club's owners, Bryce Halsey, had arrived and escorted Mattie upstairs. His younger brother, Mike, had stifled Lyssa's protests before he hustled her down a hall, into a storage closet, and repeatedly fucked her to multiple orgasms.

Lyssa shook off the dangerous images from that night and fought the urge to indulge the fantasies of playing submissive to Mike's dominant she'd buried deep inside. "Think about the plan," she mumbled.

A plan hatched because of a silly hiccup in her biological clock. Stupid hormones. Who would've thought turning forty could wreak such havoc? Early signs

of menopause. Nothing had prepared Lyssa for her doctor's diagnosis after a routine exam over two months ago. Which meant the children Lyssa had always wanted couldn't stay a dream for someday in the distant future. She needed to do something about it. Now.

The idea of insemination at a fertility clinic seemed too cold and sterile. Even if it was just for the purpose of creating a baby, she wanted some kind of connection, brief as it might be, to the father of her child. A chance to tell her baby that there had been more than test tubes and syringes involved in his or her conception. After weeks of tracking her temperature and using ovulation test kits, Lyssa thought she was ready.

Four weeks of hitting the bars and nightclubs outside San Diablo had left her dejected and about ready to give up. It was only after Mike's annual invitation had arrived that she contemplated

involving a dominant from the Club—a dangerous but very tempting idea.

Barricades funneled the traffic ahead of her toward the front of the building, requiring guests to leave their vehicles with the valets. Herding the cows to slaughter, she thought. Lyssa pushed her unease away. “This is to get my baby,” she reminded herself as she pulled up to the curb and watched the valet approach.

“Enjoy your evening.” He handed her a ticket and helped her out of her sedan.

The light fall breeze tousled Lyssa’s auburn wig. Loose tendrils clung to the shiny gloss coating her lips. She used one hand to smooth the short skirt of her costume—a red velvet Christmas elf’s dress trimmed at the collar, cuffs, and hem with fluffy white faux fur—while she secured the strands from her wig behind her ear with her other hand. A fortifying breath filled her lungs with the crisp

scents of fall as she examined the stone edifice in front of her.

The Club didn't need lights or decorations to lend an intimidating mien for Halloween; it did that by reputation alone. Six broad steps led to a wide flagstone veranda and heavy, curved double doors resembling the wooden gate of a castle.

Around her, other guests continued arriving. Lyssa followed them up the steps. Once she faced the doors, a shiver squirmed up her back. She paused and then moved aside to wait beside one of the thick columns until her body calmed. She used the fingertips of her right hand to stroke the embossed letters of the invitation tucked into the pocket of her skirt. The thump of her heart echoed in her ears as she stared at the Club entrance. *Mike will probably never find out where I met my baby's father.*

No matter how many times she

weighed the pros and cons of her decision, Lyssa knew eventually she'd have to face Mike. She was fully aware there would be consequences for using his invitation. Consequences beyond what she hoped for tonight. But she had asked around and confirmed Mike wasn't likely to show up. Everyone she'd talked to had made it clear that her brother-in-law's younger brother no longer attended the Diablo Blanco Club's Midnight Masquerade.

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of the younger man—a habit she'd never been able to overcome since the day they'd first met nearly twelve years ago. “Not that I'd ever let him know it,” she muttered; she'd made the mistake of trusting him once. Her internal alarms had gone off, but she'd ignored them, thinking it would be different than her previous experiences with men. “Strike three and you're out, Lyssa. You don't need any other proof that you've got

rotten luck with men.”

Besides, four years ago a baby would have more than cramped Mike’s globe-trotting lifestyle. Diaper changing and two-a.m. feedings clashed with photographing swimsuit models on sugar white beaches in the Caribbean or dodging bullets while recording the ravages of civil wars in remote areas of third-world countries. She didn’t need a repeat performance to know what was best for herself. “No Mike allowed. I should tattoo that across my forehead.”

It’s over. Done. In the past. There isn’t anything Mike can say or do to make me change my mind. But saying that and actually believing it were two completely different creatures. Lyssa shook off the turbulent emotions thoughts of Mike stirred and returned her interest to the building in front of her. He had nothing to do with her plan. “Nothing at all,” she assured herself. “Focus on the plan.”

A stone frame accented the unique arched doorway, and a second brim of stone edged the frame. The letters etched into the gray rock were worn down by time and the weather, but each was still visible when she looked close.

“El diablo supone; el Dios sabe; los actos blancos del Diablo,” a man’s voice whispered into her ear.

Lyssa jumped at the amused tone. “Excuse me?”

The man beside Lyssa stepped into the glow of the lanterns that were shaped like medieval sconces on either side of the entrance. His hazel eyes glittered down at her. “The devil supposes; God knows; the white devil acts.”

A neatly trimmed goatee framed his mouth, accenting the full lower and slightly thinner upper lips. The whiskers were the same jet-black as the hair he’d pulled back and secured at his nape. The way he held himself and the self-control

emanating from him gave more than enough of a clue that he was one of the Club's dominants. His tailored tuxedo only confirmed it.

"The words." The man motioned to the doorway's decoration with his chin. "That's what they mean." His eyes twinkled with humor in his handsome face as he leaned back against the stone pillar to watch her.

Lyssa nodded at him. "I know. A friend of mine told me years ago."

"Wouldn't happen to be anyone I know, would it?"

"No." Lyssa shook her head and grinned. "It was long ago. When I first moved to San Diablo."

"With your sister, Mattie?"

Lyssa looked at him and finally recognized the man. "You're David Henderson, aren't you?" Heat filled her cheeks as an image of this man and his

friend, Dayton Kringle—her target for the night—sharing a woman in the lounge of the Club four years earlier entered her mind. She'd joked with her sister about what it would feel like to be caught between a private dick and a hard Saint Nick. How ironic would it be if she were to actually experience it? She held her hand out to him.

He nodded and grinned. "And even with a wig on, I recognized you. You're Lyssa Lawrence."

His big hand wrapped around hers, but instead of a friendly handshake, he lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a gentlemanly kiss against her knuckles. The warmth of his breath took away the chill in her fingers for a moment.

After releasing her, he continued, "If a friend told you the motto when you first arrived, it must have been one of your foster brothers."

The accuracy of his guess made

Lyssa start. Then a wisp of memory surfaced. “I remember hearing you’re a detective.”

“Investigator. So was it one of Gino’s boys?”

The nerves relaxed in her belly at the mention of her foster father. It was possible David only recalled the information about her and her sister because he’d been tasked to do a background check on her sister when Mattie first started working as Bryce’s personal assistant twelve years ago. Lyssa admitted, “Yes, it was one of Gino’s boys. I’d forgotten about the inscription being there.”

David stepped aside as another couple ascended the stairs to the front of the Club. He guided Lyssa away from the steps with a hand at her elbow. “I’ll bet Gino tanned his son’s hide for bringing you out here to begin with.”

“Marco was scrubbing hulls for a

month.” Lyssa laughed as she recalled the punishment her foster father, the owner of a small boatbuilding and repair shop, had meted out. Her gaze returned to the stone engraving, then drifted back to David.

He extended his hand. “Would you allow me to escort you, or are you having second thoughts?”

Lyssa looked at the hand he held out to her. She might have dressed for her intended target, but nothing said she needed to center her attention exclusively on that man. Considering David posed a likely candidate, it made sense she take the opportunity to acquaint herself with him. Her intended quarry might already be inside or en route. Either way, Lyssa knew what she was looking for, and she wouldn’t settle for less. “No, no second thoughts. As for your escort, I would like that. Thank you.” Lyssa allowed him to settle her hand in the crook of his elbow

and draw her through the entrance and into the Club.

Unlike other fetish clubs she'd seen online or had described to her, there were no dimmed lights or curtained hallways leading to private rooms. Instead the paneled walls and crown molding exuded a sophistication and respectability equal to any of the exclusive country or yacht clubs up and down the California coast. These little details made it easier for her to keep her emotions under control. And staying in control, especially tonight, was paramount to the success of her plan. She didn't dare give in to the temptation to submit to a dominant, no matter how much a part of her craved to do so.

The majority of the guests were dressed in evening gowns or tuxedos. The only ones in costume, like her, were submissives—both those owned and those looking for owners. Scanning the faces, she identified several of her potential

donors, but she was careful not to stare at them in a way that might arouse unease or make them leery of her approach. She ignored the tiny pain that twisted her heart when Mike wasn't among the guests. *Forget the fantasy and face reality, Lyssa.*

"Smile. We aren't that scary," David whispered, his warm breath stirring the hair of her auburn wig over her ear.

A tingle slid up Lyssa's spine.

"You've been here often enough to know we don't bite." A wicked grin lifted his lips. "Well, not unless you ask us to."

Lyssa smiled and shook her head at his jest. "And just how do you know how many times I've been here before?"

David reached up and rubbed a curl from her wig between his fingers. "You might be in costume, but I've seen you visit a few times with Vance and Ben."

She met his gaze, trying to read his

intent. His capricious eyes gave nothing away. Another tremor worked through her at the thought that this man would never allow another person to guess what he was thinking. Good information to have if she hoped for events to proceed as planned. Especially if she chose him this evening.

“Invitation.” A security guard dressed in a black tuxedo and white shirt stared down at her.

David nodded at the man, who then consulted the clipboard in his broad hands. Both men waited for Lyssa to fish the card from the pocket of her costume. She handed the heavy velum over and watched the doorman check her name off a list.

“Hand.”

When Lyssa held up her left hand, he slipped a white plastic bangle over her wrist. There were other colored bracelets, similar to the one she'd been given, in

little boxes on the table beside the bouncer.

Once she walked through the double doors leading from the foyer to the lounge area of the Club, she searched the assembled guests for the other men on her list and ignored the urge to scan the crowd for the one man she already knew was not going to be there. She spotted a few of the members she'd designed and created gear and costumes for, and nodded when they waved at her. At the bar, her neighbors Ben Murphy and Vance Justiss were chatting with each other and a few Club members. Vance stood behind the long expanse of teak nestled between the curving staircases leading to the second floor.

His snug black cotton T-shirt emphasized his muscular build and highlighted his copper skin and silver-threaded black hair. In the four years since he'd been back in San Diablo and

retired from the Marine Corps, he'd allowed his hair to grow. Tonight the long, thick waves were pulled back into a ponytail that brushed the area between his shoulder blades.

Ben looked sophisticated and sexy in a tailored tux that fit his athletic frame. His dark blond hair, which he kept neat and short, brushed the collar of his white linen shirt.

She sneaked a look at her companion. Four years ago David, with his goatee and long, tied-back black hair, had seemed yummy when dressed in jeans and a shirt. Now that he was dressed in a well-fitted tux, Lyssa wasn't surprised to see several women moving toward them. The colors of the women's wristbands varied, but not a single white one was among the group.

Retreat definitely seemed the wiser choice at this point in the evening. There would be plenty of time to determine if

David would fit her needs. Lyssa smiled up at him and conceded softly, "I'll leave you to your admirers." She eased her hand free of his arm and headed for the bar.

If he protested, she didn't hear or see it. She smiled at the surprised looks on Vance's and Ben's faces as she moved toward them.

"Lys!" Ben rose from the stool he'd occupied at the bar to envelop her in a warm hug. "Darlin', what are you doing here?"

Vance leaned over the teak counter and kissed her cheek as she took the seat Ben had vacated. "Decided to finally check out a Select-a-Sub Night?" Vance teased with a grin.

"I thought I'd see what all the fuss is about," Lyssa hedged. There was no way she was going to give away her true purpose behind accepting Mike's annual invitation.

Ben picked up her wrist and ran his finger over the white band. "More than just see?"

Lyssa ignored the glint of concern in his gaze and asked a question of her own. "What's the significance of the colors?"

Ben looked at her, his gray eyes measuring as if she were one of his patients before he answered. "Red means a sub has recently left a master and is actively searching for another. Black indicates a sub who is mourning the death of a master, usually within the last three years, and is just returning to the search. And yellow is a sub currently being tested but who is still unsure of the master she is interested in."

"And white?" Lyssa fiddled with the bangle.

"White means you're a virgin, baby." Vance grinned as he set a highball glass filled with ginger ale in front of her and a rocks glass of Scotch in front of Ben. He

leaned over the bar and settled a soft, slow kiss on his lover's lips.

Lyssa groaned both at the appellation assigned by her wrist jewelry and the sexy look the two men exchanged. Watching them always stirred feelings of envy. The trust, affection, and commitment the pair shared made her wish she could find the same things for herself, despite the terrible luck with men she'd encountered in the past. Childhood lessons resurfaced to taunt her.

The devotion between these men had made it easier for her to approach them when she was unable to suppress her interest in spankings and bondage play. Neither man was attracted to her sexually. They only had eyes for each other, which made being with them safe. No need to worry about losing what was left of her heart to either or both of them. Not like with Mike.

Over the last three years, she'd

negotiated a few scenes with them. Too bad the heat their lessons stirred never brought her to culmination. If she'd been able to respond to another man—any man—in the last four years, her baby project would probably have never been necessary. Another reason to damn Mike and the way he made her feel. Of all the men she'd fallen for, why did he have to be the only one she couldn't get out of her system?

She was sure Ben and Vance would have something to say about her plans for the evening if she let them know there was more to tonight than finding a temporary dominant to end four years of celibacy.

“Why am I getting stuck with the virgin label when I've been coming here off and on for the last three years?” Lyssa asked as she raised her soda to her lips.

“Because you've never had a dom officially claim you,” Ben stated, sipping

his drink and watching Vance move off to help another customer.

“You’re so wet and ready, Lys. Tell me no if you don’t want this.” Mike’s hand smoothed over her breasts, his lips soft against her cheek.

“Please,” she begged, her voice hoarse with need.

“Please what?” In the dark of the closet, she couldn’t see the deep brown of his eyes, but she knew he watched her. She could almost feel the burn of his gaze on her face.

“I need you. Please,” she sobbed, arching as close as her bound hands would allow.

A frisson of heat coursed through her. She tried to ignore the desire, heavy and hot, filling her lower body, making her shift on her seat and scan the room again. A secret part of her had hoped Mike would be present. That he’d

approach her, reclaim her, and take control as he had that night. Another part, though, reminded her of the days of quiet following their encounter before he left the country for several weeks after their siblings' wedding. Not to mention the humiliation of being left waiting at a restaurant with only a last-minute "I'm sorry. I've got a job" phone call as he was getting on a plane.

That should have been her first hint that she'd been right all along and that, like all the other men she'd cared about, he'd decided to move on to greener pastures. Which she'd verified herself a few days later, after her conscience had browbeaten her into calling him. When a woman had answered the phone—Lyssa refused to recall any of that conversation.

Shaking off the uncomfortable thoughts, Lyssa focused on Ben's comment. She asked, "Claim me?"

His gray gaze held hers, making her

aware of how close her secret was to being revealed. “There are a few ways a master can stake his claim on a sub.”

A tingle of foreboding traveled through her. She’d long considered the masquerade invitations Mike sent her annually nothing more than a fancy booty call. She’d returned the first one to him in shreds, as well as the two subsequent ones she’d received. She *had* been “claimed.” The man had simply changed his mind about keeping her.

Even as she thought it, Lyssa could practically taste the bitterness of disappointment on her tongue. If Mike *had* wanted to keep her... Again she forced away the reminder and focused on the conversation.

“I’m familiar with the concepts of consideration and training collars,” Lyssa admitted, her gaze roving over the crowd, searching for the man she’d singled out as the ideal candidate to assist her with her

goal.

Ben's breath whispered past her ear as he leaned forward, "Dayton hasn't arrived yet."

Startled out of her search, Lyssa swung back around to face him. "What?"

His grin and knowing look assured her that her game hadn't been as subtle as she'd hoped. The stroke of his fingertips over her red velvet skirt heated her cheeks.

"I assume the Christmas elf costume is for his benefit. Even the wig is a nice touch." Ben tugged a long, auburn curl. "Kringle has been tied up in knots for the last three months, ever since Miss Jeffries took over for Nadine when she retired."

"Are you saying he's involved with someone?" Lyssa fought the worry snaking through her. If Dayton was involved with another woman, there was no way...

Vance arrived, answering her question before Ben could. “Nah, our favorite Santa has been hovering over Elfina but hasn’t made a move yet. Give him time though. I don’t see the big guy denying himself a piece of that Elf for very long,” he predicted.

Lyssa ignored the tingle tickling the back of her neck at the thought of Mike viewing her as a prize to be claimed, similar to Vance’s observation about Dayton and his assistant.

“By the way, Lonnie looks good in the cheerleader outfit you made.”

She focused on the distraction Vance provided and turned in the direction he motioned. Ben looked as well. Across the room, a blonde woman was dressed in a dark blue, sleeveless, military-style top with gold-fringed epaulettes on the shoulders. A double row of gold buttons with gold chains dangling between them marched down the front of the jacket. The

flirty white skirt of the costume barely reached the top of her thighs as she knelt beside her mistress. White, knee-high boots decorated with gold pom-poms on the front zipper pulls finished off the outfit.

“It’s a majorette’s uniform,” Lyssa corrected.

“Lonnie sure seems to like it.” Ben chuckled. “Must be all the chains.”

“She does love her nipple chains,” Vance agreed.

“That’s why I built a pair into the inside of the bodice.” Her grin widened at both men’s raised eyebrows. “Any of the chains on the front can be used to tug on the nipple chain inside. See the three on the front of the skirt’s yoke?”

Vance tilted his head in thought. “You didn’t?”

“Dina said she’d begun using a clit ring, so—”

“You built one into the skirt? Interesting idea, Lyssa.” Ben’s shoulder nudged hers. His free hand slipped down to pat her knee as he nodded toward the door. “Your target has arrived, madam.”

With a simple shift on the bar stool, Lyssa faced the foyer entrance. The first thing she spotted was the distinctive silver hair on Dayton Kringle’s head. He had the appropriate nickname of the Santa Claus of San Diablo because of both his last name and his toy business, but he was only a few months younger than Mike. It took a decided effort to squash the temptation to dart out the door behind him. Lyssa cursed the sudden unease clouding her mind with doubts. *Damn it, I need to get past this obsession with Mike.* She shook off the urge to turn away and forced herself to watch Dayton move through the crowd.

His broad shoulders stretched the seams of his white tuxedo jacket, and the

black trousers emphasized his muscular thighs. His deep blue eyes scanned the guests mingling in the lounge before he looked toward the dining area on the opposite side of the room.

Lyssa smoothed her sweaty palms down her skirt and hoped he wasn't searching for anyone in particular. She swallowed the last of her soda, set the glass on the bar, and slipped off the bar stool. "Wish me luck."

"Luck," both men offered in unison.

She refused to allow the unease she spotted in Ben's gaze to infect her as she moved away. It had only taken one night with Mike for her to conceive four years ago. This time it would be intentional. She wanted a baby, and tonight was just the first step. By Christmas she hoped she'd be happily puking up breakfast and looking for stretch marks.

Chapter Two

Hot water washed over Mike Halsey's shoulders, cleansing his skin but doing little to erode the psychological filth coating his mind. The grit and sand were long gone, left behind in the shower of a hotel in Dubai. Even with the blood scrubbed away, he could still feel it smeared across his hands, splattered over his face. He shoved the thoughts aside. The transatlantic flight and layovers factored into his tiredness, but the images imprinting themselves against his closed eyelids exhausted him. He knew the instant his head hit the pillow, rest wouldn't come.

He reached for the faucet and twisted the water off before he tugged the towel from the rod and scraped it over his skin. The hypocrisy he encountered through the lens of his camera turned his stomach. People donning masks to hide the darkest sides of their nature. The flashy, charming smiles that twisted so easily into sneers.

Mike shook off the irritation and annoyance burning through him. He was home now. What he'd seen, photographed, and witnessed on this last mission made it all that much easier to settle into semiretirement, despite the protests of his agent, Max Landry. Protests Max continued to spew every time he called Mike to try to coax him to take an assignment outside the United States. Protests echoed by Mayor, his superior in the covert agency that had recruited him over a decade ago.

Mike grimaced at the thought of the

secrets he'd kept from Max, not to mention his own family, who thought he had been away visiting a friend on the East Coast. Someday he'd have the freedom to tell Bryce and his father the truth about what he really did on his travels, but he'd given his word. Mike wasn't about to break that promise. Not yet. Not after keeping it for nearly twelve years.

He felt a wry smirk tug at his lips at how unlikely his family would be to believe him if he did tell them he'd spent nearly a dozen years working as a spy. That the weeks he was out of contact were because his talents as a photojournalist were needed to uncover and document the illegal activities of drug and gun smugglers around the world. The missed birthday parties, holidays, and canceled dinners that caused his family to give him grief about being unreliable were all a result of the international organization

he worked for.

“Yeah, pull the other one, pal.” Mike snorted.

Determined to think of something other than the assignment he'd left in the Middle East and the annoying demands of his agent, Mike stepped out of the bathroom. Towel wrapped around his waist, he padded into his bedroom. The jangle of his cell phone echoed off the high ceiling of the warehouse apartment. He scooped the phone from the nightstand and flipped it open. “Halsey.”

“How soon are you going to get here?”

“David?” The distinctive deep voice could only belong to David Henderson. “What do you mean ‘get here’? Get where?”

The chuckle vibrated through the phone. “Well, my man, I’m talking about the masquerade at the Club.”

“I haven’t been to a Midnight Masquerade in—”

“Three years,” David finished for him. “I would suggest you change whatever plans you made for tonight. Unless you want Kringle to mark your lady?”

“What?” Even as he responded, Mike moved toward the walk-in closet. “Why is Lyssa at the Club?”

“You send her an invitation every year.”

“And she tears it up and mails it back to me every year,” Mike returned. He found his tuxedo stuffed in the back, still wrapped in the cleaner’s bag. He stepped back into the bedroom and stripped off the towel. His heart rate increased, and the heat in his balls stirred, animating his cock at the thought of publicly reclaiming his woman.

“Well, it seems like she’s decided to

use the invite this time. And she's looking for a master, my friend. Has the white bracelet and is dressed like a cherry red Christmas elf, leaving no one in doubt as to whom she's selected for the job."

"Red elf?" Mike tamped down the irritation that tried to rise inside him. Ripping the plastic bag away, he tossed the jacket, pants, shirt, and cummerbund of his tuxedo onto the silk duvet.

"Yup. Red dress, red heels, even a sexy red wig. Makes her look hot. Not that she doesn't look smokin' when she has her own hair down," David assured him.

"Down, boy. The lady is mine." The warning was clear in his voice.

"Just trying to compliment your good taste."

"Don't. How long has she been there?" Mike glanced at the clock. It was half past ten. Depending on traffic and lights, he'd probably make it to the Club

by eleven, leaving an hour before the masquerade concluded and masters paired off with their selected submissives.

“Just got here. And the bartender and his doctor friend have been chatting her up since she arrived.”

“Keep them occupied. I’ll be there in a bit.”

“Better make it quick. Kringle just walked in and is already taking notice. As are a few others in the room.” Reluctant honesty filled the other man’s voice as he admitted, “I wouldn’t mind getting a taste of her myself.”

“Back off, Henderson; she’s already been claimed. And I don’t share.”

David’s rumble of laughter was full of humor, but Mike was sure he heard a hint of disappointment there as well. “That’s mean, man, that’s just—”

Mike cut the other man’s protest off as he snapped the cell phone closed and

tossed it onto the bed.

Hands on his hips, Mike stared down at the formal wear covering his bed.

Soft skin, heated kisses, the wet sounds of two bodies coming together in the dark, cramped confines of a supply closet.

"Say it, Lys." His voice was harsh, guttural with the need flooding his body and his determination to stay in control of both the flow of years of pent-up desire and the woman bound and waiting for him.

"Please." Her voice cracked as she moaned, pushing toward him, desperation in her tone. The way her body arched into his touch, rubbing against the sweat-dampened skin of his chest, the scent of her arousal filling the darkened room heightened his excitement and fed the dominant within him.

"Not good enough, baby," he taunted. His teeth nipped her lips. In the pitch-

blackness of the room, he could barely make out the glitter of her eyes, but he wasn't about to dispel the magic surrounding them by turning on a light.

"Oh God, Mike, please! I need it!" Her words caught on a sob.

"Say it, Lys. Tell me what you want. Who you want." He knew his voice was cold, harsh, but he needed the words. Had to hear her finally say it. Admit to what she wanted. What she'd denied for eight years but he'd always known.

"You, Mike. I want you to fuck me." The anger and bitterness in her admission turned the words from a plea to a demand. Shifting the power from him to her.

But not for long.

Mike shook his head at the memory. If there was one thing he'd learned in the last four years, it was never to underestimate a Lawrence woman. And

never to anticipate what Lyssa Lawrence would do in any given situation. If she'd finally reached the point of acknowledging her interest in the Dominant/submissive lifestyle, he wasn't about to let another man step into the role he'd been awaiting since the day they'd met. There was no damned way he was allowing another dom to poach the woman he'd claimed four years earlier.

"But Kringle?" He shook his head at the idea. "He's younger than I am." And considering how vocal she'd always been about the six years separating them, he doubted Lyssa would seriously want a man still younger.

If Lyssa thought for one second she could walk away from him, she had a few lessons to learn. This time—a growl of exasperation rolled in his throat—a quick shag in the supply closet or against the wall in the foyer of her home wasn't going to be enough to satisfy him.

Not nearly enough.

A grin twitched the corners of his mouth. "There's no walking away this time. No hiding. No denying her master."

Mike reached for the tuxedo trousers and began to dress.

* * *

Lyssa watched the slow crawl of the clock's hands as they inched toward midnight. She sipped another glass of ginger ale and allowed her gaze to meet and hold Dayton Kringle's. The deep blue of his eyes sent a *zing* of interest through her chest, but the heat fizzled before it could go below her belly button.

I can do this, damn it. I know I can.

Her window of opportunity was dwindling fast. Everything she wanted was riding on this single night. It had to succeed. *She* needed to succeed.

When her mind conjured images of Mike Halsey's dark hair and eyes, the

sharp stab of pain made her gasp. No, a child who carried Mike's coloring but wasn't his was likely to create too many questions from her sister and Bryce. Not to mention stir up dreams of what might have been if... No, Lyssa determined. It was gray-haired, blue-eyed Dayton Kringle she needed.

Now all she had to do was convince him to select her when the clock struck midnight. It shouldn't be too difficult. Her heart tripped, and the palms of her hands grew damp, making it risky to keep hold of her half-empty glass of soda. After swallowing a sip, she set it down on the small table beside the sofa she shared with Dayton and tried to pay attention to what he was saying.

Since she'd approached him, they'd chatted about various things relating to their respective businesses, movies they'd seen, authors they'd read. If it hadn't been for the setting, Lyssa could have

likened the conversation to the banal subjects discussed on a first date.

An hour. Just sixty minutes. The litany repeated in her head as she counted down the time before the dominants selected their submissives and the parties would move into private rooms upstairs or negotiations began for public performances.

The dark-haired investigator she'd entered the Club with slipped onto the chair across from the sofa and greeted them. "Hey, Dayton, long time no see." Turning to her, David grinned. "Hello again, Lyssa."

"Hello." She offered a slight nod. Unsure how to interpret the interruption, she waited to gauge how Dayton responded and ignored her internal sigh of relief at David's arrival.

"You know Miss Lawrence?" Dayton queried, leaning back in his seat. His callused fingertips brushed over her

knuckles, then moved upward to rub along the white bangle on her wrist.

Tension coiled at the base of her skull—a dull ache building with the pressure of maintaining a placid expression. With each slide of Dayton's fingers along the white band around her wrist, Lyssa fought the urge to pull her hand away. Thoughts of the plan she'd carefully constructed kept her from acting on the impulse. She ignored the signals her body kept sending—that the touch wasn't *his*, that it didn't feel right, that the warmth didn't penetrate to the very atoms of her being like Mike's did.

David nodded. "Yes. I came in with her. Plus, I remember when she and her sister first visited the Club before Mattie and Bryce married. You should recall her opposition to Bryce carrying off her sister. It garnered a few members' attention."

The flash in David's eyes hinted that he knew the outcome between her and

Mike the night she tried to stop Bryce from taking her sister upstairs. But before Lyssa could react, David returned his attention to Dayton and continued.

“We didn’t formally meet though until her sister’s collaring ceremony.” He turned a grin on her and gave her a slow wink. “I was wondering if you were going to keep close to Ben and Vance tonight, but I guess you’ve decided to venture out a bit, huh?”

“I’m thinking about it.” Lyssa hoped her face didn’t reflect the panic swirling in her belly. If either of these men alluded to the way Mike had dragged her off the night of her first visit to the Club, she wasn’t sure how she would respond.

“You haven’t come in with them in a while,” David remarked.

Damn it, she needed to get Dayton alone to persuade him to select her tonight. “I didn’t realize my visits had become that notable.” She employed

every bit of self-control to keep her voice steady.

It was Dayton's turn to respond. "Ben and Vance are very exclusive. The fact that you've joined them over the last few years has been a subject of some discussion among the Club members."

Lyssa hoped her smile looked relaxed rather than tense. If the unease knotting her insides and the repeated complaints filling her head showed on her face, it was sure to cause Dayton to hesitate in choosing her at midnight. "Should I be flattered?"

"Definitely." They assured her in unison.

"Was there something you wanted to discuss, David?" Kringle asked.

"Not really. Just wanted to come over and say hello. Oh, and warn you that the Dragon cometh."

The remark confused Lyssa almost

as much as Dayton's response. The toy maker sat a little straighter in his seat and eyed her as if she were an unexpected package tucked under a Christmas tree. "He is? That hasn't happened in a while."

David smirked. "I guess something—or someone—tweaked his tail. He's a bit miffed."

Dayton laughed. The deep booming sound drew the attention of several other guests and members. "This should be interesting. I'll have to see if I can keep the man on his toes."

David's own rumbling laugh settled between the three of them. "I have no doubt he'll be on his toes. I just wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of his fire."

Uncomfortable with being ignored and having her plan on shaky ground, Lyssa decided to pull the men's attention back to where it needed to be—on her. She crossed her legs, allowing the skirt of

her dress to slide up and show a hint of the lacy top of her thigh-high stockings. It was difficult to keep the smile from showing on her lips at the immediate attention the bit of silk garnered. Deliberately pushing the velvet skirt back into place, she commented, "I've never attended a Midnight Masquerade before. Have either of you been to one?"

"I've been to several. Did you have a question about how events transpire?" Dayton moved his arm to the back of the sofa behind Lyssa's shoulders.

She stifled a soft sigh of relief at the removal of his touch. "There have always been rumors and stories, but I've never talked to someone who's been to a masquerade."

"What about Bryce? Didn't you ask him?" David leaned forward, an eyebrow quirked.

She rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated huff. "Need to know, and

apparently *I* didn't need to know."

Neither man hid their amusement. Lyssa turned away from the pair and looked around while she waited for them to wind down. The double doors of the Club's entrance opened, admitting several costumed, tuxedoed, and evening gown-clad guests.

The instant she met Mike's gaze, her entire body tensed and her breath froze in her lungs. He tilted his head at her, then walked toward the bar. The tingle of electricity skittered over her skin, and a warm curl of interest stirred to life in her center. Her heart pounded as her gaze followed his progress, and she watched him chat with Vance while he waited for his drink.

"I haven't seen him attend a masquerade in four years," she heard Dayton comment.

"Must be someone important to drag him out of his cave," David observed.

All three of them watched as Mike received a drink from Vance, along with a key. The heat in Lyssa's belly intensified. If Mike was getting a key, it could only mean he'd reserved one of the rooms upstairs. Lyssa caught the tense look Ben sent her way, and her pulse rabbited.

"Room nine again?" David's cryptic question seemed to make sense to Dayton, even if it meant nothing to Lyssa.

Dayton nodded. "Definitely."

Lyssa swallowed the impulse to run. If she hadn't gone so far in her plans, she would have done exactly that, but she'd come too far to stop now. She wouldn't be deterred simply because Mike decided to show up. What had happened between her and Mike was in the past. There was no reason either of them should be concerned about the potential partners they interacted with during the masquerade. Nothing connected them anymore beyond the fact that Mike's older

brother was married to her younger sister. Her heart ached at the reminder of what could have been, but she pushed it back. She was working to rectify that part of her life.

A semblance of calm settled over her. *I can handle this. I can.* Her pep talk halted the moment a sexy brunette dressed as a cowgirl and wearing a yellow bracelet approached Mike. Lyssa's desire to stride over to the pair and yank them apart was overwhelming. She curled her fingers into her palms to keep from slapping the girl. And she *was* a girl. Younger than Mike by at least six, perhaps eight years. It took a concerted effort for Lyssa to return her attention to the men with her.

See, what other proof do you need that he's too young for you? It was the same soft warning she'd heard every time the thought of being with Mike tempted her. Six years might not seem like much,

not now. But mix in the work they both did, his tendency to frequent war zones and places where natural disasters hit, and the fact that any feelings he might have for her were doomed to fade. Just look at what had happened the first time she allowed her heart to overrule her head when it came to him: he'd left her waiting. Alone.

"I'd heard Rena was looking for another master," David mentioned. His gaze moved between the couple near the bar and Dayton.

Dayton nodded. "From what I heard, Fenton has been having a heck of a time with her."

"She's had her eye on Mike or Richard since she was approved to join the Club two years ago." David winked at Lyssa when he added, "She tried to get Bryce's interest, but he wanted nothing to do with her. Especially after she made a few comments about how unattractive a

pregnant woman was. And how babies ruin a woman's figure."

Lyssa felt her lips compress. The irritation she felt at Rena's insult toward her sister increased her desire to intervene between the woman and Mike. At least that was what she told herself. "And what did Bryce tell her?" She might not fully understand the relationship her little sister had with Bryce Halsey, but one thing she did know—and never doubted—was Bryce's single-minded love of, devotion to, and fidelity toward Mattie.

"He didn't even look at Rena when he informed her that watching his pregnant wife move was one of the sexiest and most arousing things he'd ever seen. Then he politely told Rena to get lost."

"I'm sure Mat had something to say as well." Lyssa had no doubt her sister would make a comment to the other woman.

Both of her companions laughed.

“Rena was no dummy. She waited until Mattie waddled off to the bathroom before approaching Bryce.” Dayton grinned.

“Waddled?”

David nodded. “Yup. Mattie was about six months along with Sean.”

The accuracy of their description startled a laugh from Lyssa. Her sister had definitely waddled with her second pregnancy. “I’m surprised Bryce didn’t follow Mat to the bathroom.”

“Oh, he did.” Mike’s voice drifted over her shoulder.

The tingle along her nape and the sudden increase in her heartbeat should have warned Lyssa he was getting close, but she’d ignored the signals. She could see him from the corner of her right eye. “Your brother drives Mat crazy when he’s overprotective.”

Dayton scooted away as Mike leaned his hip against the sofa back behind her

shoulder.

“Bryce is a Halsey. We protect what belongs to us.”

Lyssa shifted enough to meet Mike’s gaze.

He held it as he added, “Whether they want it or not.”

“A bit like a dragon watching over its hoard of treasure, right?” David suggested.

Mike sipped his drink. “Exactly.” The grin lifting his lips was one of satisfaction more than humor. The fingers of his other hand played with the curls of her wig before he stroked the fur-trimmed neckline of her dress.

Lyssa ignored the way her breasts began to ache and the fact that her nipples had hardened and now pressed against the silk and lace of her bra. Lyssa shifted her legs, trying to quell the heat at the apex of her thighs.

If she didn't get rid of him soon, Mike was going to ruin everything. Telling him to leave wouldn't do it. She'd have to make him *want* to leave. She rose from her seat, dislodging Mike's hand, and was instantly dwarfed by the three men as they stood around her. Facing Mike, she asked, "And if the protection isn't wanted? How do Halseys handle the women who refuse to submit?"

Mike moved around the sofa to stand in front of her. "Submission isn't the goal, love. Protecting our mates is our responsibility, even if it means protecting them from themselves."

Lyssa laughed. No damned way was she letting Mike take the lead in anything. Been there. Done that. And more than paid the price. Leaning forward, she eased the crystal tumbler from his fingertips and swallowed the measure in one quick gulp. The Scotch burned all the way down, but she refused

to betray her reaction to the taste. "I've spent a long time taking care of myself, kid. I think I know what's best for me." She handed the glass back to him and turned back to the two men watching them.

Dayton stifled his laughter with a roguish but charming smile—a clear attempt to put her at ease. "Are you truly interested, Lyssa?" he asked.

Her breath unsteady, throat slightly raw from the alcohol, she croaked out a question of her own. "Interested?"

Dayton nodded. "Yes. Are you interested in experiencing submission to *me*?" His dark blue eyes examined her closely as he held his hand out to her.

Lyssa forced herself to meet his gaze. *This is it. My chance. Tell him yes. Say yes.* The voice in her head urged her to respond while she worked hard to ignore Mike hovering behind her.

The blood rushed through her veins, pounding in her ears, drowning out the sounds around her. Even the four-piece jazz ensemble fell quiet just as Lyssa inched her hand away from her side to set it in Dayton's.

Lyssa could have crowed with joy. She was doing it, ignoring her internal longing for Mike and taking the next logical step to completing her plan.

Long, tanned fingers gripped her forearm, stilling her limb's ascent and sending fire cascading through her body.

"Hands off, Kringle." The threat was clear in those three words.

Lyssa shifted her gaze from the man before her to the one standing behind her left shoulder. Temper blazed in his dark brown eyes, but his features were smooth, giving nothing of his emotions away. She only hoped her own features masked the emotions slamming through her. She was so close, damn it! What right did he have

to interfere? Bastard!

If she said one word in protest, Mike wasn't sure he'd be able to control himself. He was tired. His body ached from exhaustion, but he'd be damned if he'd let another man claim what was his. No matter how many times he'd apologized for the only date he'd canceled, Lyssa's damned stubborn nature wouldn't allow him to make a dent in the armor surrounding her heart.

Four years of watching her avoid him at every turn and pretend his interest was no more than the buzz of an annoying insect. *Not this time, darlin'. This time you don't go anywhere until I say so.* Although his gaze never moved from Dayton, he could see color suffuse her cheeks.

She stood tense, ready for battle. *Bring it on, doll. I've been waiting for this.* If she had an inkling of the plans he had

for her, plans he'd cultivated for the last four years, she might have rethought using his invitation to snare another man.

"She's free for selecting, Halsey," Dayton informed him and motioned to the white bangle sliding down her forearm.

Mike made short work of plucking the bracelet from her wrist and shoving it into the pocket of his trousers. "No, she's not."

"Just because—" Dayton began.

"You know I had her here first. That means she's mine by Rite of First Claim, Kringle." Mike tugged her away from Dayton, but he could feel resistance building within her. The muscles in her arm tensed beneath his hold, and the soft fullness of her lips thinned as she glared up at him.

"What in hell are you talking about, Mike?" Lyssa demanded under her

breath. She seemed hyperaware of the guests surrounding them, watching the scene unfold, and Mike suspected that was the reason she hadn't raised her voice.

Vance Justiss eased the hatch on the bar up and stepped from behind the counter to stand beside his lover and partner, Ben Murphy. Both men watched, their eyes focused on Lyssa and the way Mike retained hold of her.

"Club rules, Halsey," Dayton warned, his blue eyes moving from him to Lyssa, then back. "If she doesn't want—"

Mike smirked and stepped around Dayton, drawing Lyssa along with him despite the slight resistance she put up. "First Claim supersedes all rules, Dayton." As he neared Ben and Vance, Mike first met one man's concerned gaze, then the other's before he added, "All of them."

Ben's gaze narrowed, and his

nostrils flared as if he was working hard to keep from physically stopping Mike. However, Vance was the one to speak. “Only if you’ve had sex with her in the Club before tonight.”

He felt Lyssa tremble against his fingertips. Would she lie, Mike wondered. Would she deny what had happened between them simply to avoid being with him now? And if she did, was he willing to call her on that lie? Could he intentionally draw the scrutiny of the other members—highlight his woman’s reluctance to being claimed by him? Yes. Hell, Mike knew he would take on his own brother to have Lyssa, even if it meant never being allowed to set foot in the Club again. He looked to Lyssa for her response.

She glanced at him with narrowed eyes. Mike’s expression challenged her to deny his statement. She was angry at him, but she wasn’t about to hide behind

a lie—not his Lyssa.

Her shoulders went back, and she nodded. Her cool blue eyes glared at him before she moved her attention to Vance. The answer she gave the other man came out glib and unconcerned. “Yes, but it was a game, years ago. No harm, no foul. Right?”

Mike knew it for the taunt she’d intended it to be.

Somehow, somewhere in the four years since their first time together, Lyssa had convinced herself his interest wasn’t real. Even after he’d visited her home weeks later and the physical connection between them had been stronger the second time. He cursed the emergency call that had dragged him away the night of their first and only date. It wasn’t hard to see Lyssa still held his standing her up against him. She refused to believe his intentions were serious. But by the time the sun rose

tomorrow morning, she'd know differently.

A glint of curiosity flashed in Vance's turquoise eyes as he shrugged and told Lyssa, "Time doesn't matter."

Dayton spoke from behind them. "You should have acted sooner, Halsey."

Mike held Lyssa's gaze. "It wouldn't matter if it was four years ago, right now, or forty years from now, Kringle. She's mine."

Still gripping her arm, Mike felt the frisson of awareness ripple through Lyssa. Beneath the red velvet covering her breasts, he'd bet her nipples were firm and sensitive to the touch. She might deny it if asked, but there was no ignoring the way he could arouse her body with a look or a touch. Lyssa didn't find his caveman tactics and possessive behavior appealing, but her body responded to it. That he could work with, determined as he was. From the way she resisted his urgings to move toward the stairs, Mike

doubted she'd succumb without a protest.

"Hold on." She turned to glare up at him, ignoring the curious onlookers around them. "Who says I'm admitting anything?"

"You accepted *my* invitation, Lyssa." Mike met her enmity calmly.

"I accepted *an* invitation. I never said I chose *you* for a partner." She motioned to her costume. "I think it's obvious I had someone else in mind."

Mike moved into her space, crowding her up against the bar. "Then change it, pet, because I'm the *only* master you get." He tilted his head and met Dayton's gaze for an instant before returning his attention to Lyssa. "Ever."

Mike felt a tremor flow through Lyssa's body again as he tugged her away from the bar and led her toward the nearest staircase. Not two steps away from Dayton and the curious guests

milling around the main lounge, Ben slid from his seat and blocked their progress.

“No forced play, Halsey.” The man’s gray eyes remained focused on Mike.

“We went through this four years ago, Murphy, but not this time.” Mike stepped closer, pulling Lyssa with him. Both men ignored Vance as he came forward to stand behind Ben’s right shoulder.

“If she doesn’t want to go—” Ben began.

“Rite of First Claim supersedes that rule,” Mike reminded him. He was sure the smile on his lips was smug. The muscles along Ben’s jaw flexed. Vance clenched his fists. Intent upon making it past Lyssa’s two guard dogs, Mike held steady, not backing down.

“She has the right to refuse,” Vance offered.

“Where’s the proof that I’m a threat

to her physically?” Mike broke eye contact with Ben to look around the room at the Club’s visitors—doms, dommes, and subs—before dropping his gaze to Lyssa. “Have I ever physically harmed you, Lys? Ever abused you in any way?”

He felt Lyssa trembling beside him. Mike still remembered the ragged sobs that had shaken her frame as he’d loosened the extension cord from her wrists. She’d assured him then that she wasn’t harmed, just overwhelmed. The shattering orgasms they’d shared had shaken him as well, but he’d trusted her explanation for her tears. *Was she lying when I asked if I’d hurt her that night? Is she afraid of me?* A knot twisted in his gut. The expression she’d worn after he’d taken her home following their first encounter, before she’d locked herself in the bathroom, flashed through his mind. *Was I wrong? Should I have done something to make sure?*

Ignoring the inquisitive gazes around them and the hostile ones from her pair of protectors, Mike pulled Lyssa tight against him and smoothed his fingers over her cheek. Bending close so only she and perhaps the two men closest to them could hear, he demanded, "Tell me you weren't lying when you told me I hadn't hurt you, baby."

Lyssa hesitated, her gaze searching his for long, tense moments, before she finally answered, "I wasn't lying. You've never hurt me physically, Mike."

The tension in his neck and the constriction in his chest eased at her softly spoken answer. He could tell a part of her wished she had lied. But even if it made her life easier tonight, it wouldn't have discouraged him from pursuing her. As much as she wanted to avoid her current predicament, the honorable core of her wouldn't allow her to defame his character.

Assured she wouldn't deny him, Mike turned back to Ben and Vance. "Satisfied?"

Ben looked past him and held Lyssa's gaze for several seconds. Mike was sure the man would risk his membership by defying the oldest rule set down in the early days of the Club if she made any protest to Mike's right to claim her as his submissive before any other dominant could.

When she gave a slight shake to her head, he knew she'd made her decision. Her hand flexed around his. Ben and Vance directed their nods at Lyssa more than Mike—acknowledgement of their acceptance of the choice she'd made. Even if they weren't sure it was the right one.

Stepping past them, Mike headed toward the stairs. He felt Lyssa tense as they passed the open hatch leading to the area behind the bar. Was her mind conjuring the same images his did of the

events of four years ago? If so, she would soon learn his goals had changed. Two hours of fucking in a closet, when less than a handful of people knew about it, would hardly satisfy the craving he had for her.

After tonight and before the end of the thirty days due him through Rite of First Claim, no one would doubt his ownership of her. Least of all Lyssa.

Chapter Three

“You can stop this right now.” Lyssa rounded on Mike the moment he shut the door. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She took in the decor while trying to regain some semblance of control. Everywhere she turned, she saw Mike and herself. Mirrors covered two walls and the doors of the armoire. What wasn’t covered with a reflective surface was painted a soft eggshell white and trimmed in silver. The two chairs near the window, the round table between them, and the king-size poster bed repeated the white and silver. Even the Berber carpet was white with flecks of silver sprinkled through the fibers.

Her reflection surrounded her—impossible to get away from or ignore. Harder to deny was the expression of mixed arousal and unease on her face as she watched Mike engage the lock and slip the key into the pocket of his trousers.

“What’s with the act?” she demanded. “You’ve ignored me and stayed away this long. Why change your mind now?”

“I’ve never ignored you, Lys.” Mike moved closer.

Lyssa took the same number of steps away from him. “You have—”

He silenced her protest with a look. “No, you’ve been running away. Every time I got too close. Every time I asked for something more than indifference, you ran.”

She stopped moving. Mike did too. “Uh-uh. I wasn’t the one running off to take pictures of the runway models in

New York. I wasn't the one—”

“No, I was the one who got treated to insults and denials or the sight of your back whenever we ended up in the same room for more than five minutes.” There was no heat in his voice, nothing to register his emotions.

Lyssa avoided looking in his eyes. Excitement bubbled through her body at the thought of being with Mike, but he'd never believe the excuses forming on her lips if he read the emotion in her gaze. “So why do anything about it tonight? What, are you pissed because I've decided to see what a real lover is like?”

“Not now. Not tonight. Not ever, Lyssa. No other lovers but me. Remember?”

“*No one but me touches you, Lys. Only my hands, my lips, my cock.*” The heated words he'd repeated in her ear while he made love to her in the Club's storage closet whispered through her

mind. Much as she hated to admit it, those words had affected the way her body reacted to other men if they made overtures. But damn it, there had to be a way out.

Lyssa listened to the soft cry of protest that sounded deep inside her at the thought of allowing herself to be vulnerable to this man again. *Remember the plan!* Mike had already proven once that she was an afterthought to him. If there was no place for her, there was no place in Mike's life for a child. No way his jet-setting, here-today-gone-tomorrow lifestyle would ever include the baby she wanted. No. She needed to get out. Get away from him. Now.

"That line about claiming me was just show, right? A way to save face with all your dom friends? It's just a lame excuse to make everyone think you actually give a damn. Right?"

Anger and forced disinterest had

worked to push him away in the past. Fighting her own needs was going to prove more difficult. Already she could feel how excited she'd become simply because he'd publicly claimed her. But there was a big difference between claiming and keeping. No one knew that better than her. Especially where this man was concerned.

Mike ignored her question. "Strip." The order came in a cool, amiable tone, even as his fingers pulled at the studs fastening his shirt. Her body quivered at the look in his eyes.

"The hell I will." Her plans for the night were ruined; there was no reason she needed to stay. And she sure as hell wasn't going to feed his ego by sticking around.

When she stepped toward the door, he blocked her. The dance started again. When she took a step one way, he matched her. With each step he took

toward her, Lyssa moved back. She eased around the end of the bed as she watched him toss his black tuxedo jacket toward one of the nearby chairs and then remove the wide, black cummerbund. He slipped the black leather suspenders from his shoulders before he loosened the bow tie, removed it, and tucked into his trouser pocket. The studs fastening his shirt followed.

“This is a joke, right?” she asked, cursing the shaky tone of her voice.

“Strip, Lys.” He was so close his breath stirred the hair clinging to her cheeks.

Her back was now pressed against the cool glass of one of the mirrored walls. After swallowing the disquiet she felt at his calm demeanor, Lyssa shook her head again. “No. There’s no point—”

“No point?” Mike’s fingers carefully removed the bobby pins securing the auburn wig to her head. He dropped the

pins and wig onto the nightstand before he combed his fingers through her hair, releasing it from the knot she'd coiled it in at her nape. "When your master gives you a command, love, you need to obey."

"Master?" she tried to inject a healthy dose of disdain into her tone. "You're not my master, kid."

The muscle at the edge of his jaw flexed at the insulting nickname she'd always used against him. The fire ignited in his chocolate eyes before they narrowed. His nostrils flared like a wolf scenting its prey.

"Wrong answer, Lys." The fingers working so carefully against her scalp slid free of her hair and moved to the front of her dress.

The sound of rending fabric surprised more than frightened her as he gripped her costume and tore it open. He stripped the dress off her shoulders and down her arms, and then dragged first

her bra, then her panties off as he summarily removed almost everything covering her. Then he pushed her back against the broad mirror behind her.

Lyssa froze, breath suspended in her lungs. Memories of her father yelling and his fists striking her mother, Mattie, and herself flared to life. Instinct told her to close her eyes, but Lyssa couldn't bring herself to do it, afraid of not seeing the first blow when it came. She'd made that mistake only once—the first time her father punched her, when she was eight. She waited for fear to follow, to paralyze her, eroding the sensual spell Mike had wrapped her in.

Soft linen caressed her naked breasts as Mike moved in close, his face hovering above hers. "Don't ever tell me no again, Lys."

The command in his voice recalled those heated hours in the supply closet, banishing the taunting demons from her

childhood. She doubted she'd ever forget *that* night. Her body reacted to him, even if her head wanted to fight the pull.

"You are mine by Rite of First Claim, and no other dom touches you. Is that clear?"

"You have no—"

His lips cut off the rest of her response. Heat washed over her as his tongue swept past her parted lips and demanded reciprocation. And God, how she wanted to give in, but doing so would ruin all the plans she'd made and end in a disaster of epic proportions. The cool mirror against her back was a stimulating contrast to the furnace of his flesh in front of her. It was enough of a contrast to allow her to maintain a measure of reason to keep him from taking complete control.

The strength in her knees failed, but the pressure of his body against hers kept Lyssa upright. She would have collapsed to the carpeted floor when he pulled away

if Mike hadn't picked her up and carried her to the broad bed. He dropped her among the silver-colored silk bedding. As his eyes catalogued every inch of her body, Lyssa fought the urge to cover herself.

His gaping shirt displayed a lean torso, tautly muscled and tanned by the sun. A sparse dusting of dark curls stretched between the copper-colored areolae surrounding his nipples before trailing in a thin line to his navel, forming a sexy T that made her mouth water to trace it. Still hidden by the shirt tucked in at his waist, Lyssa recalled that more curls, coarse and sensual, encircled his navel before forming a band leading down to his groin and the root of his penis. In the two times they'd been together, nudity hadn't factored into the equations. Both times they'd removed only the clothes keeping their bodies apart. Lord, she wanted to see him. All of him. Even if

it was just for this one night.

“Very good, Lys.” He grinned. His eyes lingered on her belly before admiring the pale flesh of her mons. Something beyond amusement and lust flashed in his eyes as he visually traced the design tattooed beneath her belly button and within the cradle of her hips.

“Don’t be a smart-ass, Mike,” she retorted. At forty, Lyssa was more than aware of the less than perky nature of her full breasts, the little pooch to her belly no amount of crunches had ever been able to flatten, and the ample width of her hips. The fullness of her figure had been the primary reason for her desire to design clothes that accented her body’s shape instead of trying to squeeze into other people’s idea of what looked good.

When his gaze returned to the tattoo adorning the pale skin at her pelvis, she fought the urge to hide it. She wondered what he was thinking as his gaze traced

the intricately etched dragon inked in shades of copper and gold, because the only emotion she could read on his face was an almost wry amusement.

“This is crazy,” she muttered. When she moved to leave the bed, Mike shifted to block her. She tried to change positions a second time in order to avoid him, but between one breath and the next, Mike straddled her hips. Her eyes went wide at the *snap* of the clips holding the braces to Mike’s trousers being released. Leather hissed against silk sheets. In a split second, he expertly bound her wrists above her head with one strap of the suspenders and secured the other strap to the bed frame, all before Lyssa could figure out his intent.

“Don’t fuck with me, baby,” Mike warned as he stripped away her shoes and stockings before returning his attention to shedding his own clothing.

“Damn it, Michael. Are you insane?”

Let me go!" Lyssa snarled as she twisted on the sheets.

Using her stockings, Mike tied first one ankle, then the next to the bedposts. Worse yet, instead of pissing her off, it turned her on. The folds of her pussy grew damp and swollen; the first telltale beads of moisture slipped from her core to wet the silk beneath her.

Embarrassed but excited too, Lyssa prayed Mike wouldn't take note of her peaked nipples or increased heartbeat.

But no one was listening to her prayers, least of all Mike as he kicked off his shoes and stripped off his socks. He shrugged out of his shirt before shucking his tuxedo pants.

Now that he was gloriously naked, Lyssa could see for the first time the reason her body had ached for nearly a week after their last intimate encounter. The thick length of his erection easily reached his navel, and she seriously

doubted her fingers would touch one another if she tried to wrap her hand around his impressive girth. In addition to his size, the tattoo that decorated the skin below his navel also decorated the golden flesh of his cock, which was both alluring and frightening at the same time.

“Tell me what you were doing here tonight, Lys,” Mike ordered as he moved to the armoire facing the bed. Mirrors covered the doors, but Mike’s body blocked Lyssa’s view of the images reflected there.

“Go to hell, Mike,” Lyssa replied, the sneer on her face contradicting the sweet tone of her voice. No way was she going to divulge her plan. Especially to him. *Quit looking at his ass!* She squeezed her eyes shut, but the image of the muscles flexing in his thighs and buttocks rolled across her closed eyelids. The thought of sinking her teeth into the taut flesh sent the tip of

her tongue coasting over her bottom lip before she could curb the fantasy.

“That’s one.”

Her eyes popped open, and Lyssa fought the urge to ask, *One what?* as Mike carried several items to the bed and laid them on the silk counterpane at her hip.

“Tell me.”

The cuffs and ties weren’t unfamiliar to Lyssa. In the scenes she’d negotiated with Ben and Vance, she’d had occasion to wear similar bindings. She wasn’t naive.

Considering the calm, methodical way in which Mike was replacing his impromptu restraints with the more secure bindings, it looked as if she’d have to come up with a plausible cause if she wanted to get out of here. To indulge her fantasy of another night under Mike’s command would destroy tonight’s plans for a baby. It had taken her this long simply to recover from their two brief

episodes together and from Mike's disregard. Another time similar to those and she might as well give up. Hang a sign of surrender around her neck and let Mike use her any way he wanted. And he would...until he realized what all the other men in her past had known—that she wasn't worth it—and walked away. Leaving her alone and shattered again.

Eyes closed, she drew a deep breath. After counting to ten, she exhaled, opened her eyes, and glared up at the ceiling. The disgruntled expression on her face was visible in the mirror mounted above the bed. “You can stop the big, bad dom routine now,” Lyssa huffed.

“No.”

Dropping her attention to the nonchalant way Mike was settling the leather cuffs around her wrists, then securing them to the length of cable bolted to the wall behind the headboard, Lyssa hurried through her false

confession. If she pissed him off enough, perhaps he'd leave her alone. Release her. The best possible scenario would be if Dayton was still downstairs and unattached so she could approach him.

She nixed that idea. Nope, after the scene Mike had made in the Club, she doubted she'd convince any dom to take her as a submissive. She'd have to go with Baby Plan B. Cold and clinical, but at least she wouldn't have to bear the touch of any man who was not Mike.

Mike lifted his head, his gaze meeting hers. "Tell me why you came tonight."

Keep it under control. Don't let him know. "I wanted a man," she told him. It wasn't a lie. Her intent tonight had been to find a man.

That seemed to get his attention, but only for a moment. Mike continued moving after a momentary hesitation. "Congratulations. You got one." The smile

lifting his lips wasn't a reassuring one. "Me."

A tiny quake undulated through her at the stroke of his hand along her calf as he adjusted the spread of her thighs. Lyssa gritted her teeth and fought the urge to growl at the confidence in his voice. *Piss him off. Make him let you go.* "I said a man, not a boy."

He searched her face, then held her gaze. "I'm almost a year older than Kringle, Lys. That would make him a boy as well." Nothing in his expression gave away his feelings on the matter, but the tightness of his lips and the narrowing of his eyes hinted at his rising irritation. "If you were really hoping to shag Dayton tonight, you would have been disappointed," Mike informed her coolly. He removed the suspender strap from her wrists once the bindings settled into place.

"What do you mean?" Lyssa asked, intent on frustrating Mike so much with

her ridicule that he'd let her go. *God, don't let him touch me again before he lets me loose. He'll never believe I don't want him once he really touches me.* "How can you doubt it was him I wanted? The costume was for him. He seemed very attracted. The conversation you interrupted was going along smoothly—"

"Kringle is careful about his partners, Lyssa. He learns everything there is to know about them. If he ever selects a sub at the masquerade, he doesn't touch her. He tests her and he challenges her, but he doesn't fuck her." He settled onto the edge of the mattress next to her left hip. "He wouldn't have taken you to bed tonight."

She ignored the shudder of relief Mike's revelation sent through her. Images of Dayton touching her sent chills through her body. "He seemed interested." Lyssa turned her attention from ignoring the truth she hated to

admit and focused on not reacting to how close Mike sat to her.

Although she'd done her homework, that little fact about Kringle had eluded her. Lyssa tensed as she watched Mike rise from the bed and move to her ruined dress. The crackle of cellophane whispered from the velvet as he lifted it from the floor. Lyssa could have cursed. She'd forgotten about the doctored condoms she'd brought with her. Discomfited, she gnawed on her bottom lip and refused to acknowledge the kernel of regret growing inside her as she watched Mike, waiting for a reaction.

Mike pulled the packets free of the cloth and held them in the palm of his hand. Anger glittered in his eyes. Perhaps it was merely her imagination, but Lyssa sensed disappointment in his gaze as well. She ignored the tiny voice connected to the part of her that wanted Mike, the part that had ached to be with

him for what seemed like forever. “Untie me and let me get back to what I was doing before you butted in where you weren’t wanted.”

Mike moved back to the bed and dropped the prophylactics onto her bare belly. “No.” His fingers checked the fit of the cuffs and cords restraints. “It would be a shame to let all your preparations for the evening go to waste.” Graceful bastard that he was, Mike climbed onto the bed and settled on his knees between her splayed legs. “If you need a man, you get me.”

“I’ve already had you, Mike. Time to move on. Try someone new.” She hissed as his hands stroked up the inside of her thighs.

“Now you’ve earned a second punishment, Lyssa,” he informed her.

His expression and tone were so matter-of-fact, Lyssa realized just how serious he was about punishing her.

“First off, Mike, let’s remember you don’t own me...”

“Are you trying to go for three?”

“You are insane,” Lyssa snapped, tugging at the restraints and twisting against the sheets.

“But,” Mike continued as if she hadn’t even spoken, “I’m willing to let it go because you’ve been a good sub and kept yourself waxed for me.”

At the heat in his fingertips and the rasp of callused pads over her sensitive flesh, Lyssa arched involuntarily into his touch. She couldn’t deny the sensations running through her. She’d be lying if she said her fast, shallow breaths weren’t a result of the slow stroke of his fingers over her nude mound. It was harder still to fight the moan welling in her chest when her reactions brought a wicked smile to his lips.

Wanting to wipe the smug, self-

satisfied look from his face, Lyssa snorted. "I did no such thing!" The lie fell smoothly from her lips. It had pleased her to indulge in trips to the spa with Mattie. The fact that the command he'd whispered in her ear that night in the closet prompted the first visit was a moot point.

"We'll work on your honesty another time, honey." Two thick fingers spread her nether lips, opening her to his view. "Right now, I'm going to set the ground rules." Two digits on his other hand slipped into her wet channel, pressing against the taut muscles, searching for the sweet spots he'd instinctively found the last time he'd touched her. "Rule number one: I don't share. Ever. So no other men."

The heat in his gaze matched the heat his fingers were building between her thighs. Crying out as he pulled free, then returned, this time using three

fingers to stretch her delicate flesh, Lyssa made note of every word he said, locking them away so she could somehow use them as a cudgel to beat away the temptation Mike represented. This couldn't last. The heat, the passion would burn itself out, and he'd go back to his life, his career. Just like last time. He'd never want what she wanted. A baby. A family.

“Rule number two: I tell you when you've had enough. If I think you need to be fucked every hour on the hour for a week, then that's what you'll get.”

“What about a safe word?” Her voice was shaky and breathless. Lyssa cringed inside at the hint of excitement in her tone. She should be fighting this, not savoring the sting and heat coiling inside her as his thumb coasted over the tender knot of nerves peeking from beneath its hood.

Lyssa trembled at the sight of his body poised over hers, her paler legs

bound open as he knelt between them. His fingers pushed into her body, then pulled out, her cream coating his skin. She jerked her gaze from the erotic reflection in the mirror above the bed.

“Now that we’ve established you understand who’s in charge, yes, I’ll select a safe word.” Mike never lifted his gaze from the movements of his fingers as he caressed her sensitive flesh.

“I choose *ass*,” Lyssa snapped, unable to keep her gaze from drifting back to the view above her.

Mike shook his head. “Not a democracy, darlin’. I make the rules. You follow them. I’ll choose the safe word. Something you wouldn’t normally blurt out.”

“I know the purpose of a safe word,” Lyssa grumbled, her senses on edge as his fingers teased a particularly sensitive spot deep inside her and his head lowered over her breasts. At the sharp nip of his

teeth against a tightly beaded nipple, she arched closer to him, driving his fingers deeper within her. Her head swam with the sensations, her eyes fixed on the mirror overhead, adding visual stimuli to the damp heat of his mouth on her breast, the sting of his fingers stretching muscles that had been empty for too long. Again Lyssa forced her attention from the mirror to Mike. In a ragged voice, she suggested, "How about *worm*?"

Mike simply looked at her. His gaze drifted from her flushed cheeks to the rapid rise and fall of her breasts and finally to the curve of her belly. "Dragon," he said. "Our safe word is 'dragon.'"

Her heart slammed against her ribs as he leaned back on his haunches. He wrapped one hand around his straining penis and lifted his other hand away from her pussy. Her juices glistened on three of his fingers. He opened his mouth and sucked the moisture free. The gleam in

his eyes and the way his dark chocolate irises deepened to black sent a shiver skidding along her spine. Involuntarily she tugged at her restraints. The condom packages slid off her stomach onto the bedding next to her. “O-okay,” she stammered.

“Now, there’s one more rule for you to remember,” Mike intoned softly.

Lyssa dipped her head in a small nod and waited. God, she needed to fight this. There was no way she could allow him to know how much she lov—wanted him to take control. She breathed deep and slow, trying to calm the fire in her blood.

Mike grinned down at her and picked up one of the black wrappers. “Appreciate the reminder, love,” he teased, tearing the package open and rolling the latex tube into place. He crouched over her, arms braced on the bed beside her shoulders, and the heated

length of his cock slid through the wet lips of her sex before finding her entrance and pressing in. He continued. "Rule number three: this body is mine. Pussy, ass, breasts, lips"—his fingers slipped over each body part as he listed it—"everything belongs to me. To use as I see fit. In any way I want."

His firm shaft moved deeper, forcing her pulsing flesh to submit to his presence. She gasped. He fisted his hands in her hair, and his mouth hovered over her parted lips. He held her gaze as he forged onward, burying himself completely in her tight sheath. "Do you understand? Everything—all of it. All of you belongs to me."

His first stroke vibrated through her. She arched up into his arms, pressing her mouth against his even as he drew her into his kiss. The flavor of her arousal mingled with his unique taste as his tongue coaxed hers into play. Winding

around and over it, he seduced her response even as his body attempted to force hers to admit his dominance, his ownership.

She squirmed against him, her mind refusing to follow where her body wanted to go. Wrenching her mouth free, she turned her head, hissing at the sting in her scalp. The clenched fingers tangled in her hair immediately loosened, but Mike's hold remained firm. Lyssa glared up at him. "I belong to me. No one else, kid."

He stopped moving. "Four years ago I proved I wasn't a kid, Lys. Do I need to remind you again?" Propped over her, he waited, his eyes focused on her.

Lyssa could guess what he saw. If she gave in to the temptation to look over his shoulder again at the reflection of them in the mirror over the bed, she was sure to confirm that a flush pinkened her cheeks and the hard peaks of her nipples capped breasts that were heated and

swollen. She'd be damned if she'd roll over for him. It was better if he stayed ignorant of the truth. Better for her.

"I must have missed that particular lesson." She wanted to curse the impulse within her that egged her on, but it was the only thing saving her from eventual heartbreak and disappointment.

Mike pulled out and rose over her. Moisture from within her body glistened on his latex-covered cock. "Then let me repeat it so you'll remember, pet. We wouldn't want any confusion regarding rule number one."

Her laugh sounded forced. "You mean no other men?" She shook her head and smirked. "Doesn't apply, remember? You. Don't. Own. Me." She annunciated each word slowly and without rancor.

The only problem was, Lyssa wasn't sure if it was him or her own body she was trying to convince. How foolish was she to fantasize about this man possibly caring

for her? This was a game to him. Role-play. No matter how much she'd like to believe, and despite Mike's professed intentions, a part of her knew there was no future with him.

"Wrong answer, Lys." He leaned so close his features blurred. Only his dark, furious eyes were clear. "I own you. Every muscle, hair, fiber, and cell within you is mine." His lips caressed hers, soft as a butterfly's wings, before he eased lower along her frame.

His hands held his body away from her, the damp heat of his penis brushing her hip, then thigh, the only contact between them. The craving to touch was unbearable, but Lyssa knew at the first sign of weakness, at the barest hint of giving in, she would be lost. She'd never be able to convince anyone, especially herself or Mike, that she didn't want him.

Damn, why does he have to make it feel so good?

His lips sipped at the firm jut of her nipples. First one, then the other. The tip of his tongue flicked over them, circled. He drew one breast into his mouth while the other ached for attention. Fire burned beneath her skin, and the hard peaks throbbed in time to the slow draw and release as he suckled. Then it started all over again as he shifted to her other breast.

Throughout the meticulous process, his body caressed hers. Nothing too heavy. Merely enough contact to remind her of what the rasp of his chest hair felt like against her flesh. How the heat emanating from him permeated her skin and sank deep to warm her insides, stir the blaze his fingers had kindled earlier.

Long before he left her breasts and eased himself farther down her supine form, the moist evidence of her arousal escaped her channel and drizzled onto the bedding. The restless shift of her legs

smears a fine layer of her body's natural lubricant onto her thighs. The smell of her arousal wafted up to her. Lyssa gritted her teeth harder to keep from begging.

Their bodies were clearly displayed in the mirror over them. The sight fascinated her. The contrast of his darker skin against hers; the dark curls he'd allowed to grow down over his eyes and past his nape, caressing her skin like raw silk; the flex and pull of muscles rippling under his skin, highlighted by the sheen of sweat. Her body quivered and twitched with every touch, and her fingers curled around the cables binding her until her knuckles went white. She twisted her head to the side, only to catch sight of their reflections in the mirrors on the armoire and bathroom doors.

His body glided over hers, slow and sensual; his hands coasted along her breasts and hips. Even the slightly

abrasive feel of his chest hair along her bare skin pushed Lyssa closer to the edge. The more Mike played, the more she tensed up to battle her building climax. She couldn't give him the upper hand. She couldn't lose control. The need to surrender that control to him was too tempting.

Mike rested his chin on her sternum and watched until she returned her gaze to his; satisfaction tilted his lips upward. "Enough?"

Never let 'em see you sweat. She'd learned that lesson as a child under her father's fists, perfected it as a young woman with the "stellar" choices she'd made in men. She met his challenge with a smirk. "Is that all you've got? Tired already?"

His laughter rumbled against her belly, vibrating through her core, churning the passion into a fiery froth.

"Just tell me when it gets too hot for

you, baby.” His hands moved to cover her breasts, the rough fingertips mapping the tiny bumps and ridges of her areolae before plucking at the firm crowns. The rest of his body moved south, then paused as his lips traced the indentation of her navel.

Lyssa bit her lip to fight the moan that rose inside her. She couldn’t stop watching him, whether directly or in the mirrors around them. She couldn’t make up her mind where to look. The sight of his darkly tanned skin against hers contradicted the rumors she’d heard of his visit to friends on the East Coast. The streaks of lighter brown in his dark brown curls attested to time in the sun, as did his sun-darkened skin.

A wave of stimuli coursing through her subsumed her misgivings as Mike’s mouth reached the design permanently drawn into her skin. As Lyssa swung her gaze from the mirror beside them, past

the ones on the armoire doors, to look directly at Mike, she held her breath as he rubbed his lips over her tattoo and moved from side to side as he worked his way down to the pale mound beneath the dragon.

His left hand abandoned her breast to stroke along the path his lips had taken. At the apex of her thighs, he waited. His gaze held hers as the heat of his palm warmed the crease between her thigh and groin before he stroked his fingers over her vulva, parting the swollen folds. He blew softly across the throbbing bundle of nerves and watched her reaction.

Lyssa moaned and arched closer, shudders coursing through her limbs at the fire building between her thighs. When her eyelids began to drift shut, the pinch of his fingers around her clit snapped them open again.

“No turning away, pet,” Mike

taunted as he watched her. He lowered his mouth to hover over the nubbin held captive between callused fingertips. The warmth of his breath teased the nerve-rich flesh before his tongue swirled over it, around it. Once. Twice. Then a third time before his lips sealed it away inside his mouth.

Lyssa bucked beneath him. She fisted her hands around the cables securing her, the muscles in her legs locked up, and a cry left her lips as she ground her head into the soft pillows. Waves of sensation buffeted her body and stole her breath as she fought the orgasm determined to break free. The rush of her blood sounded in her ears, drowning out any words Mike might have said. The vibrations pulsed outward from her womb, soaking the channel desperate to be filled and radiating into her swollen breasts, where the fingertips of his other hand continued to pluck and twist the nipple of

her left breast.

She didn't dare close her eyes. Fixated on the mirror over them, Lyssa could feel the fingers between her thighs move downward to circle and tease the entrance to her body. The wet evidence of her passion coated his digits as he teased and taunted her with barely there forays into the opening before retreating to rub along the puffy lips guarding it. His teeth nipped her clit. Another cry spilled from her lips.

"Look at me, Lyssa." His voice was rough with arousal. She moaned and shook her head. His next bite bordered on painful. She whimpered. "Now. Look. At. Me."

Gasping, desperate to control the climax screaming for release, she lifted her head from the pillows and blinked several times to bring his visage into focus.

When it came to sex, Lyssa had

assumed four years had dulled the memories, reduced the truth to half-believed fantasies, but the look in his eyes, the touch of his hands, the determination and control evident in his face supported what she had to admit was true. Mike knew her body better than she did. His touch ignited sparks along nerve endings she had never imagined existed. And the dominant he was called to the submissive within her.

The fearful part of her cringed and cursed the admission. Any chance of escaping this experience with her heart intact was officially shot all to hell. She could see it in his face as he pressed a last kiss and seductive swipe of his tongue over her clit before rising above her.

“Do you remember the lesson now? Do you remember who owns this body?” he taunted. The tip of his sheathed penis teased the quivering petals of her mound.

Tongue tangled, unsure of whether

she could speak clearly, Lyssa merely nodded. Her breasts heaved as she tried to drag air into her starving lungs. The crown of his cock breached her entrance, and he pressed forward. The moment she gasped and cried out as he slid against her G-spot, he held himself still, waiting, watching. Lyssa groaned deeply at the quirk of his lips and the flash of satisfaction in his dark eyes. Her moans rolled upward again and again as Mike rocked against her, rubbing along the spot until her body quaked beneath him.

Lowering himself onto her, Mike moved his left hand between them and spread her pink flesh so the thick length of his cock and the coarse pubic hair surrounding its base scraped over her clit with each advance and retreat of his body into hers. His gaze held hers as he asked, "Everything you are belongs to me, right, Lyssa?"

Conviction filled his words. It

surrounded Mike's body like an aura, soaking through Lyssa's skin, into her muscles and bones, even into the blood racing through her veins. She wanted to deny him, wanted to refute the feelings and sensations bombarding her mind, her heart. When she tried to turn away, his free hand moved beneath her to cradle the back of her head and force her gaze back to his.

Even if a tiny part of her believed what he said was just words, a game he was expert at playing, in that moment she gloried in his command. In his determination to bind her to him. Bound spread-eagle on the bed beneath him, Lyssa drowned in the passion her body had been craving for the last four years. Against his lips, she whispered, "Yes, everything."

"What, baby?" he demanded, pulling away, holding her head still, his eyes focused on hers. "Tell me."

“Everything I am belongs to you. All of it, all of me, is yours,” she sobbed, arching into the thrust of his cock. Even if it was just for this one night, Lyssa gave in to the glory of allowing him control over her body. If it was all she’d ever have of Mike, she’d take it.

“Very good, Lys. Very good.”

The heat of her body around his, the way her soft flesh cushioned him as he settled over her, Mike fought back the urge to hammer his cock into her. But he wasn’t about to believe she’d acquiesce that quickly. Lyssa was more complex than that. More stubborn too.

Four years ago he’d let his need override reason where she was concerned. He’d allowed his duty to his fellow agents to take precedence over his commitment to Lyssa. He refused to repeat that mistake.

“That’s it, Lys,” he encouraged as she moved to meet the advance of his body. Holding her gaze, he pulled his hands from between them and under her head to prop himself on his elbows with his forearms braced beneath her body. He cupped her shoulders in his hands, holding her in place. “You squeeze so tight when I pull out. Don’t you want me to leave?”

The rattle of the cable against the headboard as she tugged at her bindings was her only response.

“Hmmm.” Mike rubbed his lips against hers, nipping at her bottom lip as hers parted and her tongue darted out to stroke over his mouth. “Ah, ah.” He coupled his admonishment with a firm thrust of his cock, making Lyssa arch beneath him.

Her thighs squeezed his hips, but the cuffs around her ankles hindered her ability to keep his body locked to hers.

Lyssa's eyes began to drift shut, her breathing increased, and the flex of her internal muscles around his flesh signaled her approaching climax.

Time to remind her who held the control.

Mike thrust hard and deep, then stilled. His grip around her shoulders held her upper body in place while he allowed more of his weight to rest in the cradle of her hips to prevent her from pushing up. The flush on her cheeks deepened, the warmth of her breath filled his mouth as he hovered over her, waiting.

She tried to shift, but his size inhibited all but the minutest movement. The muscles surrounding his dick fluttered and pulsed, but without any real strength. He made a mental note to instruct his woman in how to use *all* the muscles of her body to increase her pleasure, as well as his.

“Mike?” Her plea came out as a soft whimper. She looked up at him, confused, unsure, even a bit frightened.

“What do you want, baby?” He moved his head back when she tried to kiss him.

Lyssa’s breath caught, then shuddered out of her as she blinked up at him. A moan slipped through her parted lips as she ground the back of her head into the pillow beneath her.

Mike fought the urge to grin. He’d known her capitulation was too soon. She loved what he could do to her body, but she’d be damned before she admitted it to him. Let alone to herself. Using the lightest motion, he rubbed his pelvis against hers, teasing her clit with the rough scratch of his pubic hair. The breath hissed from Lyssa’s lips, and her teeth clamped down on her bottom lip.

“You can’t forget it, can you, Lys?” He moved his lips to the exposed skin on

her throat. The delicate V of flesh at the base fluttered with the rapid beat of her pulse. “It felt so good. Hot and fast and hard. Out of control, your body speeding from one climax to the next. The sound of our breathing mingling with the wet slide of my cock in and out of your pussy.”

Her head thrashed on the pillow. The muscles in her throat flexed as she swallowed. He felt her breath still for a heartbeat, then two. Her fingers relaxed their hold on the cables binding her to the wall, then gripped them tight as a ripple started in the legs rubbing against his and moved upward.

“It was so good. Wasn’t it, Lyssa? So good that when I came back to town and knocked on your door in the middle of the night, you didn’t turn me away.” Mike moved his lips to the vein along the side of her neck. Tracing the path upward, he settled into the spot behind her left ear, the tender divot of skin almost as

sensitive as the nubbin he teased between her thighs. He rubbed his tongue over the spot, his lips lifting in a grin as she quivered and moaned beneath him.

“Did it feel the same to have me taking you from behind, your body pressed against the wall beside your front door, as it did when I tied you up in the closet?”

Her answer was a drawn-out moan.

Lifting his head, Mike released her shoulders and held her head cupped in his hands. “Tell me what you want, baby.” He slid his lips over hers. “Look at me and tell me.” There was no plea in his voice. At no time did he relinquish the control he had over her or her body.

When she tried to shake her head, his grip stopped her. The slow drag of his hips over hers, the retreat of his flesh from within her drew a cry from her lips, and her eyes flew open to search his. Lyssa’s thighs tensed against him, trying

to keep him close, but unable to due to the bonds around her ankles.

“Please,” she whispered.

“Please what, Lys?” Mike declined to allow emotion to enter his voice. This was it. It was time his woman accepted him. Time she admitted to his control. Four years earlier, he’d let her body speak for her. This time she needed to say the words. “Tell me. What do you want?”

Heat flared in her eyes. The soft blue glittered like ice as she glared up at him. Mike stifled the temptation to laugh. He schooled his features to remain expressionless. He’d trained dominants and submissives for nearly as long as his brother, he recognized the determination and pride fueling Lyssa’s rebellious nature.

“You.” The single word was spit out between her gritted teeth.

“Me what?” Mike prodded, rotating

his hips against her, teasing her entrance with the threat of pulling completely free.

“Bastard,” she muttered, then pressed her lips together as if trying to stop herself from saying more.

He shifted one hand from beneath her head to the taut peak capping her breast. He pinched the swollen nipple, drawing a gasp from her lips. “Me what, Lyssa?”

He withdrew the head of his cock from her entrance. Lyssa pushed her hips into his and held his gaze. “You. Oh God, Mike, fuck me please. I need you to fuck me.” Her words ran together as she tensed beneath him, her chest heaving as the sobbed confession exploded from her.

Mike settled his lips over hers. “Okay, my pet.” He eased his hand away from her breast to between their bodies. He guided himself back to her entrance, before lifting his head enough to capture her gaze with his. “Say my name, Lyssa.”

“Mike.” She moaned it as he moved into her, pushing past her fluttering muscles.

“Again.” He commanded, holding her gaze as he retreated, then thrust back into her.

“M-Mike.” Lyssa gasped, her body going rigid beneath him as her climax built.

With every thrust and retreat, he repeated his command until Lyssa was chanting his name as the sound of their mating filled the room. The scent of sex surrounded them. Her body arched and rocked against him, meeting each advance, following every retreat of his flesh within hers until Mike dipped his head and settled his lips over hers.

“Come for me, Lyssa.” The order quaked through her.

Beneath him, he felt the grip of her sheath tighten. Her eyes went wide before

her head fell back. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out beyond a soft moan.

She shuddered and quaked in his arms, every muscle in her body tensed as her climax peaked, only to be followed by a second, then a third. Tears streaked her cheeks. Lyssa caught her breath, then released it in shaky sobs as her body slowly relaxed.

Mike waited, watched her until her eyes began to drift shut and her body went lax beneath him. He moved one hand to cup the back of her head while wrapping the other around her hips, pulling her tight against him, lifting her free of the bed.

Her blue eyes flew open, wide and surprised as he gazed down at her. "My turn, pet."

His mouth captured hers as it opened, whether it was in protest or surprise was irrelevant. His tongue tangled with hers. The taste of her filled

his senses. The smell of her body, the tart scent of her climax, and the musk of her passion permeated his soul. It wouldn't take long, he knew, for his body to reach completion. Mike let his desires lead as his hips hammered against her. Each thrust was hard and deep as he staked his claim.

His orgasm sizzled through his groin, sent fire into his balls and up his spine as he set it free. He thrust deeper, held Lyssa's hips tight to his, pressing the head of his cock as close to her womb as possible, and imagined a time when he would be able to spill every drop of his seed within her without a thin layer of latex between them. A time when Lyssa would belong to him and a child would connect them. Beneath him, Lyssa tensed, her body vibrating with the climax that flooded through her and matched the residual pulses coursing through him.

His grip tightened. Mike nipped at the slack line of her lips as she went limp in his arms. The dazed expression that filled her blue eyes drew a smile from him. "Mine," he claimed and pressed his lips to hers.

Lyssa declined protest. A sigh slid from her mouth into his as her eyelids fluttered, then drifted closed, and her body melted beneath him. He'd let her rest, Mike reasoned as he eased free of her body and moved off the bed.

The crackle of cellophane drew his gaze to the five condom packages spread over the bedding beside her. After scooping them up, he dropped them onto the nightstand as he moved into the adjacent bathroom. A twinge of irritation niggled at the thought of the protection he'd donned before taking his woman. When his older brother had married, Mike had often wondered at Bryce's insistence on immediately binding Mattie

to him through pregnancy, but now, with Lyssa in his control, it all made sense to him.

Both Lawrence women were stubborn, determined to follow a path only they could see. A child represented an elemental connection that neither woman would blithely walk away from. Bryce had recognized it years ago, and Mike could see the logic in his brother's machinations. He disposed of the condom and dampened a cloth to clean himself. Rinsing it, he moved into the bedroom to attend to Lyssa.

There were still a few more lessons he had to teach her before he released her cuffs. In the morning, he'd make sure she understood what he expected of her. Running away was over. Halseys kept what they caught. And Lyssa was definitely caught.

Chapter Four

It was more the mellow peace cocooning her than any sense of time slipping away that pulled Lyssa from sleep. The temptation to curl closer to the man beside her set alarms off in her head. The reflection across the room of herself, head pillowed by Mike's chest, her arm wrapped over him as if she couldn't bear to let him go, brought Lyssa fully awake. It all felt too good to be true. Her body and heart grumbled, urging her to return to sleep, but her head began to spin with the impossible scenarios of what would happen if she gave in to her feelings for Mike.

Reliance on feelings had created an untenable—and eventually deadly—situation for her mother, and Lyssa had spent over half her life avoiding the same trap. The moment they met, she'd known instantly the type of man Mike was—determined. She hadn't been wrong.

Somehow in the twelve years since they'd met, Mike had convinced himself that he was in love with her. But that wasn't possible. Not for her. The same stubborn determination that had helped the youngest Halsey break free of the family business and forge a career in photojournalism had also worked to keep the damned man from seeing the reality Lyssa had known her entire life: she wasn't worth loving.

He only thought he was in love with her. The age-old inclination of all alpha males to chase what ran away from them was at play. Lyssa had made the mistake of running the first time Mike had shown

an interest. Which meant until he caught her, nothing she said would make him see reason.

He carried the same bone-deep sense of honor and responsibility as his older brother. And that sense of responsibility would only become a prison for both of them if she didn't get Mike to realize what he felt for her wouldn't last. Lyssa cursed the day he'd set his sights on her. Not because she wasn't interested in him, but because she ultimately knew she couldn't have Mike. Letting him indulge the mistaken affections he carried would only bind him to a woman his honor wouldn't allow him to walk away from.

For her own good, she had to make him see what her father had made abundantly clear during her childhood and what her experiences with other men had merely reinforced—love and Lyssa were a rotten combination.

She didn't doubt Mike would finally

see that the chase had fueled his affections, his love.

“Mike?” Lyssa whispered, her lips near his ear. He remained still, unmoving. The heavy weight of his arm lay across her waist, binding her to him. She shook off the reluctance that weighted her heart. The consequences should she stay frightened her more than the anger she’d have to face when he found her gone. Only a fool trusted sexually based emotions.

Inch by slow inch, she eased from his hold and scooted to the edge of the bed. As quietly as possible, she unfastened the buckles on the leather cuffs on her wrists and ankles. Once free, she left them on the nightstand beside Mike’s cell phone and the single remaining condom. Even as she searched the room for clothing, Lyssa refused to think about the five prophylactics she’d doctored and Mike had used.

Working quickly, Lyssa tugged on the trousers, shirt, and formal jacket Mike had discarded. She never let her gaze leave his face. The complete stillness of his body disturbed her. The dark circles beneath his eyes and the exhaustion lining his face identified the reason Mike slept so soundly.

“All the better for me,” Lyssa muttered, ignoring the concern that lingered in her mind. She dug the key to the room from the borrowed trousers’ pocket and slipped toward the exit. On her way, Lyssa bundled up what she could quickly find—her shoes, wig, and ruined dress—and held them in her arms while she eased through the door. Over the railing surrounding the second floor balcony, she was able to peek down into the lounge area.

It was empty, though the sounds of voices and a vacuum cleaner filtered out of the dining room. Through the French

doors leading onto the outside balcony, the sky remained dark, the only light cast by the dimmed wall sconces lining the hall. Lyssa locked the door behind her and carefully made her way downstairs. There was no guarantee Mike would remain asleep for long, and she wanted to be safely away before he discovered her absence.

The grandfather clock began to chime when Lyssa reached the double doors leading into the foyer. Five sonorous notes sounded. She must have slept, if just for a few hours. Her body ached from Mike's prolonged attentions.

“Shall I get your car?”

Lyssa jumped at the quiet voice behind her. “Ah, yes, please. My car.” In the shadowed confines of the foyer, she fumbled with the bundle in her arms for the ticket she'd received the night before.

After handing it over, she followed the man onto the flagstone porch and

stifled a gasp at the chill against her bare feet. Lyssa glanced back at the entrance, half-afraid she'd spot Mike, nude and furious, bounding after her. Her attention drifted to the stone border framing the curved, castle gate-styled doorway. Her heartbeat increased as her gaze tracked the design carved into the slab of stone over the lintel. A dragon. A crouching beast, eyes watchful, tail curled around its folded haunches while the vine of a climbing rose tethered the creature in place.

Displayed at each end of the granite design was a rose in full bloom. At the center of the open petals, the claws of a dragon held a faceted stone in place. The intertwined initials of the Club rested in the middle of each gem. She knew the dragon and rose were a symbol of the Halsey family and had been since the fourteenth century. She could easily imagine the beast's eyes followed her as

she moved away from the doorway as if monitoring her behavior in order to report to Mike later.

A shadow detached itself from the darkness beside one of the thick Ionic columns that supported the second-floor balcony and roof above.

“Running again, Lyssa?”

Lyssa’s body tensed, ready to do just that—run. The beat of her heart slowed when the man stepped into the porch light and she recognized his face. “Not running, David. Just going home.”

“Without your master’s permission?” David leaned against the column and eyed her attire but didn’t comment.

“He’s not my master.” Lyssa shifted her feet, trying to rid them of the chill from the stone, but she met David’s questioning gaze directly.

Juggling the items in her arms, Lyssa got hold of her shoes. Her gaze

strayed to the door again. The litany of prayers that Mike remain asleep and unaware of her departure ran in a steady stream inside her head. They stuttered to a halt when David moved closer, plucked her shoes from her grasp, and dropped to one knee. Heat emanated from his hands when they brushed her ankle as he rolled up a pant cuff. She was surprised further by the gentle way he lifted her foot and wiped the dirt from the bottom before he slid a shoe into place. He repeated the process with her other foot before dusting off his hand on his pants, and then braced his forearm on his thigh.

David looked up at her, his gaze sharp, piercing. “So you’re going to play this like you did four years ago?”

Lyssa didn’t want to think about what had happened four years earlier. Not right now. “I don’t know—”

“You do.” Suspicion glinted in his hazel eyes. “But I’ll warn you now, Mike

won't be easy to dissuade this time." David rose and stepped back to lean against the column. The flash of his teeth within the ebony frame of his goatee ignited a flicker of foreboding deep inside Lyssa's chest.

The hum of a car's engine and the gleam of headlights signaled the approach of a vehicle. Both Lyssa and David turned to watch it pull up. The valet parked and swung the door open. David returned his gaze to Lyssa, a warning clear in his eyes. "He's staked his claim, Lyssa Lawrence. There's no walking away from that."

Lyssa smiled and slipped a tip into the hand of the valet before meeting David's look. "Watch me." She moved past him.

David waved off the valet to hold the car door for her and wait until she settled behind the wheel. His arm braced against the roof, he smiled down at her. "Until you

convince him otherwise, love, for the next thirty days by Rite of First Claim, you belong to him.”

Lyssa met his gaze with faltering confidence and shrugged. “I belong to no man.” She pulled the door closed, shifted the idling car into gear, and pulled away.

* * *

“What the hell is the Rite of First Claim?” Lyssa demanded less than an hour later, her hands planted on her hips. Mike’s shirt and tuxedo jacket drowned her form as she waited on her neighbor’s front porch.

“Good morning to you too, sweetheart.” Ben yawned as he stood in the open door, bare chested and barefoot, wearing faded jeans that were zipped but not buttoned.

Lyssa glared at her neighbor and friend. “Whatever. Just answer the question. What the hell is the Rite of First

Claim?”

“It’s a rule those outside official Club membership are unfamiliar with,” Ben confessed.

“What does that have to do with me?” Lyssa demanded.

Ben covered another broad yawn as he leaned against the door and began to explain. “Seems when the first Bryce Halsey—”

“He went by Cole rather than Bryce,” Vance interrupted, reaching past Ben to tug Lyssa inside. His dark hair hung loose around his face and shoulders, the silver and black tones a stark contrast against the white T-shirt he wore with his faded jeans. Neither of her friends seemed surprised to find her on their front porch before dawn, dressed in Mike’s clothes. Considering the two men’s military backgrounds, Lyssa had to wonder just what would create a stir from Ben and Vance. She forced herself to listen to

Ben's explanation.

"When *Cole* introduced his wife to the Club, there was a bit of a... misunderstanding." Ben shut the door and followed them to the kitchen.

The provocative scent of fresh coffee filled the cozy confines of the kitchen.

Vance snorted at Ben's comment. "Misunderstanding, my ass." He leaned toward Lyssa and told her, "Seems the little missus was pissed at Cole over something and walked out on him."

"I'm tellin' this story," Ben grouched, slugging Vance in the shoulder as he moved around them and approached the coffeemaker.

"Well, you're draggin' it out like some soap opera." Vance mocked the soft Southern drawl Ben let slip when exhaustion or irritation overcame his control.

The older man glared at Vance

before continuing. “According to the stories, Margaretta stormed into the Club and set about looking for a man to assist her. Cole had followed her and watched as she approached different men about helping her with what she wanted to do.”

“How does that relate to what Mike was yammering on about last night?” Lyssa recalled hearing from Mattie about the volatile relationship between the pirate and his captive wife, but she’d never been aware of how wild it had been. Nor did it seem to answer her question about the Rite of First Claim.

Vance shrugged. “No one really knows what had her so upset, but the second she approached one of the local ranchers and he started showing an interest in not only helping her but taking her as well—”

“Cole stood up and announced no one could touch her since she belonged to him by Rite of First Claim,” Ben finished.

A frisson of dread snaked its way up her spine, making the hair on the back of Lyssa's neck stand up. *What in hell have I gotten myself into?* "That still doesn't tell me what the whole 'rule' is."

"If a master or mistress is interested in a submissive and has had sexual relations with her or him on the Club's premises, then the master has the right to claim the sub for thirty days."

Ben's matter-of-fact tone warned Lyssa that there would definitely be repercussions from last night's scene—the scene that once and for all ended any possibility of her approaching one of the dominants in the future. With Halloween passed and Mike announcing his ownership by Rite of First Claim, there was no doubt in Lyssa's mind she'd be hearing from her sister and Bryce very soon.

Lyssa asked, hoping to find a loophole out of her situation, "Thirty

days? And the submissive has no voice in this decision?"

"They do if they can prove the master is abusive and likely to cause physical or mental harm to the submissive." Ben shrugged, filling his coffee cup and a second for Lyssa before carrying them to the table.

"It's a rarely used rule, Lys," Vance assured her as he collected several items from the refrigerator to make breakfast. Setting them on the counter beside the stove, he twisted the knob for one burner before placing a frying pan on it. He laid out strips of bacon in the skillet.

Ben added, "If I recall, according to the Club's history, only three masters ever used the Rite of First Claim. After Cole, Don Reynardo used it in eighteen seventy-two to claim his wife, Hayden. The last one was in nineteen twenty-two when Dillon Halsey's fiancée tried to break off their engagement after her

brother tried to kill Dillon over a business both men were interested in acquiring.”

“Until last night,” Lyssa muttered.

“Until last night,” Ben agreed. He moved to the other counter to slide bread into the toaster.

Lyssa could say nothing more. The expressions on her friends’ faces were indication enough that last night’s events would have far-reaching ramifications, not just for her life but for her design business as well. The baby plan she’d originally started with was ruined. Artificial insemination looked like her only option now. Lyssa refused to speculate on the possibility that the doctored condoms she’d provided might have actually done the job she had originally hoped they’d do. What a nightmare that would be.

It was one thing if she conceived the child of some anonymous dom. But if lightning struck twice and her

preparations resulted in her carrying Mike's child, the situation would be untenable. Mike would never walk away from his child, and Lyssa could never give her baby away. Which would mean the very thing she'd fought so hard to avoid—

“It can't happen,” she assured herself. She kept her voice soft so neither Ben nor Vance were likely to hear her. “Not twice.”

As she watched the two men working on breakfast, Lyssa couldn't ignore the thoughts spinning through her mind. Fate wouldn't curse her so cruelly. Not after the last time. Then there was Mattie to think about. How much grief would Bryce give her sister if Lyssa ended up pregnant with Mike's child? As much as Lyssa had fantasized about having Mike's baby, the reality could create havoc in her sister's marriage. Bryce would never believe Lyssa hadn't intended to trap his little brother, and Mattie would feel

obligated to defend her. With the tempers and obstinate natures of her sister and brother-in-law—simply contemplating it had her stomach rolling.

No. Despite her desire to experience motherhood, it would be best for everyone if Baby Plan A proved a failure and she moved on to Baby Plan B.

Chapter Five

The soft comfort of the pillow did little to muffle the persistent jangling noise. A grumbled curse slipped from Mike's lips, followed by a sigh as the ringing stopped. But relief was short-lived as the caller tried to gain Mike's attention again. Stuffing his head beneath the pillow didn't work. Neither did ignoring it. Eyes closed, head buried under the down-filled rectangle, Mike blindly slapped at the top of the nightstand for the offending device.

The ring stopped midshriek as Mike flipped open his cell phone and dragged it under the cushion to his ear. "This better

be fuckin' good."

"Depends on your perspective," a man sniped back at him.

Brain still mired in sleep, Mike yawned. "David?"

"If you ever ask me to keep an eye on your lady again, Mike, I'm gonna have to start charging you."

"Lyssa?" The fog dissipated instantly. The events of the previous evening swam in a burst of Technicolor images across his mind as Mike pushed himself upright on the bed and blinked at the spill of golden sunlight through the curtains.

"Yeah. Next time I'm gonna wake your ass up instead of just dropping off clothes," David complained.

Mike ignored him and scanned the empty room. "Where is she?"

"Running. Again."

Mike cursed and tossed aside the

sheets covering him. A duffel bag sat on the table beside a tall thermos. "Where?" he asked, rolling out of bed and digging through the bag to pull out clothes.

"After she left you, she made a beeline for her neighbors' place," David told him. "I left to get your clothes. Nice addition to the alarm system, by the way."

Mike headed for the bathroom. A quick shower and shave and then he could collect his woman. "Is she at home now?"

Around a jaw-cracking yawn, David said, "Yes."

"I should be there in thirty minutes," Mike assured him.

"How long are you going to keep waiting on her to change her mind? Because, I'll tell you, I don't think it's going to happen."

What could he say? David was more aware than anyone in San Diablo of the

cat-and-mouse game playing out between Lyssa and him. "Thanks for keeping an eye on her. I'll be there as soon as I can." Mike closed the cell and left it on the table. His friend's advice was the last thing he wanted right now.

In the bathroom, he dropped the clothes on the vanity before he wrenched the shower on. Stepping beneath the spray, he hissed at the chill as the water gradually warmed. His thoughts disconnected from the automatic motions of soaping and rinsing the dried sweat from his skin.

Eyes squeezed shut, he let the water pound against his shoulders. He curled his fingers into fists against the ivory tiles. David's question repeated in his head. It wasn't anything he hadn't asked himself in the last twelve years. Every advance met with resistance or escape. For every inch of ground he thought he gained in his endeavor, Lyssa ripped a

mile away.

Not an inch, not a foot—a fucking mile. Every time.

It shouldn't surprise him that once again, as soon as he got too close, Lyssa was gone. He'd fucked up four years ago—the one and only time he'd made any progress with her. He'd regretted it every day since. Mattie had been just as skittish around Bryce until she learned to trust him. The difference between the two sisters, Mike reasoned, was that Mattie's constant exposure to his brother had allowed her to accept and rely on the instinctive trust she felt for Bryce, while Lyssa's pure mule-headedness refused to identify her body's submission to Mike's control as an indicator to how safe she felt with him. No, she viewed it as a weakness—aberrant behavior in need of quashing.

“Damn it, not this time,” Mike growled. A forceful twist shut off the water, and the air fairly vibrated with the

energy building inside him. Rough motions with the towel sluiced away the majority of the moisture beaded on his skin before Mike tugged on his jeans.

“This is the last time she runs,” he announced to the empty room. He pulled a T-shirt over his head and tucked it into the waistband of his faded jeans. While he tugged on the socks and sneakers David had supplied, then cleared away the ruined stockings and underwear Lyssa had left behind, Mike reviewed everything he’d done the night before. He’d taken his time, pushed Lyssa until she’d admitted to wanting him, but he had failed to maintain control over her. Being in charge, giving all the orders was second nature to Lyssa. He’d failed to firmly establish his role as the dominant in their partnership.

That would be his last mistake. “No more,” Mike decided. He shoved his cell phone into his pocket and grabbed the

bag and thermos from the table before he strode out of the room and downstairs. By the time his sneakered feet hit the first landing, the beginnings of a plan had formed. A stop by his apartment would be required, but before he faced his woman again, Mike intended to be ready.

The valet stood beside the idling truck in front of the Club by the time Mike exited the front door. Something in his expression caused the attendant to back away from him as Mike handed the man a tip. Determination fueled his actions. Even as he drove out of the parking lot and down the long, tree-lined road back to the highway, he began to compile a list of the items he'd need to retrieve from his apartment before heading over to Lyssa's.

She owed him thirty days, and he would take them. Take those thirty days and every day after because this was the last damned time his woman would run

from him and from the connection between them. Whether Lyssa Lawrence liked it or not, he'd finally staked his claim, and nothing would keep him from her. Not even her.

* * *

Almost an hour later, he was on his way out of his apartment, several days' worth of clothes and the toys he'd selected for Lyssa in a second duffel bag, when his cell phone rang. "Halsey," he snapped. Phone cradled between his cheek and shoulder, he punched in the alarm codes and secured the door behind him.

David didn't bother with a greeting either. "She's on the move again."

"Where?" Mike grimaced. He wouldn't put it past Lyssa to leave town for a week or two until she figured he'd lose interest. But that wouldn't happen; he'd never lose interest. He tossed the duffel bag into the truck before climbing

in.

“Looks like she’s headed to your brother’s place.”

Definitely a mixed blessing, Mike reasoned. It made sense for Lyssa to go to her sister, as close as the pair was. He could call his brother and ask Bryce to keep Lyssa occupied until he got there. That thought made him pause. If he made the call, it would require he explain why, which was not something he wanted to go into on the phone. He’d have to hope Lyssa chose to spend an extended amount of time with her sister. “I appreciate the heads-up, David. I can take over from here.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line as if his friend was debating his next words. “Are you sure you’re ready for this, man?”

Mike wasn’t surprised at David’s concern. They’d been friends for years, having met soon after Mike first visited

San Diablo before going to college, and the investigator wasn't known for keeping his opinion to himself. "Ready?"

"She hasn't had the best life, Mike. There're a lot of walls you're going to have to deal with. And so far it doesn't look like she's interested in making it easy for you."

Knowing David had reinvestigated Lyssa four years ago at his request, Mike understood the reason for his friend's caution. If Mike hadn't already come up against a few of those walls himself, it might have intimidated him, but one thing kept him going. "She belongs to me. No matter how long it takes, I will convince her of that."

"Good luck," David offered before hanging up.

Mike closed the phone and tucked it into his pocket. With his hands draped over the steering wheel, he stared through the windshield. There were other

things to consider if he was going to follow the path in front of him. One of those was his responsibility to the OZ team he'd spent the last five years working with.

From a concealed pouch beneath his seat, Mike drew out a second cell phone. To convince Lyssa of his sincerity, he'd need to stay close to home. At least for the next month or so. It would leave the unit shorthanded, but Lyssa was his future. Once he'd secured that, he'd reevaluate the role he'd be taking in future investigations.

As anonymous as each team member's identity was, there was always a likelihood that the criminals they pursued might discover who was watching them. That could put Lyssa in danger. For nearly twelve years, he'd taken every precaution to keep his family protected. When he brought Lyssa into his life, he'd extend that security to include her and any children he'd convince her to have.

After punching in the preset number, he waited. Two rings, then a soft Southern voice requested, “Secured, Scarecrow?”

The woman’s voice gave no hint to the capabilities or duties she carried. Mike wondered, not for the first time, if the face matched the sultry voice. “Yes, Aunt Em.”

“Tin Man cleared you from the farm. Did you have news about the ruby slippers?”

All business. Mike grimaced. No, she definitely wouldn’t like what he had to say. “No, ma’am, nothing on the ruby slippers.” Much as he’d like to have information on the target—whom they referred to as “ruby slippers”—the unit had been pursuing for the last four years, his contacts had given him nothing.

“Were you hoping for relocation?” The click of computer keys sounded through the connection.

“No. I’m pulling out for a few weeks. Have some crops of my own to watch over,” he explained.

“Pulling out?” There were a few clicks over the phone before she continued, “Are you okay, Scarecrow?”

She knew nothing about his real identity, only the code name assigned to him when he’d joined her unit, after Trent—Tin Man—recommended him. “Personal stuff, Aunt Em, but I won’t be able to leave for at least a month.”

“You’re leaving us shorthanded. Lion and Dot are waging an armed truce. Frank and Uncle Henry are backing up Glenda, but Tin Man’s working solo.”

“I realize that, Em, but this is more important.” For the unit, nothing was more important than finding the head of the organization funneling guns, drugs, and children into the hands of terrorists and cartels.

“Are you talking retirement, Scarecrow?”

Was he? He was only thirty-four, but men younger than him had died in the last twelve years he'd been serving with Mayor's organization. Hell, just over forty-eight hours ago, he'd scrubbed the blood of another field agent from his hands. In his mind, he could still feel it, hot and sticky between his fingers. “Maybe, Em.”

“Keep your phone close. In case a storm blows up.”

“Will do,” Mike assured her.

“If Baum calls you, tell him to quit messing with Toto. I'm tired of refereeing their territorial squabbles. Next time I'll drag Mayor into it, and then no one will be happy.”

Mike laughed at her disgruntled tone but agreed to pass on the message to either agent should they call. Then he

disconnected, returned the phone to its hiding space, and checked to make sure the P226 was strapped beneath the seat beside it before sitting up and cranking the engine.

Thoughts of retirement could wait. Right now, he needed to concentrate on proving his claim to Lyssa.

* * *

Sunlight spilled through the multipaned window of the breakfast nook near Mattie's spacious kitchen while Lyssa watched her sister finish loading the dishwasher with the breakfast dishes.

"See, Aunt Lys, Lizbet is gettin' Ronald from the dragon."

Lyssa paid little attention to her niece as Maggie pointed out the characters in her book. "Um-hmm."

"And her dragon is green. Your dragon is black," Maggie informed her in a firm tone.

“That’s nice, sweetie.” Lyssa reached around the child in her lap to stir the tea her sister had poured for her a few minutes earlier.

Soft, chubby hands bracketed her cheeks, directing her gaze downward. Maggie watched her with pale green eyes; springy, chocolate brown curls framed her round face. “You need to listen, Aunt Lys. Your black dragon has the baby.”

“What dragon, Maggie?” Mattie asked as she returned to her seat at the table.

Maggie released Lyssa’s face and turned to smile at her mother. “Aunt Lys’s dragon, Mama. He’s black.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh.” She pointed to the picture in her book. “Lizbet’s dragon is green. See.”

Mattie made an appropriately impressed sound before smiling at the

three-year-old. "Mama needs to talk to Aunt Lyssa, honey. Can you take your book to Grandpa and show it to him?"

Maggie heaved a loud sigh. "Okay." She bounced off Lyssa's lap, her book clutched to her chest. "Bye, Aunt Lys." The little girl waved before scampering out of the room.

Lyssa waved back. "Bye, Maggie." The expression on Mattie's face was warning enough for Lyssa that her sister had questions she wanted answered.

"Are you going to tell me why you're here so bright and early?" Mattie leaned back in her chair and sipped her tea.

"Can't I just come by—"

Mattie rolled her eyes. "Please. Not looking like that, you can't."

"Like what?" Lyssa held her arms out and glanced down at the oversize sweatshirt and jeans she wore. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

“It’s not the clothes, Lys; it’s you.”

The moment Lyssa set her hands down on the table, Mattie covered them with hers. “I haven’t see you this nervous since I convinced you to approach Bryce about investing in your design business.”

Lyssa turned her hands over to grip Mattie’s, conflicted about what to say. She’d never intended to do anything but use the time at Mattie’s to avoid facing Mike. Now that she was here, though, it was hard not to confide in her sister. “I screwed up, Mat.”

“How?” Mattie’s gaze held hers, no anxiety, worry, or unease showing in her expression. She simply waited.

Lyssa had to laugh. “Four kids have definitely mellowed you. I can remember when you would have been practically levitating off your seat, full of questions, if I told you how badly I’d messed up.”

Mattie chuckled and released one of

Lyssa's hands to sip her tea before she answered. "I wouldn't say mellowed so much as conditioned. I've discovered that grown-up adventures don't often require learning how to avoid annoyed skunks or flustered ground squirrels who've been dragged into the house to be pets."

Lyssa winced. "Maggie?"

Her sister nodded. "She's been forbidden to go to the animal shelter, so she's making do with the local wildlife."

"They still haven't forgiven her for opening the cages?"

"No." Mattie grimaced. She set her empty cup on the table. "So how did you screw up?"

Lyssa began to say something about the prior evening, then changed her mind. Unwilling to burden Mattie with her concerns, she shook her head. "Mat, you have enough to deal with—"

"Uh-uh. No. Don't start to tell me,

then stop. You're obviously upset about something. Now what is it?"

"It's nothing. I shouldn't have—"

"Does it have anything to do with Mike?"

Lyssa's teacup tilted, splashing lukewarm tea onto the table. Avoiding Mattie's gaze, Lyssa dabbed at the mess with a napkin. "Wha-what makes you think he's—that I—"

Mattie leaned forward to refill her cup from the teapot in the center of the table. "He's the only reason you ever get nervous and fidgety and start dressing in the baggy outfits."

"I do not!"

"You do so." Mattie smirked. "Mike has been chasing you for years, sis. Why don't you let him catch you? I promise if he's anything like his brother, you won't regret it."

"And when it ends? What happens

then?" Lyssa asked. "Just how welcome would I be here if I dumped your husband's little brother?"

Mattie wagged her eyebrows suggestively. "Who says you'll dump him? Halsey men have stamina."

"I could. Or he could be the dumper and I the dumpee." Lyssa figured the latter was a more likely scenario if she were ever foolish enough to leave herself vulnerable to betrayal again.

Amusement glinted in her sister's eyes for a moment before she grew somber. "You're serious?"

"Mat, I'm six years older than him. He's not going to be interested—"

Mattie set down her cup and leaned forward in her seat. "That's not true. Mike is nuts about you."

"Maybe. But it isn't going to last." Lyssa had no intention of living in a fantasy world, and she refused to let her

sister convince her otherwise.

“Why can’t it last? You can’t predict the future, Lys.”

“But I do know me. There’s nothing exciting or stimulating enough about me to sustain Mike’s interest.”

Mattie rose and moved around the table to sit next to Lyssa. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Lyssa had been over this subject in her mind once this morning; she was in no mood to rehash the same discussion only to come to the same conclusion. She shrugged off her sister’s reassurance, “Maybe, but he has his whole future ahead of him, Mat. And I have mine. If we just ignore this itch, it’ll go away.”

“Your problem is you think too much,” Mattie grumbled. “You need to stop listening to your head and start listening to your heart.”

“The heart lies, Mattie. I don’t want

to build a future on lies.”

Lyssa could tell by her sister's expression that she'd surprised her, but she wasn't interested in fairy tales. At a very young age, she'd seen just how ugly the real world was, and she had no intention of repeating her parents' mistakes.

Before Mattie could think of a comeback, Maggie's excited squeal sounded in the hallway as she raced down the hall toward the front door.

“Cluncle Mike! Cluncle Mike!”

Lyssa tensed; her heart raced.

“Maggie! No.” Bryce's voice overrode his daughter's cries.

The conversation that followed was lost to Lyssa as she waited for the sound of Mike's voice. The touch of Mattie's hand on her shoulder startled her. Her cup tumbled onto its side, spilling the little bit of tea left inside in a shallow

golden pool across the table. She trembled as she righted the cup, patting ineffectually at the mess with a crumpled napkin as she listened to the rumble of voices in the hall.

“I’ve gotta go.” Lyssa shoved her chair back and grabbed her purse.

“It’s Mike, isn’t it? Something happened between you.” Mattie’s eyes went wide as she followed Lyssa toward the kitchen door leading onto the wraparound porch. “The masquerade. Oh God, Lys, you used the invitation.”

“Yes. No. I—” Lyssa tried to calm down, but she grabbed her sister’s hands, driven by the fear that Mike would walk in on them. “I need to go home. I can’t see him. Not now. Not yet.”

“You’re scaring me, Lys. He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No. It’s nothing like that. I just—I need some time. Okay? Can you just keep

him here for a little while?" She hoped her smile looked more reassuring than it felt.

"You have to tell me—"

Lyssa pulled Mattie close for a quick hug. "I promise. I'll tell you everything. Later. Just keep Mike here long enough for me to think."

Mattie squeezed hard, then released her. "How long? One, two hours?"

"At least one. Two would be better."

"Promise you'll tell me?"

Lyssa agreed. "Promise."

Mattie's agreement was reluctant, but she gave it. "Okay. Go. I'll try to keep him occupied."

Lyssa nodded and slipped out the kitchen door. She hurried along the porch, hoping Mike hadn't blocked her escape. As she passed the front of the house, she spotted Mattie through the windows on either side of the double doors as she approached her husband. The

expression on Mattie's face worried Lyssa, but not enough to stick around.

Mike's truck was parked beside her sedan, but it didn't hinder her ability to exit. She expected to be caught at any second as she fumbled open the door and scrambled inside. She slid the key into the ignition and twisted it. The engine caught immediately, and she shifted into gear at the same time she tugged the seat belt across her lap. No shouts or protests sounded behind her as she pulled out of the curved drive and onto the paved private lane leading toward the state road into town. Only then did Lyssa release the breath she'd been holding.

The second Mattie joined them, Mike knew Lyssa had made her escape. The sound of her car starting and pulling out of the drive frustrated him, but he could be patient. Judging by his brother's curious expression and Mattie's

determined one, he'd be staying a while. Lyssa wasn't likely to go anywhere but home.

"Go play with Grandpa, honey." Mattie's expression and tone drew Bryce's attention. Even Maggie didn't question her mother's instructions, simply waved at her uncle and hurried down the hall.

"Lawrence?" Bryce moved next to his wife, his voice concerned.

Lyssa must have mentioned something about last night, Mike guessed as Mattie's eyes narrowed on him and she pointed to the open door up the hall. "Study. Now." She marched into the room and disappeared, confident that Bryce and he would follow.

"What the hell have you done now, Mike?" Bryce growled as they walked into the study, closing the door behind them.

"The masquerade? You and my sister were at the masquerade last night?"

Mattie demanded, her hands perched on her hips and one bare foot tapping furiously against the carpeted floor.

“What?” Bryce said.

“Yes,” Mike answered at the same time as his brother. He tucked his fingers into the back pockets of his jeans, palms facing out as he waited for Mattie or his brother to continue.

“What did you do to her, Michael?” Mattie’s foot stopped moving as she waited.

“I reclaimed her.”

Mattie looked confused. Her hands dropped from her hips, and her arms crossed over her chest. She asked, “*Reclaimed?*”

Bryce cursed. “Son of a bitch. You didn’t use—”

Mike faced his brother, ready to take him on if Bryce tried to deny his right to Lyssa. “She was mine. Rite of First Claim

was valid and binding.”

“Not if she isn’t a member. Not if the first time was forced,” Bryce snapped back, his pose resembling the one Mattie had abandoned moments earlier.

“I submitted her name and have paid her fees for four years. And she freely admitted to witnesses our first time wasn’t forced.”

“Whoa! Whoa! Four years? First time?” Mattie pushed between her husband and Mike. “Are you telling me you and my sister? At the Club? When? Where?”

“Hon, that isn’t important right now.” Bryce cupped her shoulders and tried to shift her aside.

“Not important?” Mattie swung around to glare up at her husband. “I find out *your* brother is staking a claim to *my* sister, and it’s not important for me to find out just when they decided to bump uglies

and where?"

Mike couldn't contain his amusement. He snickered. "Bump uglies? Come on, Mattie; you can use a better term than that."

Mattie turned on him and poked him in the chest. "There's an ick factor here, buster. She's my sister, and you're practically a brother. I don't want to think of either of you in that way. But if I find out you hurt her—" She stopped, then leaned back from him. "Oh my God! You—the first night we went to the Club! I knew there was more than that kiss involved."

"Lawrence," Bryce interrupted before Mattie could elaborate further. "The when and where don't concern me." He looked over his wife's head and met Mike's gaze.

It wasn't difficult to read his brother's concern. Mike knew the importance of the Rite of First Claim. He'd known it when he stepped into the

Club last night. He made it clear to Bryce that he wasn't backing down. "She belongs to me."

The change happened quickly. From one instant to the next, Bryce went from concerned older brother to master dominant. "There are responsibilities that go along with Rite of First Claim. Do you intend to live up to those?"

"Yes."

Bryce still pushed. Mike recognized it for the test it was. "You recognize what you're accepting and the duties you're taking on?"

"I love her. I've always loved her. I chose the duties and responsibilities long before I invoked Rite of First Claim."

"You're going to have to break her." Mattie's quiet comment had both men turning to look at her.

While he'd been focused on his brother, Mattie had moved away from

them to perch on the arm of the sofa. Beside him, Bryce shook his head.

“No, Lawrence—”

“I don’t want to break her, Mattie,” Mike assured her, although a part of him realized what his sister-in-law said might be true.

“Then you’ll lose.” Mattie shrugged. “Lyssa will never admit to her real feelings. She’ll never give up control, no matter how much she might want to.”

“There are methods of training that will show her the sense in giving up control,” Bryce offered as he moved to stand before his wife. He smoothed the loose curls away from her cheek and reminded her, “The pleasure isn’t in breaking the will of the submissive, love. It’s in guiding the sub in pushing past inner boundaries.”

Mattie turned her head and pressed a kiss into Bryce’s palm. Her eyes closed,

and a contented smile lifted her lips. She leaned forward, her head resting against Bryce's abdomen as she sighed, then pulled away. Looking up at her husband, she explained, "Lyssa and Mike aren't like us, Master. I dreamed of being free to give control over to you. I yearned for it, ached to feel the connection between us. My sister is afraid."

Mike fought the envy he felt as he watched Bryce and Mattie together. He wanted that for himself. He wanted that unity, that closeness, the absolute trust and devotion and love that his brother shared with his wife. He wanted it with Lyssa. Only with her. But as he listened to Mattie, he wondered if he'd ever convince his woman.

Mattie rose and wrapped her arms around Bryce's waist. She held him close, her cheek resting against his chest. Watching Mike, she continued, "Lyssa needs you to control her, Mike. She needs

to feel safe and loved and cherished by you, the way I feel with Bryce. But she doesn't trust what she needs. She told me the heart lies. For her, giving in to the emotions, giving in to the temptations, submitting to the needs of her heart would be a living nightmare."

Bryce's hands, which had been slowly caressing along Mattie's back, went still. He pulled her tight against him. "It's dangerous, love."

Mike agreed. "It could drive her away, Mattie." He started to shake his head, unwilling to risk losing Lyssa, but at the same time knowing it might be his only way of reaching the woman he loved.

"You have to tear down the walls she's used to protect herself, Mike." Stepping away from Bryce, she moved to stand in front of Mike and set her hand over his heart. "You need to strip away the barriers and show her that the only protection she really needs is you. No

matter what she's ever said, I know Lyssa has always felt safe with you. She's always trusted you to keep her safe."

Mike had to disagree. He wasn't about to alienate his only allies by telling them how badly he'd fucked up four years ago by putting his duty before Lyssa on the only date she'd agreed to. "No, Mattie. I don't think so. She's always run away. How does that equate to trust?"

Mattie grinned. "Running showed she could trust you to respect her wishes. If she thought there was any chance you wouldn't do that, she'd've just cut your balls off and fed 'em to you the first time you asked her to pose nude."

All three of them laughed, but the sound faded quickly. "I don't know, Mattie. I love her. I could never harm her."

"You're not hurting her, Mike. You're awakening her. She needs to realize she's worthy of your love and

honor and protection, but she's going to fight you every step of the way."

Bryce crossed the room to wrap his arms around Mattie's waist. "Like I fought acknowledging how important my own feelings were for you?"

Mattie nodded, leaning back into Bryce's hold. "She's going to defy you and top from the bottom every opportunity she gets, Mike. You have to show her you're strong enough to take on anything, including her, to keep her."

"Anything including her and her past, right?" Mike felt the resolve building inside him. He could see what Mattie meant. There were things in their past that each of the Lawrence women had survived. Things that would have broken weaker people, male or female. It merely required he stake his claim and prove to Lyssa he meant to keep her. No matter what she threw at him.

"Mike, if you don't intend it to be

permanent, walk away now,” Bryce told him.

“I’m not walking away.”

Bryce held his gaze. “I swear, Mike, brother or not, you break her heart and once I finish beating you bloody, I’ll let Mattie have you.”

Mike remained quiet. It was useless to protest. If anyone’s heart was broken this time, it was most likely going to be his.

Chapter Six

Lyssa didn't know how long Bryce would keep Mike occupied, but she was sure she'd be seeing him before nightfall. When he showed up at her house, she had to be ready. A look around her living room assured her nothing there could give away the plan that had sent her to the Club the evening before. The kitchen, on the other hand... She moved into the room and groaned at the fertility clinic literature she'd left scattered on the countertops and table.

She grumbled as she gathered up the papers, pamphlets, and fact sheets. "One problem with living alone: reading

while eating over the sink tends to become a habit.”

The concerns that had sprung to mind during her visit with Mattie resurfaced. There was no arguing that Mike would demand she comply with a thirty-day obligatory training. A *zing* of heat flashed through her lower belly. At least her body looked forward to the coming confrontation.

If it were only about keeping herself safe, she'd have no problem rebuffing him. Much as she shuddered at the idea, she even contemplated using the secret of their lost child to drive him away permanently should Mike persist. There would be no reprieve, no going back, no future with him if he knew she'd kept news of something as elemental as his child from him.

But it wasn't just about keeping her heart safe. Rite of First Claim, arcane a rule as it was, still meant something to

the members of the Diablo Blanco Club, many of whom were her clients and had connections to the politicians, royalty of Tinsel Town, and social circles who purchased the gowns she designed and created.

More importantly, refusal would constitute an insult to Bryce and Mattie. The lifestyle they lived included the Club, and Lyssa refused to bring about negative talk for them. No, she'd have to accept his claim for thirty days, if only to protect her business and Bryce's investment in it. Besides, she doubted Mike would even last the full month; he'd very likely get bored and jet off to take pictures after a few weeks.

Her fingertip absently traced the grinning face of a baby on the pamphlet she held. If Mike discovered her real purpose for going to the Club last night, the explosion would be tremendous. On the table, she spotted the small, five-inch-

square laminated photo she had never quite been able to bring herself to destroy or even tuck away in the closet. Setting the pile of pamphlets and brochures aside, Lyssa eased into the chair and cradled the picture in one palm. The grainy black-and-white image blurred as tears welled in her eyes before she wiped them away.

Even four years later, she wondered what might have been. If her baby girl had lived, would she have had her blonde hair or Mike's brown curls? Would their baby's eyes have been brown like her daddy's or the same blue as Lyssa's?

Lyssa traced her fingers over the tiny whitish-grey blob in the center of the picture with the same fear and awe she had felt the day she'd watched the monitor in the doctor's office when the ultrasound was performed. Twelve weeks after her first night with Mike. A week after he'd left, instead of staying to hear the important news she'd told him she

wanted to talk with him about. And just as fast as the fluttering of her baby's heartbeat, the fear and awe turned to pain.

A loud pounding against her door startled Lyssa from her thoughts. With shaky fingers, she wiped at the tears welling in her eyes before she pushed back her chair and rose. It wasn't difficult to guess her visitor's identity. Before she left the kitchen, she scooped the papers, brochures, and pamphlets off the table and secured them in the catchall drawer at the end of the counter. She gently laid the ultrasound image on top before closing the drawer and heading for the living room.

She would make Mike see reason. Eventually he would realize the feelings he had for her couldn't last. He had been with other women, at least one she was sure of, since their first time at the Club. In her mind it was the same old tune, just

different words—not worthy, unlovable—eventually he'd realize that and leave.

But it was the stubborn little voice deep in her heart that tried to undermine her resolve. The kernel of hope that swelled and grew, spreading sensations and emotions throughout her body. Considering what she'd learned from Ben and Vance about the Rite of First Claim, Lyssa found it difficult to stifle the building anticipation the thought of Mike's impending demands kindled.

The secret part of her that yearned to give in to her emotions and trust that Mike truly loved her fantasized about him storming her home, playing the Neanderthal, and dragging her off to the bedroom to teach her who her master was. And like every other time she indulged the dreams, verse two began to play in her head: *Parents wished you'd never been born; first boyfriend dumped you once he slept with you; college boyfriend didn't*

even bother with sex before humiliating you. Even the first photographer you hired to take pictures of your designs proved untrustworthy. Cop a clue girl—you and love ain't gonna happen.

Taking a deep breath, she focused her thoughts. Rite of First Claim. That's why he was here. Her concession couldn't be too swift. If Mike really thought he wanted her, he'd presume she'd balk. Like always. She smiled. Perhaps conceding easily would throw him off, make it easier

Mike's fist connected with the panels again, and this time Lyssa was ready. She strode to the front door and pulled it open.

"We need to talk." Dressed in jeans, a dark green T-shirt, and battered running shoes, neither heat nor humor flavored his voice. His cool brown eyes gave away nothing of what he was thinking.

Lyssa ignored the flutter of arousal

his appearance engendered. Playing the role she knew he expected, she hesitated, “I don’t think—”

Mike shook his head and moved closer, edging Lyssa out of the way so he could enter. “It’s in your best interest as well as mine, Lys.”

“Mike, this is not a good idea.” Lyssa eased away from him, allowing him to loosen her grip on the door and shut it behind him. “I think we should just agree to forget about—”

Mike dropped his gaze to the tiled floor beneath their feet. He crossed his arms over his chest as the overlong dark waves drifted across his forehead to shadow his face, leaving only the firm line of his whisker-rough jaw and tempting mouth visible.

Nerves jumped in her belly. Lyssa eased a few steps closer to the kitchen, her attention never leaving the steady rise and fall of Mike’s chest as he seemed to

meditate on what he wanted to say. When his head rose, she could read the look in his eyes. Lyssa stifled the urge to wrap her arms around him and hold him tight. Each time he looked at her that way, it got harder and harder to turn her back on him.

“You’re never going to change your mind about me. About us. Are you, Lys?” The pain in his words was palpable, but only his eyes reflected the emotion. The rest of his body remained still. Back straight, legs braced shoulder width apart, hands curled into loose fists where they rested in the crooks of his bent elbows.

“There is no us, Michael.” Her denial was softly spoken, but Lyssa saw him flinch. She might have already made the decision to go along with the Rite of First Claim, but she sure as hell wasn’t going to roll over and play dead for this man after he’d hurt her last time. If he wanted her

for the next thirty days, he was going to have to work for it.

He drew a slow breath, uncrossed his arms, and tucked his unbent fingers into the hip pockets of his jeans. "There is. I may have fucked up the last time you agreed to a date, but not this time. I'm claiming my month."

Lyssa tilted her head to the left. "Your month?"

"The thirty days guaranteed me by the Rite of First Claim. I claim you as my submissive for thirty days."

"Why?" Lyssa turned away and moved into the kitchen. Three pamphlets she'd missed sat like neon signs on the counter. Moving quickly, she scooped them up and carried them to the catchall drawer. After shoving them inside, she barely closed it when Mike pulled her around to face him.

"Damn it. I'm tired of slamming my

head against that fucking brick wall you've surrounded yourself with."

"I never asked you—"

"No, you never did," Mike admitted, his grip softening, his other hand rising to rub his thumb over her lips, then along her jaw. "Most of the wounds I have are self-inflicted, Lyssa. And I really don't mind them."

Lyssa remained silent. She fought the urge to nestle her chin into his hand, to ease just the slightest bit closer so the heat emanating from his body sank into hers.

"I've never lied about how I feel. I've told you for years that I love you, but you'll never believe me, will you?" Mike inched closer, sandwiching her between his body and the counter behind her.

His declaration sent a tremor through her. Lyssa had heard him say it before, but she knew he only thought he

loved her. Once he discovered the secret she'd kept from him—about their lost little girl—his “love” would certainly crumble to dust. “It’s not true, Mike. You know what you feel isn’t real. It’s based on the fact that I keep telling you no.”

“You can believe that if it makes you feel safe, but you’re wrong.” Mike shrugged. “I’m tired of wanting you all the fucking time and not having you.” He pressed a hard, brief kiss to her lips. His body pressed against hers. “I wake up wanting you. I go to sleep wanting you. In four goddamn years, Lys, I haven’t been interested in touching another woman, let alone having sex.” The chuckle that slipped from his lips at her surprised expression was self-deprecating rather than amused.

“I never asked you to—” Lyssa protested. His words were just further proof that his feelings related to sex, not real affection.

Mike shook his head. "You didn't have to, pet. It's just the way we Halsey's are made. When we find our mates, we don't stray." His forehead dipped into the curve between her shoulder and neck. "I'm tired of wanting what you say I'll never have, honey."

Every word was like a knife through her chest. Lyssa wanted to cry out, but she couldn't. A single life, a life without the threat of repeating her parents' errors of mistaking lust for love, was something she'd chosen for herself. One without the uncertainty of a man's professed affections followed by his abuse and rejection had been the primary goal that had helped Lyssa survive the nightmare of her childhood and the heartbreaks of her adult life. It was easier to be alone than to have an angry, bitter man snarling insults and condemnations at her. It was better to suffer loneliness than to trust three little words and have her

heart ripped out and crushed again.

“Then leave me alone,” Lyssa told him.

Each word was harder than the last to get out. If he accepted her rejection, he'd just go on thinking his love was unrequited. She needed him to stop caring. To stop believing the lie he'd somehow convinced himself was the truth.

“If I thought it was what was best for you, love, I would. In a heartbeat. Right now.” His head rose, and his gaze met hers. His body rubbed against hers, reacquainting her with the feel of the thick length of his arousal. “But it isn't, so I won't.”

Mike watched the expressions flit across Lyssa's face. On the long drive from his brother's house and then to the suburban housing development where Lyssa lived, Mike had rehashed the

arguments he'd presented to Bryce and the voiced cautions of his brother and sister-in-law. Neither of them knew about the date he'd canceled years ago. Exhaustion no longer clouded his judgment, and emotion was set aside as he analyzed the likelihood of Lyssa submitting to him. He was sure she'd use his abandonment when she'd told him it was important that he meet her against him.

If he couched her submission as a responsibility connected to her membership at the Club, it would only bring out the fact that he'd obtained and paid for Lyssa's membership with the Diablo Blanco Club. Not a discussion he felt comfortable having at this juncture in their relationship.

The next option was the one he'd adopted. Leaning on the rationale David hinted at in his last phone call, Mike's intent when he pulled into Lyssa's

driveway was getting her to see that conforming to the Rite of First Claim would be in both his and her best interests. It all came back to breaking through the walls to get Lyssa to trust her heart. And to trust *him* with her heart. If he believed Mattie and his instincts, Lyssa's heart and body already submitted to him; that only left her mind. Which meant informing her of the new parameters of her world was his next step.

"And if you'd only admit it, you don't want me to leave you alone," he added without rancor or taunting.

Lyssa shook her head even as her hips rolled against his, caressing his cock. "Yes, I do."

Mike slid one hand beneath the oversize sweatshirt Lyssa wore. A hum of appreciation slipped from his lips as he caressed the full curve of her breast without the barrier of a brassiere. He circled his finger around the firm peak

before pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. "Then what's this, pet?"

Mike played with her nipple for long seconds, enjoying the stifled groan and the way her body swayed close to him as he moved a step back. "Only hours away from each other and I'll bet your panties are wet and your pussy is aching to be filled."

She swallowed but didn't meet his gaze. "It's an aberration."

"Prove it to me, Lyssa. Four years ago, you didn't mind being with me. Last night, you enjoyed it as much as I did. And just like me, you want another taste." Mike leaned close, stroking her lips with the tip of his left forefinger, while he used the fingers beneath her shift to squeeze one of her soft, round breasts. "We'll both always want another sip, one more night." He cupped her jaw with his fingers, turning her face up to him. "We'll always need just one more fuck."

“Maybe you will—” Lyssa leaned back.

“Oh, I promise you’ll need it as well.” Mike rubbed his cheek against hers, and teased the curve at the top of her ear with his lips. He breathed in the honeysuckle scent from her soap and lotion and held it in his lungs before exhaling slowly as he nuzzled her ear.

“Who’s been chasing whom?” Lyssa cuddled closer. “I can satisfy my needs without you.”

He lifted his head and watched her as he slid his hand from her breast to her belly and flicked open the button on her jeans. “Prove it,” Mike retorted, pressing his lips against hers.

Nipping at his mouth, she tangled her fingers with his as they fought over the tab of her zipper. “This won’t do anything but prolong—”

“No, Lyssa. Give me my thirty days,”

he urged her. "For your benefit as well as mine."

Lyssa shook her head and danced out of reach, her jeans loose on her hips. She looked confused, unsure of her next move. "How does submitting to you for thirty days benefit me?" She shifted toward the doorway, putting more space between them.

"Propinquity. Too much of the same thing," Mike responded. "You've always claimed my feelings result from wanting but not having you."

"If you would simply stay away from me, you'd get over it."

Mike shook his head and leaned against the archway leading into the hallway. "And what about the holidays? We've got Thanksgiving in four weeks. Christmas the month after that. Then the kids' birthdays." Mike shrugged. "You can't expect either one of us to miss those."

“No, but—” She moved away from him.

Mike doubted Lyssa realized where she was taking him as he followed her, or that she'd made no move to fasten the jeans he'd loosened. “Admit it, hon. We can't be in the same room for more than fifteen minutes without stirring each other up. And you do everything in your power to remind me that I can look all I want, but I can't touch.”

Striding forward, he scooped her up with an arm around her waist and one beneath her knees. Ten more steps took him into the master bedroom. At the bed, he dropped her onto the mussed sheets and then crouched over her, his legs on the outside of hers and his hands bracketing her shoulders.

“I want to touch, Lyssa. And if you'd quit lying to yourself, you'd admit you want me to touch.”

Behind the barrier of his jeans and

hers, the thick length of his erection pushed against her belly. “You’ve wanted me since before I kissed you the first time at the Club.”

“No, I—”

He settled his fingertips over her lips, stopping her protest. “When I held you that night, you didn’t fight me, did you?”

Lyssa shook her head. A shiver moved through her. From her expression, Mike was sure she remembered the sensual touch he’d used after he’d tugged her down the hall and into the darkened closet.

“Were you afraid? At any time during those two hours, did I frighten you?” He searched her face for an answer.

Her eyes went wide at his question. He knew she’d enjoyed every moment in his arms that first time; he just needed to make sure she admitted it to herself. “You

were trembling, and I wasn't exactly exercising as much control as I usually do," Mike prompted.

"You didn't frighten me." She rocked her hips against his, a low hum slipping free from her lips.

Taking his time, Mike eased off the sweatshirt covering her and discarded her jeans and panties. "I'm glad to hear that." She remained on the bed as he stripped off his own clothes and retrieved a condom from his pocket. After rolling it on, he returned to lie over her, his legs between hers.

Mike shifted her arms over her head and ordered, "Don't move." He held her gaze and slid his hands over her breasts, cupping and shaping the mounds, teasing the taut peaks before tugging on them. "See, love, less than fifteen minutes and we're ready for one more fuck."

Realization shimmered in her cerulean gaze seconds before she gave a

resigned nod of agreement. "All right, you might have a point."

Mike chuckled and slipped his left hand between them to part the bare flesh exposed at the apex of her thighs with his fingers. "Might?" He nipped at the sensitive spot behind her ear. "You're wet and ready for me, baby."

Lyssa groaned as he teased the swollen bud before aligning his sheathed cock with the entrance her body had prepared. "And you think if you become my lover for thirty days, you'll stop wanting me?" she asked.

He wasn't going to lie to her. "No. I'll never stop wanting you, Lyssa. But if you'll submit to my mastery for a month, I'll prove to you that I love you and you love me."

She stiffened beneath him, her eyes going wide with panic. "No, you can't."

Mike shook his head at the flare of

unease in her eyes. "I'm pretty sure I do and so do you. But if after thirty days, you can tell me that you don't love me, I won't touch you again. Whatever decision you make, love, I'll respect it."

"Swear?"

Mike nodded. "Swear."

Her gaze measured his response. "No sneak attacks? No late-night visits? No more invitations?"

"None of those unless you ask for them."

"And if you leave before the month is over, there are no second chances. No picking up where you left off," she bargained.

Mike's stomach twisted. If the unit needed him, he'd have to go. But if it meant losing Lyssa for good...? He cursed the promise he'd made, but nodded. Lyssa deserved all of him, not just the person he showed to his family. "Agreed. If I leave

before the month is up, no taking up where we left off.”

“Okay, I accept.”

Determined to make sure she knew exactly what she was agreeing to, Mike asked, “You accept my Rite of First Claim?”

There was a moment’s hesitation; then Lyssa nodded. “Yes, I accept the Rite of First Claim.”

“I want to be sure you understand what I will expect from you as my submissive,” Mike warned her. He held her gaze, awaiting her response.

“Sex on demand, right?” Lyssa replied sarcastically.

“No, Lyssa. Submission to me isn’t about sex on demand.” Mike stroked his fingers over the taut beads capping her breasts. “It’s about releasing control. Allowing my sub to be confident in her decision to trust me and the choices I

make for her pleasure.”

Despite the sardonic expression twisting her lips into a grimace, a glint of longing flashed in her eyes at his description.

“You want me to become some mindless puppet panting at your feet for the smallest crumb of attention?” Derision flavored her words.

“You know better than that,” Mike admonished. How could a woman be so determined to deny herself what she wanted? “As my submissive, you will be required to relinquish control to me.”

Lyssa balked but returned coolly, “I’m aware of that.”

“Are you willing to do it?” He held her gaze, not allowing her to look away. “Do you trust me to keep you safe?”

Lyssa’s obsession with controlling her emotions would have to be removed. Breaking down that barrier required her

trust. As he watched her, Mike sensed her reluctance to admit to even that increment of power he held over her.

And it was power. Ironical that she should recognize that fact but remain steadfast in her refusal to listen to her own heart. "Lyssa, it's very simple. Do you trust me?" Mike asked. He stilled his fingers on her breast.

It was grudgingly given, but she did nod. "Sure, I trust you." *But only so far.* Though left unsaid, the qualifier was clear in Lyssa's tone.

Mike ignored it; he knew where her mistrust stemmed from. She'd granted her trust, albeit limited. Obstinate and obsessive as she was, Mike knew her word meant more to her than any contract or legally binding piece of paper. Any wall would fall if the right stones were removed, and that was just the first to go. He hoped she remained oblivious to the chink it revealed until the opportunity to

breach the weakened area presented itself.

“As my submissive, will you trust me to choose the most effective methods to train you?” Mike asked, moving on to another subject to keep Lyssa from dwelling too long on her decision.

Again the spark kindled in her eyes before being quickly subdued. “Sure.” Her response and accompanying shrug were intentionally dismissive.

“Not appropriate, Lyssa. You either believe the lessons and methods I employ are done with your benefit in mind or you don’t. Which is it?” He resumed the soft strokes over her breasts, circling her firm nipples and applying the mildest pressure to them by pinching first the left, then the right between his forefinger and thumb.

Distracted by his touch, Lyssa took a few moments to reply. Again her answer was terse but truthful. “I trust that you believe how you train me is done in my

best interest.”

Mike pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “Thank you, pet.” He moved lower and took a few minutes to trace her puffy areola with the tip of his tongue. A shiver rippled through her at the light scrape of his teeth along the soft curves. He eased his fingers lower, circling her navel before resting his hand over her belly.

Lyssa arched closer to him; her moan vibrated against his lips. The muscles of her belly quivered beneath his fingertips as he suckled on first one nipple, then the other. Her thighs cradled his hips, arching close.

“Do you agree to be my submissive for the next thirty days?” Mike asked, lifting his head to meet her gaze.

“Mmmm, I like the way you negotiate, Mike,” she purred.

“Master,” he prompted, halting the movements of his fingers. “If we’re in

agreement that you'll submit to me for the next month, say, 'Yes, Master.'" Mike watched the resistance flash in her gaze. Mattie's observation about her sister topping from the bottom wasn't off the mark. It seemed his Lyssa did need to be taught who was master. Holding her gaze, he waited.

Lyssa groaned. A heartbeat later, she acquiesced, "Yes, Master."

"Very good, pet." He replaced his hand with his mouth. The warmth of his breath followed by the stroke of his tongue on her nipple had Lyssa pressing closer, shifting to align her body with his cock.

Mike chuckled at her movements. "No, not yet." He lapped at her firm peak, suckled it softly, then moved his lips to the other breast and repeated the same attentions to it.

Despite her grumbled protests, Mike eased farther down, nipping at the

sensitive skin on her belly with his lips and teeth. He shifted her thighs farther apart making space for his shoulders, exposing the pink opening of her body to his gaze, he felt Lyssa's anticipation rise as she waited for his touch. It thrummed through her veins, but his attention was arrested by the inked design decorating the flesh between her hips. He paused, then lowered his mouth to tease her clit out of hiding. The questions about her tattoo would come—later. Right now, his reluctant sub needed to be taught a lesson.

Lyssa wriggled under his touch. The smell of her arousal surrounded him as he nipped at the bundle of nerves. He stroked the glistening folds, spreading the moist evidence of her desire along her pink flesh before easing two fingers inside. The clasp of her intimate muscles excited him. The flex and release of them as he slid deep, then pulled free

reaffirmed his belief that if nothing else, her body craved his touch.

Rising over her, Mike watched Lyssa's eyes blink open as he continued to softly caress the plump folds of her sex. Confusion and wariness darkened the irises to azure. "First lesson for you, pet. I'm in charge."

Her gaze narrowed. "Only for thirty days."

"Long enough," he assured her. The light of battle kindled in her eyes, sparking the warrior within him to life. She wasn't going to give in. It was written in her eyes and the way she shifted against his hands; she'd play at being passive to his commands, but it wouldn't be real. As quick and sharp as her mind was, besting her would take skills he'd rarely used with other lovers.

He leaned forward, brushing his lips over hers before pulling away. His gaze never breaking from hers, Mike

explained, “Right now, all you need to do is feel, but you don’t have permission to come.” In order to break down the walls surrounding her, Mike would have to remove the control she maintained over her body. And that would take time.

The expression on her face was a blend of frustration and need. The way she moved, the shift of muscles beneath his fingers all signaled how primed for release she was. Waiting would be torture.

“You must learn to control your body to please me,” Mike informed her.

“And what about my pleasure?” Lyssa groaned, her legs moving restlessly beside his.

The corner of his mouth kicked up in a smirk. “My pleasure is your pleasure, pet. Watching your skin go pink with the flush of orgasm, the stiff buttons of your nipples poking against my chest, the hungry grip of your pussy around my cock—it all pleases me.” He lowered his

head, kissing her with soft pressure. He moved the hand between her thighs up to her breast and smeared the moist cream coating his fingers over the hardened nipple before pinching the bud between his thumb and forefinger. "And the longer it lasts, the better it feels." Mike whispered his words against her lips, never breaking the connection between them before coaxing her into another kiss.

The moment she began to kiss him back, he pulled away. She lifted her hips to press closer to his latex-sheathed cock. Rubbing her belly against the heated length, a throaty purr spilling from her lips as she tangled her legs with his, Lyssa moved her hands to clutch at his shoulder.

"No." Mike held still over her. "Hands down," he commanded.

Lyssa hesitated and squeezed her eyes shut, clearly more intent on the sensations bombarding her body than on

him.

Lowering his head, he nipped her bottom lip and blew a soft puff of breath against her face, startling her into opening her eyes.

“Hands down. Legs down,” he directed. Once her hands settled beside her head, palms facing up, Mike moved them back above the pillow, stretching her out. Her legs trembled against his as he leaned closer, his mouth hovering just above hers, gaze locked with her soft blue eyes. He ordered, “Don’t move. Don’t come. Not without permission.”

Rebellion turned the azure to cobalt for the briefest moment as Lyssa tensed beneath him. Between gritted teeth, she whispered, “Yes, Master.”

Mike fought the temptation to smile. “Very good. You’re learning.” He gave no opportunity for her to respond before he lowered his mouth to hers. Their tongues touched, sliding over and around each

other; the essence of her flavor made him drunk. He'd dreamed of having her under him, her body his to command, for years, but the reality was far more intense than he'd imagined. Each of their past encounters all hinted at the passion she was capable of. Now it was his turn to use that intensity to his advantage.

He moved his hands down to grip her hips. Holding her tight against him, Mike rocked over her, the length of his swollen shaft pressing against her belly. In careful increments, he eased his hands onto the insides of her thighs, pushing them open. Disentangling himself from the kiss, Mike lifted his head and watched her open slumberous eyes. Arousal had expanded the centers until the blue was a dark ring around them. Her hands gripped one another as she tangled her fingers together in an effort to follow his orders and not reach for him.

Her breathing hitched as he spread

her intimate folds, guided his aching sex to hers, and thrust inside. The wet heat surrounding him stole his breath as he pushed past clenching muscles.

Lyssa cried out. Every sinew strained as she fought the impending climax, her body struggling for release. The sheath cradling him flexed and relaxed, tempting him toward orgasm, but Mike held it off.

He braced himself over her, using his forearms to lever his body up, bracing them on the bed beneath her shoulders, as he started to move, each stroke hard and fast. “Do you remember what I said about how long you would be fucked?” he asked.

Lyssa chewed on her lower lip, pleasure suffusing her face even as she fought desperately to hold off climax. “Y-yes.”

Mike stopped.

Lysa sobbed, glared up at him, and then corrected her response. “Yes, Master.”

“How long did I say it would be?” Mike pulled away, pausing just shy of exiting her body before pushing back in, filling her completely.

She moaned, battling to maintain control, to stave off completion as she stammered out an answer. “You...you said you decide how long.” She hesitated, then added, “Master.”

“I love how wet you are, Lys. The way your body grips mine when I pull out and the soft slurping sound it makes when I push back in,” he whispered in her ear. One hand smoothed the flyaway curls of silky blonde hair clinging to her sweat-dampened cheek before he shifted his weight so he could lower his grip to her thigh. He lifted her leg so it rode along his hip before he continued, “I just can’t decide if I like going slow.” He

demonstrated for her, rocking his hips against hers so the glide of his cock in and out of her pussy was accomplished in leisurely, small measures.

The sound that broke from her lips could have been a protest or a prayer. Her breath heaved, causing her breasts to rise and fall in ragged, choppy motions.

“That feels so good, pet. But I also like to go fast. And hard.” He pressed forward, setting a pounding rhythm that buried Lyssa deep into the soft mattress, her head thrashing as pleasure overwhelmed her.

He felt her orgasm begin as the muscles surrounding him locked up, squeezing his cock in tighter and tighter pulses. Her eyes opened wide as she bowed upward, the climax a physical force gripping her body, starting in her most intimate flesh and moving outward in ever-growing waves.

Watching her was ecstasy itself.

Mike remained still over her, sweat peppering his skin as he fought the burn at the base of his spine and in his balls. Her surrender was temporary, but it was a beginning. Once he gained control of her body, he'd have the leverage to begin breaking down the barriers she'd walled her heart with.

Long moments passed as he marveled at the sublime look that spread over Lyssa's face and the way her body went liquidy soft as her pleasure peaked and slowly receded. He waited, stroking his free hand along her thigh and up to her breasts, where her beautiful, plump nipples smoothed out, signaling the end of her release.

"Tsk, tsk, pet." Mike caressed her lips with his as he watched her unfocused gaze regain a semblance of awareness. "You didn't have permission." He shifted against her, reacquainting her with the heavy erection still cuddled inside her

body.

Lyssa's gaze, sleepy and satisfied, grew wary. Her uneasy look was subsumed by one that seemed to be a blend of panic and anticipation.

"I haven't made up my mind how I want to fuck you," he reminded her. "Now we'll have to start all over again." Mike began moving, setting a steady pace that drew a moan from Lyssa. On the nightstand beside the bed was a small digital alarm clock. After a quick glance at it, he smiled down at her. "It should only take two hours to make up my mind."

He watched her eyes go wide. Her teeth drew her bottom lip inside as he picked up speed. With one hand still tangled in her hair and the other easing up to fondle her breast and the nipple going tight and hard atop it, he added, "And next time I come first."

Lyssa's only response was a soft whimper as she arched beneath him.

Sheer exhaustion was the only reason Lyssa could come up with to account for having drifted off while Mike held her. Groggy, body aching, and only half-awake, she rolled onto her side to find Mike watching her from the chair near her bedroom window. Chest and feet bare, he'd tugged on the jeans he'd worn earlier. If the shadows cloaking the room were any guide, Lyssa assumed the sun had set. Despite the darkness shrouding him, she could feel Mike's gaze and knew he was aware she'd awakened.

"Come here, love."

His voice caressed her skin, drawing the tiny hairs covering her body to attention. She moved without thinking, pushed aside the bedding and swung her legs off the mattress. In the quiet of the room, her footsteps were silent on the carpet as she crossed the few feet between

them to stand in front of Mike. The smooth lines of his chest drew her gaze, where it lingered on the muscled contours of his abdomen before dropping to the distinctive bulge behind the fly of his jeans. The instant she spotted the red leather paddle resting across his thighs, though, her feet shifted, intent on retreat.

“Stay.” Again he commanded, and she complied.

Lyssa waited, her common sense waking and trying to convince her to move away. But she’d made a deal. One she wouldn’t go back on, no matter how much her instincts told her she should. As Mike’s gaze traced her sleep-mussed hair before surveying the rest of her, she had to admit his slow perusal was arousing.

“Never leave your master unless given permission.” His tone was level, calm. He could have been offering advice about stock prices or the weather. “I had decided last night to forego the two

punishments you earned, until I awoke this morning.”

Lyssaa dropped her gaze to the paddle in his lap. “But how could I have earned punishment for breaking rules I never knew?” she blurted out.

“You broke rule number one when you approached Kringle last night.”

“But I didn’t belong—”

Mike rose from the chair, crowding close to her. Lyssa remained in place, making no attempt to put space between them.

“You’ve been mine for the last four years, love. You just refused to acknowledge it.”

“You certainly didn’t stick around for very long,” Lyssa sniped.

Mike held her gaze, his expression intent. “I apologized for leaving. I explained it was important, but it won’t happen again.”

The moment she rolled her eyes and allowed a sneer to twist her mouth, Mike's gaze narrowed. She wasn't going to argue the situation. There was no doubt in her mind that Mike's promise was empty.

Cool leather coasted along the outside of her thigh before moving around to caress the curve of her bottom. "I told you then, no other men touch you."

Lyssa cursed the jump in her pulse at the idea of Mike swatting her backside. The paddle he held in his grip kept drawing her gaze. What would it feel like against her bare skin? How would it sound as it moved through the air when he swung it? Would he have a heavy or light hand when he applied it? Did she even *want* to have him spank her?

The excitement tingling through her was disconcerting. With the number of times she'd been beaten by her father or watched Aaron Lawrence beat her mother or sister, the idea of a man taking a

length of leather-covered wood to her against her will should have pissed her off. But it didn't. If there was one thing she could count on, it was that Mike, no matter how angry or irritated or annoyed he might be, would never *physically* harm her. Despite knowing that, she still asked, "You aren't actually thinking of spanking me?"

Mike ignored her question and asked one of his own. "Did you approach another man with the intent of having sex with him?"

Lyssa grimaced, and although she knew she probably would never have been able to tolerate Dayton Kringle's touch, she nodded.

"I want to hear the words, pet."

Her mouth went dry, and she swallowed. "Yes."

"Did you belong to me at the time you entertained him?" Mike tapped the

paddle against the outside of his leg.

“In a way, but your—”

The paddle was beneath her chin, gently raising her face to his in order for his gaze to hold hers. “Yes or no.”

It took everything within her to disregard the thrill skittering through her at the firm tone and direct look he leveled on her. The blend of power and calm he exuded was nearly palpable, and she complied before she'd consciously decided to. “Yes.”

“You'll receive five swats for the first infraction. Your second was a result of attempting to deny ownership.”

She remained mute, knowing her taunts had been designed to do just that. Mike acknowledged her silent agreement with a curt nod. “Very good. The consequences for that will be three swats.” The paddle returned to his side while his gaze moved slowly from the flushed

features of her face to the tips of her toes as they curled into the plush carpet. “Another two swats should remind you never to leave your master without his permission. How many swats is that in total?”

“Ten.”

He took a step closer and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. When he pulled back, Lyssa felt herself tilt toward him, wanting more. The fingers of his left hand cupped her chin, holding her still as his head dipped and he nuzzled her neck for a moment before stepping away. “Tell me our safe word.”

Her answer whispered out on a quiet moan. “Dragon.”

Another abrupt nod noted her response. “When should you use it?” he asked.

A deep breath helped clear her head, but her body still tingled at the thought of

Mike spanking her. If she focused on the questions and kept her cool, she knew she could get through the next few minutes with dignity. The temptation to argue over the punishment still simmered, but she'd made a deal. For the next thirty days, she would allow Mike control of her body. It would be up to her to prevent investing her heart as well.

Before Mike could prompt her, Lyssa answered, "I should use the safe word if the situation becomes uncomfortable or unbearable for me to continue."

Mike used the paddle to motion in the direction of the bed. "Good. Turn around and stand near the side of the bed."

A foot or two from the bed, his command for her to stop halted her. "Lean over and brace your elbows on the bed. Keep your back straight and spread your feet shoulder width apart."

Heat seared her face as she did as

instructed. The rumpled sheets cushioned her forearms, and when she would have dropped her gaze to the mattress, Mike stopped her.

“Chin parallel to the floor, pet.” He moved into position on her left, the paddle in his right hand as his left adjusted the tilt of her chin before sliding down to caress her dangling breasts and then stroke along the taut muscles of her back to the generous curve of her bottom. “When the paddle makes contact with your ass, count off each strike.”

“Okay.”

His fingers returned to her chin to turn her face up to his. “When we are dealing with role-play, discipline, or punishment, you will refer to me as Master. You will answer with either yes or no unless you wish to ask a question. In which case, you will request permission to query by saying, ‘May I speak, Master?’ Understood?”

The look on his face, the tone of his voice, even the way he held his body—upright, stiff, resolute—told Lyssa any attempt at playfulness or sarcasm would not be tolerated. This was a side of him she had never been exposed to, and instinct warned her it was the side most dangerous to her heart. She replied with a quick nod and, “Yes, Master.”

He released her chin and repeated his earlier instruction. “Now, when the paddle makes contact with your ass, count off each strike.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Very good, pet. Face forward.”

Lyssa found herself staring down the hallway toward the foyer of her house. She twisted the bedding between her clenched fists, and her body stiffened as she waited for the first blow. In the few times she'd been able to convince Ben and Vance to let her experiment, they'd started with gentle swats and worked up

to something heavier.

Mike didn't do that.

The paddle made a distinct *whoosh-SMACK* as it moved through the air and landed against her bottom. The sting made her gasp, but she made sure to count aloud. "One."

"Louder. I want to hear you," Mike informed her. "Let's try that again."

Whoosh-SMACK!

A yelp escaped her, and Lyssa winced. "*One.*" Her voice filled the room as the sting radiated across her bottom.

Whoosh-SMACK!

A filament of heat crept from her bum through her torso and into her jiggling breasts, her nipples growing hard. "Two."

Whoosh-SMACK!

"Three." Lyssa began to breathe harder as the burn spread across her bottom. The temptation to wriggle sizzled

through her muscles. Even as the tingle and heat built into arousal, the fourth swat landed. *Whoosh-SMACK!*

“F-four.” She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip, hoping to still the need coiling within her. He’d bested her twice earlier, pushing her to orgasm despite the efforts she’d used to stop it. She couldn’t allow him to do it again.

“Chin up.”

Until Mike spoke, she hadn’t realized she’d dropped her head. She lifted her chin again so it was parallel with the floor as the paddle landed. The blow vibrated through her lower body and into her torso. Her breath stopped with the flutter and pulse of muscles between her thighs. Gasping, she counted, “Five.”

The heat of Mike’s callused hand against her hot flesh brought a cry to her lips. In spite of the sting, she couldn’t prevent herself from shifting closer to

him, pressing her bottom into his touch, increasing the tingle shooting through her pussy. Moisture pooled between her thighs. When his fingers slipped lower, Lyssa dropped her head again and moaned.

“You’re wet, love. Are you finding this pleasurable?” Amusement filled his words.

It was impossible to deny considering how plump and sensitive her nether lips were. Breath uneven, voice shaky, Lyssa stammered, “Yes, Mi—Master,” she hastily corrected herself, but the way his touch stilled, she knew he’d noted the slip.

“Five more to go.” His fingers withdrew after applying a quick tap to her clit and a pinch to her throbbing bottom. “Chin up, baby. Remember, I want to hear you count.”

A whimper escaped her lips, but Lyssa lifted her chin and prepared for the

next swat.

“And you may not come.”

Her eyes went wide, her body swayed, and she nodded her understanding, words locked in her throat at the thought of having to hold back even longer when her body so desperately wanted to explode.

The paddle rose and fell more quickly this time, with Lyssa barely finishing one number before she had to say the next. *Whoosh-SMACK! Whoosh-SMACK! Whoosh-SMACK! Whoosh-SMACK!*

Instantly after the last strike landed and Lyssa gasped out, “Ten,” her knees buckled and she toppled half-on, half-off the bed. Her head swam, her breath labored in and out of her lungs, and her body shook uncontrollably as she struggled to hold off the climax boiling low in her belly.

“Stand up.” Mike’s voice crackled with authority.

It took her several seconds to gather her trembling legs beneath her and push herself to her feet. The burn across her ass increased. Her body ached to climax, but she fought the twisting, churning fire between her thighs. She refused to relinquish control to him. If she gave in to the desire to let him lead, it would end in disaster. This was for the best. Taking shallow breaths, she felt herself stagger, but she remained upright. She’d play the game, but she wouldn’t succumb to the pleasure of believing in the false promises her heart so desperately wanted to believe.

The heat from his body warmed her back. “Turn around. Face me.”

She gnawed at her bottom lip to distract her mind from the throb of her paddled flesh. The pulse matched the flex and release of her internal muscles as she

battled the urge to come. Moisture coated her thighs; the smell of sex and arousal swirled in the evening air as she carefully turned and faced Mike.

Flames glittered in his eyes. The flush of excitement tinted the skin stretched taut over his cheekbones. At eye level with her, his nipples, buried in inviting chocolate curls, were hard, tempting her to lean forward and nibble at the swollen bud nearest her.

“Tell me what you did to be punished.”

Her eyes snapped up to his. Irritation mingled with regret as she watched his expression grow remote, cool. “I broke rule number one.” She kept her tone unemotional, not signaling any of the penance she felt for disobeying him. The thought alone baffled her. Penance and regret had never followed the abuses meted out by her father.

Mike seemed to understand her

uncertainty. “You’re confused, aren’t you, pet?” He stepped forward and caressed her cheek with his fingertips. “You feel conflicted about the pleasure you find in letting me set the rules, don’t you?”

Her nod was hesitant. “Yes, Master.”

He cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking over her chin and down her throat, then back up. “As much as you’ve been in charge of your own business for so many years, you’re finding it uncomfortable to discover you don’t resent the role I’ve assumed.” Without waiting for her to confirm his analysis, he continued, “Fighting me for control will only make it harder for you to follow my instructions.” The fingers of his right hand moved between her thighs, parting the swollen lips and coasting over her engorged clit.

Lyssa moaned, sinking her teeth into her bottom lip as she quivered before him.

“You say you trust me, pet, but you don’t trust yourself enough to let me guide you completely.”

Lyssa tensed at his words, wary as she watched him without responding.

Mike eased his touch from her body, his gaze holding hers as he continued. “My pleasure should be your primary interest. My pleasure is your pleasure, Lyssa, but you must let me have control in order for you to truly enjoy submission. If you don’t let me lead, you fight both me and yourself. And you will lose every time.”

He waited for most of the tension to leave her body before giving his next instruction. “Get on the bed. Lay on your back.”

The sting from the contact of her reddened bottom with the duvet brought tears to her eyes, but she blinked, focusing her gaze on Mike as he stepped away from the bed and stripped off his

jeans. The ache inside her intensified as the mattress shifted beneath his weight when he lay down beside her, close yet not touching her.

Lyssa lay faceup across the bed, her body one huge, quivering nerve. She paced her breathing, trying to gain a measure of control, to stave off the orgasm clawing at her center. Heat radiated from Mike's hand with every stroke he made along her body. Never once did his skin make contact with hers. His hand hovered over her, allowing the warmth to penetrate her skin. First one breast, then the other, down her torso to her belly, the curve beneath her navel, and finally the damp petals of her sex.

Sobbing, Lyssa arched upward, nudging his hand between her thighs where he used his fingers to part her plump folds and settle over the wet entrance. She clenched her thighs, clamping his fingers between her nether

lips while the swollen petals fluttered and flexed with need. Then he withdrew them.

Taking his time, he collected a condom from the nightstand and rolled it on before finally rising over her. Lyssa yearned for more, her body on fire with denied passion. His lips brushed hers as he whispered, "Let go, Lyssa. You may come."

Six simple words and the world exploded behind her eyes. Her body bowed upward, the fire in her core coalescing with the heat of her ass. She pressed her hips against Mike, pushing and rubbing her belly over his thick cock, trying to increase the sensations bombarding her nerve endings, aching to feel him stretching her empty sheath. She wrapped her hands around him, her fingers clutching his damp skin and the muscles bunched beneath, shifting as he moved over her. The coarse hair on his legs scraped the inside of her thighs as

she tangled her legs around his and held him tight against her.

Incoherent sounds spilled from her lips, somewhere between cries and gasps. Lyssa rode the first wave of climax, dropped into the trough that followed, and then started the climb along the crest of the second swell of sensations undulating outward from her core.

Her heart swelled, the sensations terrifying in their intensity as she marveled at how much this man could potentially come to mean to her and just how dangerous the agreement she'd made could become.

Mike waited for her breathing to even out before he dropped his gaze to the dewy skin below her belly button. Propped on one forearm over her, he stroked the dragon's gold and copper scales with the fingers of his free hand. He'd noticed it the night before but hadn't asked about it.

“When did you have this done?” The softening of the snout and the sinuous, sensual positioning of the limbs gave the creature an earthy and decidedly feminine rather than fierce aspect. A primal part of him stirred to see her bearing his mark. Or something similar.

“Seven—no, six years ago.” Her voice was sleepy, unfocused, as she lifted her hand from beside her head to linger atop his hand. “It appealed to me when the artist created it.” The tips of her fingers skimmed along his as Mike traced the crimson and black rose cradled in the claws of one forepaw near where the dragon’s head rested.

When her free hand moved down and urged him to move, Mike sat up, exposing the inked art on his lower abdomen to her gaze.

“I was surprised by this. That we both have similar tattoos,” she told him.

Mike glanced down at the artwork

decorating his pelvis and cock.

“Yours is masculine and intense. Its expression reminds me of an animal battling nature,” Lyssa confessed, eyes slumberous but slowly regaining the heat of arousal. Her fingers traced the design.

Mike pressed closer to her. His sheathed cock, still hard, nudged the wet folds of her sex. A tremor moved through her body as he smoothed his fingers over her dragon’s gold and copper haunches and along its tail. When the tip of his penis blocked him, he gripped it and used the latex-covered head to finish his exploration along the soft skin just above her mound.

Her breathing hitched, and she took a moment to recover before continuing, “It almost looks like the dragon carved above the doorway to the Club, with the green vines of a climbing rose wrapped around it.” Her fingers traced the four blooms along the greenery, each a blend

of copper and gold the exact color of her dragon and a definite contrast to the ebony and crimson body of his beast.

Unlike the way the tail on her tattoo curled around her dragon, his dragon's tail disappeared into the curls at the base of his penis before reappearing along the shaft of his cock and ending in a lethal-looking barb on his cockhead. The same head teasing the nude flesh he wanted to sink into. But he'd wait. She needed to be pushed just a bit more.

"When did you have yours done?" she asked.

"The day after I met you," Mike responded.

The muscles in her throat contracted as she swallowed. Her fingers slid over his, then upward, along the pulsing shaft, as if she was fascinated with the intricate shading delineating each of the scales visible beneath the thin latex. "Did this hurt?"

The condom covering him muted the cool touch of her fingers, but it was still enough to get his flesh to react. With a mind of its own, his cock pressed closer to her. "Like a son of a bitch." He chuckled and closed his hand over hers, lifting her hold away and guiding her palm up to her mouth. "Lick it, baby. Get it nice and wet."

He watched heat flush her cheeks and her breathing speed up. The pretty rose crowns on her breasts grew hard as her tongue peeked out and lapped at her palm. Their gazes locked, and he shifted lower, nudging her thighs open wider, spreading the plump lips apart, and lowering his shaft into the wet crease.

She was hot and ready to take him in. But not yet. The sensitive knot hidden away beneath its hood responded as he rocked his body forward and back, rubbing his length against her, coating the rubber with her juices to ease the slide of her hand once she wrapped it

around him again.

Mike let her see the pleasure he felt when he lowered her damp palm and rolled her fingers around his wet cock. He pressed down, squeezing her hand under his, showing her the pressure he preferred. The firm hold sent fire tingling along his spine. A vice twisted around his balls as he urged her hand to stroke him from base to tip, then back again. "It hurt like a son of a bitch," he repeated, enjoying the sexy hurt her hand supplied.

"Why?"

"Because the cock is a very sensitive place on a guy, and I needed to be hard for the artist to ink it." He released her hand to adjust one of her thighs higher against his hip, opening her more to his attentions.

Lyssa laughed and squeezed just a bit harder. Mike grunted and dipped his head to nip a berry-hard peak.

Lyssa jumped, and her fingers clenched over the tip of his cock. The fingers of her free hand threaded through his hair, holding his mouth close to breast. She groaned before asking her next question. "No, I meant why get a tattoo on your penis?"

He shrugged, tugging at her nipple before releasing it with a soft *pop*. "I'm not sure. Arrogance of youth, I guess."

"I don't buy it." She shook her head and stroked his hard length.

Mike tilted his head to watch her hand on his flesh. The soft cream of her arousal dampened her pussy and thighs. "To prove you wrong."

"Wrong?" Her touch faltered, and she released his erection.

Not allowing her time to pull away, Mike thrust inside her. She gasped, arching against him, her fingers tugging at his hair as she stared up at him.

“When I asked you to go celebrate with me and you asked me for my ID, I dealt with your rejection the only way I could. I went off to find the most macho thing possible to prove I was a real man.”

Breathless, her body squeezing him tight as he pulled out then pushed back inside, Lyssa gasped. “A-And getting a dragon tail ta-tattooed on your dick was it?” Her fingers clutched at his shoulders as he moved over her, hips rocking forward and back, measuring his full length inside in firm, aggressive thrusts.

“Up until she started working on the tat, I was actually thinking of getting a barbell piercing as well.” Mike shifted, lowering his chest onto hers, forcing her deep into the bedding. He braced his arms under her hips, pushing her thighs wide, opening her completely. He kept his pace hard and fast. “That’s it, babe; rise up,” he encouraged.

“I’m never going to be able to walk if

you keep this up,” Lyssa moaned, but her body’s response revealed how much she enjoyed his loving. Her fingers released his hair to slide over his shoulders. Both hands scratched and pulled at him, urging him on.

When he stopped, she cried out. “I’m not complaining.”

Mike laughed. He knew what she needed, what her body needed, even if Lyssa was being stubborn about it and trying to ignore what was between them. He worked hard to keep the need from his voice as he asked, “So why’d you get your tat?”

Lyssa arched against him, her thighs tight around his hips. It seemed to take her a while to gather her thoughts, but he kept his hips moving, this time slow and steady.

“Your tattoo, baby. Tell me why you got it,” he whispered, his mouth against her throat, teeth nipping at her earlobe.

“I got it—*oh God, deeper, please*—I got it when I celebrated having been in business for ten years.” Lyssa hummed deep in her throat as he picked up his pace.

Her blue eyes glinted with humor, acknowledging how similar their reasoning for gaining their body art was. “Just had to get yourself some proof you weren’t a kid, huh?” he teased.

Lyssa grumbled, her expression a mixture of arousal and exasperation. “I guess.” She smiled and tugged his head down toward hers. “At least I stopped at exposing myself to the tattoo artist.”

Mike matched her grin. “Prude.” His mouth whispered over hers. “The lady who worked on me was very impressed at my...stamina.”

The flash of emotion in her gaze could have been disgust or jealousy. Mike chose jealousy, and satisfaction coiled around his heart at this hint of

possessiveness in his woman. It was hell on his pride to think his woman refused to admit to even a fraction of what he felt for her. Beyond the heat generated by the sexual attraction between them, it was difficult to accept Lyssa's determination not to trust that his declarations of love for her could be permanent.

He'd have to break her habit of trying to maintain control, like Mattie suggested.

"I have to a...admit"—Lyssa gasped, her gaze meeting his as he pulled her closer—"your stamina has me a bit breathless."

Mike remained straight-faced. Holding her gaze, he asked, "Remember rule number three?"

Lyssa tensed, her eyes squeezing shut as she dropped her head back against the pillow. "I-I remember."

Mike nipped her throat with his

teeth, tugging on the bit of skin, leaving a telltale mark for anyone to notice. “Good.”

Her head ground into the pillow as a tremor vibrated through her body.

“Don’t come,” he ordered, pushing her thighs toward her chest, leaving her vulnerable to him.

Her body already recognized him as her master; her heart trusted his direction without question. It was her mind he needed to teach to let go. The agreement for thirty days of submission should be sufficient to prove to her he wouldn’t abandon her again. That she was as necessary to him as the air he breathed.

Her breasts were crushed against his chest. He freed one hand and tilted her face up to his. “Wait for it.”

Lyssa groaned. Her eyes closed, but a soft tap from his fingertips against her cheek opened them again.

Their gazes locked, and he watched her pupils dilate as climax rose within her. "Wait, pet."

"Please."

He could see her anger at herself as the plea escaped her. The blue of her irises was a pale ring around the dark centers. Against her lips, he whispered, "Come for me, Lys. Let me feel how wet I make you and how much you enjoy having me inside you."

Her gasps wafted over his face. The choked-off cries hitched and blended into a soft wail of satisfaction as her sheath clenched around him, holding him inside, milking his body until there was nothing left.

He held her close, keeping their bodies joined as their breathing slowed and their eyes drifted shut. A few minutes, Mike promised himself, just a few more minutes to hold on before the next skirmish for control began.

After a shower, with Mike applying the sponge and soap, followed by a quick drying off, Lyssa pulled on a plush robe while Mike tugged on the jeans and T-shirt he'd shed earlier. Lyssa tried to tamp down the excitement she felt at having Mike in her home. She needed to keep her head. Isolate the sex from emotions. That was the only way she could protect herself.

"So when can I expect my next lesson?"

Mike stepped close and moved her hands from the robe's belt. "That wasn't a lesson, pet." The smile on his lips should have warned her that keeping her covered wasn't on his mind. The front of the robe parted, allowing him access to her shower-warmed skin. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he tugged her close, lowered his head, and pressed a soft

kiss against her lips. “Do you remember the rules?”

She grimaced and rolled her eyes. Allowing one hand to rise and tangle in the thick hair at the back of his head, Lyssa held the other hand up and lifted the forefinger. “Rule number one: no other men.” The still-tender skin on her butt throbbed.

One of Mike’s hands stroked down her back, then rubbed across her bare bottom. “Hmm, only one reminder was required for that rule. Good.”

Lyssa made a face at him but refrained from comment and raised another finger. “Rule number two: you tell me when I’ve had enough.”

“You certainly enjoyed that rule, pet.” His mouth covered hers for a long, tongue-tangling kiss. The hand on her ass pulled her close, rubbing the firm rise of his jean-covered cock against her bare belly.

Over the next thirty days, this man would twist and tug and wrap her body into knots she knew she'd never get undone. And she'd love every second of it. Hell, the way her body pulsed now, with the internal muscles contracting and relaxing in time with the rock of his hips, she figured she'd be begging for more in no time.

But he wasn't part of her future. She needed to stay focused on her plans, not the silly flights of fancy about happily ever after that kept popping into her head. The second his lips released hers, Lyssa drew a long, fortifying breath. She was going to need all the strength she could muster to keep from succumbing to his magnetism.

Lyssa put up a third finger beside the first two as she steadied her voice and enumerated the last rule. "Rule number three: everything belongs to you." And it did, but she'd never let him know that.

“Very good, Lys. And what is our safe word?”

Lyssa smirked. “Worm?”

The hand on her buttocks lifted, then landed with a sharp *smack*. The sting set her juices flowing between her thighs. She sank her bottom teeth into her top lip to stifle her moan of arousal, but Mike sensed it.

He warned her, “Don’t think that sweet pussy of yours is going to distract me again, Miss Lawrence.” His mouth settled over hers, silencing any argument. When he released her, he demanded, “Now, the safe word?”

“Dragon.”

His lips bussed hers as his hands slid away. The rub of soft fabric against her aching breasts and the tug of something around her waist induced her to open her eyes and look down. Mike deftly retied the belt at her waist and straightened the

lapels of her robe. He pressed one last kiss to her lips before pulling away. Her unease stirred the moment she saw the look in his eyes.

“Tell me what you expect from me, Lyssa.”

“Nothing.” The response slipped free before she realized the word had formed in her mind.

An expression she couldn't name flickered across his face before disappearing. The curve of his lips compressed, and his eyes squeezed shut. Mike drew a deep breath, then expelled it. “Why?”

That was more difficult to answer. Not that she didn't have a ready reply. She did. It just wasn't *her* reply. “*Worthless. Useless. Should never have been born.*” Venomous insults and snarled words whispered through her mind. Internally she winced at the memories but refrained from repeating them aloud.

Better to pretend ignorance than make Mike aware of faults he'd soon discover on his own. It was for her own good. Shrugging, she told him, "It's only thirty days, Mike, not the rest of our lives."

"Ah, but you're wrong, love." Mike moved closer; his fingertips caressed her cheek as he tilted her face up to his. "The next thirty days are for you to learn the freedom in submitting to me. But after they're up, I'm not leaving."

Lyssa stumbled backward, retreating from his hold. "No, you said—"

"I said I wouldn't touch you if you could say you didn't love me after our thirty days are over. And I won't. But nothing you say or do will make me leave you."

Her heart thundered in her chest as he lifted her left hand. "You're making a mistake," she told him, desperate to quash the anticipation that stirred to life as he carefully wound a pale gold string around

the base of her ring finger.

The warning was useless. He'd never believe her. He never had in the past.

A sigh escaped her as he leaned forward. She squished her eyes shut, and Lyssa forgot to breathe as Mike's lips settled, butterfly soft against hers and he whispered, "I promise I'll never leave you, baby. I love you." His lips left hers and pressed against the decoration he'd placed on her hand. "Not quite right," he muttered.

She blinked against the burn of tears as she opened her eyes and found him contemplating the thread on her finger as if debating something. "What isn't right?" she asked, confused and terrified at the same time that he'd finally decided to listen to reason.

"The color." He tapped the gold string. "You're going to have to have more than just a plain gold band when we get married. Doesn't offer much of a warning

to other men that you're taken."

Lyssa's gaze dropped to the simple length of thread wrapped around her finger. The gold was slightly darker than the light tan she'd developed over the summer. She tried to ignore the inner voice that disagreed with Mike. A plain gold band would be sufficient since there wasn't another man she'd ever want except him.

She shook off the desire to plunge headlong into the fantasy of marriage, but she couldn't bring herself to remove the bit of cotton. Instead she curled her hand into a fist, trapping the thread in place. Temporary as it might be, she'd take what she could before Mike left her for good.

Chapter Seven

Lyssa planted her hands on her hips and wrinkled her nose in frustration. The outfits spread across her bed ranged from a formfitting cocktail dress to casual slacks and silk tunics. Never in her life had she been in such a dither over what to wear for a man. Mike hadn't confirmed when he would arrive, but she knew he would come with luggage in tow.

When he'd rolled out of her bed this morning—and left her limp as a damp washrag sprawled across her sheets—with a promise to call, Lyssa figured there would be a phone call. One. Singular. Instead she'd gotten one every hour or so.

Some were done to ask questions about items he was thinking of bringing over, while others were simply Mike calling to tell her three simple words: "I love you."

Her body ached, and her panties grew wet at the thought of him strolling through her door again. Thirty days as his lover, playing the submissive opposite his dominant, was sure to satisfy the strongest of her desire for him. After the thirty days, she'd have to tread carefully around the man. She stuffed her hand in her pocket as soon as she realized she'd begun rubbing the spot where Mike had twined string in a makeshift ring the night before.

Never mind that she'd tucked the thread ring into the keepsake box on her nightstand. Fantasies of spending the rest of her life with him were one thing. Reality was something completely different. No one stayed with her, she reminded herself. Not even Mike. It was

inevitable that he would leave again. And when he did, she'd have to start working on the family she wanted to fill the hole his leaving would create.

Wiping her damp palms down her jean-clad thighs, Lyssa chewed on her bottom lip and scanned the clothes covering the bed. Sex with Mike was one thing she knew she did well. She'd use these next thirty days to store up memories for all the years when she'd be without him. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on her. Here she was craving the role of the submissive when everything in her had to assume the role of dominant in order to protect her heart from the pain she knew was likely.

"Life is such a bitch," she grumbled. She started to reach for the peach raw silk tunic with mandarin collar and matching wide-legged trousers when the doorbell rang.

Cursing at the lost opportunity to

impress him when she greeted him, Lyssa hurried down the hall and opened the front door. The sight of Ben and Vance on the porch, a grocery bag of food in Ben's arms and a six-pack of beer in Vance's, made Lyssa recall what day of the week it was—Taco Saturday.

“Did you tell him?” Ben asked.

Lyssa leaned against the door and glared up at her friend. “Good afternoon to you too, Ben,” she grumbled. Leaving the door open behind her, she headed into the kitchen to begin the preparations for the Saturday taco lunch she always shared with her neighbors. Both men followed her, closing the door behind them.

“Ben's in a bit of a pissy mood, love.” Vance squeezed her shoulders in a one-armed hug before pulling open the refrigerator and setting the beer he'd brought on the shelf inside.

“I am not in a pissy mood,” Ben

denied.

As she tried to move past him, Ben stopped her. Hips resting against the counter, he held her still in front of him and watched her closely. Lyssa squirmed beneath his gaze.

“Did you tell him?” Ben asked again.

“Tell him what?” Lyssa knew it was silly to try to play dumb, but rehashing this same argument held little interest for her. Not with Mike likely to arrive any minute.

“About losing the baby.”

Ben allowed her to shift out of his hold as she moved to the refrigerator to gather the ingredients for lunch. “Why would he care about that, Ben?”

“Because it was his.” Vance answered her question, drawing Lyssa’s gaze as she moved toward the stove.

“What—How—” she stammered.

Vance settled his hands onto her

shoulders. "Ben told me what happened. It makes perfect sense that the baby you lost four years ago was Mike's, considering he's the only man you've been involved with in years."

"That doesn't mean he'd care about what happened." Lyssa shrugged off Vance's touch. She focused her gaze on setting the skillet on the burner before she turned on the stove. "I mean, look at how many men are out there who don't—"

"You never even gave him a chance," Ben argued. "How could he tell you how he felt when he never knew about it?"

"When should I have given him a chance to decide?" Lyssa glared over her shoulder at both men as she crumbled the hamburger into the warming skillet. "He was gone. He left after Mattie and Bryce married, and I didn't see him again until Mattie's collaring ceremony. I'd already lost the baby by then. What good would it have done to tell him?"

She'd never told Ben about the visit Mike had made to her home three months after their siblings married, the night Mattie ended up locked in a closet at the Club. Nor had she told him about Mike standing her up on the date she'd intended to tell him that she was pregnant; she'd miscarried merely days after realizing he'd chosen a model over her. By that time, Mike had been in England with some exotic-voiced woman—Lyssa cut the thought off before it could form.

Guilt was hard enough to swallow every time Ben suggested she confess to Mike about the baby she'd lost. It would be ten times—a hundred times—harder to deal with if Ben knew the visit from Mike had started off as a simple attempt to see if there had been consequences to the hours they'd spent together. If Ben knew that Mike had actually asked if she was pregnant during that second wild,

irrational evening, he'd be suspicious. If he discovered she'd lied that night and told Mike she wasn't pregnant, she'd never hear the last of her friend's speeches about integrity and honesty.

She blamed the heat suffusing her face on the warmth from the stove. Hopefully both of the men with her would think along similar lines if they spotted her pink cheeks.

"There is such a thing as the telephone, Lys." Ben's comment pulled her from her thoughts.

"Yes. And he could just as easily have contacted me if he'd wanted." The inner voice whispering to her about the lie grew louder as she continued to deny the attempts Mike had made to coax her into a relationship after their night at the Club. Or the overtures she'd shrugged off for the twelve years she'd known the younger man. She moved to the sink and rinsed off her sticky hands. Wiping them

on a dishtowel, she looked at Ben. “Why should I be the one to make the first move? To try to contact him when it was so obvious he couldn’t have cared less.” She’d tried that too, only to have another woman answer his phone.

“You don’t know that.”

Lyssa nodded. “If he cared, he would have stuck around.” She swallowed as she remembered the bitter words she’d exchanged with Mike the few times she’d seen him before Mattie’s wedding and following the night he’d stood her up on their only date. “If he really cared about me, he wouldn’t keep running off to those godforsaken stretches of land where everyone is trying to kill each other.”

Or ogling sexy young models. The jealousy that always rose at the thought of Mike pursuing one of those models stirred to life. The memory of the woman who’d answered Mike’s cell phone the second time Lyssa had given in to

temptation to tell him about the baby rose up again. The woman's exotic accent stirred images of a Nubian princess, her dark skin a sharp contrast to Mike's as they twisted against each other while making love.

Lyssa's stomach churned even now at the thought of Mike taking the other woman to the room he'd shared with Lyssa at the Club after the masquerade. Of him bringing her to San Diablo and making Lyssa face her replacement in Mike's bed, in his affections.

"I can't speak for Mike, but I would want to know." Vance's voice broke into Lyssa's musings, pulling her back to the discussion.

"Know?"

"Whether you'd had or lost my child, I'd want to be there. I'd want to do whatever necessary to help you."

"And if you didn't know? If you found

out years later? How would you feel? Would you forgive the woman? Or would you hate her—resent her having stayed silent?” Lyssa’s heart slammed against her ribs. Anxious to hear Vance’s response, she was concerned his answer would be the same as the ones she imagined Mike would have if she revealed her secret.

“It would depend.”

She stirred the simmering meat but glanced over her shoulder to read the intensity of Vance’s expression. “On what?”

“The reason I wasn’t told. How long she’d kept the truth about the baby from me.”

A shudder traveled through Lyssa as she processed Vance’s comments. Knowing Mike the way she did, there was little doubt in her mind that he would resent her not telling him about their child. He would feel betrayed, even

resentful, that she'd lied to him. She shook off the spinning thoughts and glanced at Ben. "What about you?"

"I've been telling you for years you needed to let Mike know."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Ben didn't hesitate. "I'd want to know."

It hurt enough dealing with the fact that she hadn't been able to protect the tiny life that had been entrusted to her. To think how angry Mike might feel about her keeping the information about its loss from him only increased the unease, the guilt filling her. "Would you expect to be part of raising your child if you found out about it?"

"Yes." Both men answered at the same time, their tones firm.

The knot in her belly grew.

* * *

Anticipation stirred in Mike's groin as he strode up the steps onto Lyssa's porch and knocked on the door. The small gym bag David had filched from his apartment two days earlier was weighted down with toys he was sure his woman would enjoy. He'd forgotten it in his truck the night before. After gaining her agreement yesterday afternoon, Mike had stayed the night with her. Only the need to check on his business had drawn him away. He had thirty days to convince Lyssa he was the man to master her body and her heart.

The half grin on his lips disappeared when Lyssa's door swung open and Ben Murphy stood facing him.

A tense moment passed between them until Lyssa's voice broke the staring match. "Ben? Is that Mike?" she asked.

"Yes," Ben called back. He motioned Mike in and closed the door behind him.

Mike left the bag on the floor beside

the entrance and followed Ben through the living room and into the kitchen. Vance stood slicing vegetables while Lyssa stirred something in a pan on the stove. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail. A loose pair of jeans and an oversize sweatshirt hid the generous curves of her body.

He'd been irritated when the two men had tried to interfere with his claiming of her at the Club. To see them in her house casually sharing cooking duties with her twisted the jealousy inside him. It was a unique and disturbing feeling. Mike disliked it. Nor did he appreciate the apparent ease his woman felt around these men.

"Is it because I was coming over, or do they live with you now?" Mike asked.

"Excuse me?" Lyssa turned a confused look on him.

"Are you suddenly getting cold feet, Lys? Is that why you've decided to keep

your guard dogs close?"

"It's Saturday, Mike." Her tone suggested he should understand the significance of the day.

"So?" He failed to see how the day related to the presence of two men. Especially after he'd already punished her for breaking his first rule—no other men.

"Taco Saturday," Vance explained as he grabbed the package of cheese Ben tossed at him. "Saturdays we do tacos here. Wednesday night is steaks on the grill at our place."

"Taco Saturday?" Mike watched Lyssa place a cover over the pan and take the package of tortillas from Ben. The friendly smile she gave the other man only increased Mike's annoyance. "How long have you three been sharing Taco Saturdays and Steak Wednesdays?"

"Four years," Vance answered. "Ben

and Lys let me join them after Ben and I hooked up.”

“And what if I don’t like tacos or steak?” Mike asked, his gaze focused on Lyssa. Perhaps he hadn’t made it clear that his rules didn’t pertain to merely having sex.

She stopped laying the tortillas over a small wire form and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“What if I don’t want to spend Wednesdays or Saturdays with anyone else around?” He could tell by her expression she hadn’t been expecting his demand. She seemed oblivious to the tension between him and the other men. He’d be damned if he’d allow her to turn away from him and back to these two for anything—whether it involved friendship or sex. “I told you yesterday, I don’t share, Lyssa. And I meant it.”

“Now just a minute—”

Mike ignored Vance's protest as he faced Lyssa. "Rule number one: no other men."

"Excuse me." Lyssa set aside the package, slipped the pan with the tortillas hanging over the forms into the oven, and left the kitchen. She avoided looking at any of the men as she moved past them.

"What the hell is your problem, Halsey?" Vance demanded, setting the knife down as if he didn't trust himself with a weapon.

"You don't get it, do you, Justiss? She's mine."

"So?"

Mike crossed his arms over his chest. "So this little threesome you all have shared is over."

Ben shook his head. "No, my man, it isn't. Lyssa is a friend. As long as she wants or needs us, Vance and I are going to be here for her."

“She has me now.”

Vance shook his head and picked up the grater. Running the chunk of cheese he'd sliced over the ridges, he snorted. “If you're not careful, Mike, *you* won't have her for very long.”

Determined to make sure Lyssa understood his expectations, Mike left the kitchen and headed for the master bedroom at the back of the house.

Inside her room, he found Lyssa carefully picking up the various outfits spread over her bed. He was ready for a fight, but the quiet calm of her voice surprised him. “Did I ever tell you that I don't like pushy men?”

“I told you the rules.” Mike ignored her comment.

She glared over her shoulder at him as she hung her clothes up. “So, what? I'm supposed to isolate myself from my friends to keep you happy?”

“No.”

Heat built in her tone as she snapped, “Then what? I sit around by myself waiting for you to stroll in?” She shoved another outfit into the closet and then turned to face him.

Again he ignored her comment, his focus on removing the other men from her home. “They need to go.”

“Who?”

Down the hall, he could hear the rattle of plates and cutlery as Ben and Vance continued making lunch. “Ben and Vance. They need to leave.”

She drew a deep breath. He could see the resolve forming in her mind. “Knuckling under to a man’s demands isn’t a part of my life. That stopped when I was seventeen. And it won’t start again. Not *ever* again. No matter how much I may be attracted to you, Mike, I’ll decide whom I ask to stay and whom I ask to go.”

“Is that a no?”

Lyssa nodded. “Exactly. No. I won’t ask them to leave. I heard what you said to Ben. You can’t tell me who I’ll keep as friends, Mike.”

“No fuck buddies,” he warned her, moving into the room.

Lyssa laughed, the sound empty of humor. “You can’t be serious, Mike.”

Mike dismissed the loosening of the knot in his chest and pointed out, “You’ve been with them at the Club.”

“Is there some unwritten rule that says I have to have sex with any man accompanying me there?” Lyssa shook her head. “I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“What’s with the sudden jealousy? You haven’t given a damn about what I did or who I went out with before now...”

“Like hell I haven’t.” Mike strode across the room to stand toe-to-toe with

her. "They certainly acted like they owned you at the masquerade. Does Ben have a key to your house?"

Lyssa nodded. "And I have a key to his and Vance's place." Setting her hands on her hips, she faced Mike calmly. "We're friends. We take care of each other's homes when one or the other of us needs to be away for a few days."

The urge to demand that she open herself to him the way she did with the other two men hovered on the tip of his tongue. Regaining control, he asked the one question he needed answered, "And a comfy spot in their bed as well?"

Not bothering with a response, Lyssa moved to shove the last dress into her closet and grouched out loud, "I should have known the second I slept with you again this would happen. I knew there was a reason I didn't want to get involved with a kid like you. You have the maturity level of a six-month-old puppy.

What's next? Peeing on everything so you can mark your territory?"

"Kid?" Mike demanded. He gripped her arm and swung her around to face him. "What about them?" He gestured to the men down the hall.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, if it's such a hardship getting involved with a 'kid like me,' what the hell is getting involved with Ben or Vance? Robbing the cradle?"

"I don't..."

"Sweetheart, Vance is two years younger than me. Ben, on the other hand, is two years older than me, but that still puts him four years your junior. If I'm such a kid, then so are they." Gripping her other arm, he pulled her close, leaving little room for anything to pass between them but air. "And if anyone should have a complaint about immature behavior, it should be me."

“You? Why?”

“Four years ago, I took you home, and you locked yourself in the bathroom. I knocked on the door and waited for an hour. An hour. But you refused to come out.” He gave her a little shake, wanting to rattle her memory into place. “I returned as soon as I was back in country, and you did the same thing—ran away. After a little wham-bam-thank-you-sir, of course. Then it was back to you playing rabbit for four years. Every time I tried to talk to you, you scurried off like some frightened little bunny and avoided me.”

“If I recall, you couldn’t be bothered to keep the one date I did agree to.”

“I apologized. I told you it was an emergency—”

“And I needed to talk to you, but your job, your career was more important,” Lyssa snapped.

“I came back. I tried to make it up to

you.” The damage had been done. He’d accepted that when he’d decided providing backup for his team came before Lyssa. Now, though, nothing would come before his woman’s needs. Nothing and no one.

“You just wanted to gloat,” Lyssa excused.

He didn’t miss the way her body betrayed her, moving closer into his hold rather than pulling away.

“I just wanted you, Lys. In bed or out. Against the wall. Over a chair. I wanted to sink inside you and never leave.”

Mike crushed her mouth beneath his. Pulling her close, he wrapped her in his arms as their kiss grew more heated. Spots appeared behind his closed eyelids due to lack of oxygen. Breathing labored, Mike eased his lips away and gazed down at her. “That’s all I wanted, Lyssa.”

Looking stunned and a little dizzy from his kiss, Lyssa held on to him to try to steady herself. “I-I didn’t know.”

“Well, now you do. What are you going to do about it?”

She shook her head, confused.

“Lunch is served. Come and get it.” Vance’s call from the kitchen offered her an escape.

And she grabbed it. “I’m starving. Let’s go eat.”

Mike stopped her as she tried to step past him. “You won’t be able to run forever, Lys.”

Without saying anything, she moved around him and headed down the hall. He waited before following her, his mind strategizing his next move to break down the walls the woman he loved kept building between them.

Chapter Eight

Mike leaned against the entrance to the hallway as Lyssa gave Vance and Ben a final hug at the door. At the same time, he noticed how determinedly she ignored the packed bag he'd left in the foyer. Ben glanced over Lyssa's head at him. The warning was clear in the other man's cool gray eyes. *Hurt her and you'll answer to me.*

Mike nodded his acknowledgement of the threat and offered a casual salute in farewell.

After she shut and locked the door, Lyssa rested against it, her back to him for several moments.

“Delaying it won’t change anything, pet,” Mike told her as he straightened away from the wall and moved across the room toward her.

“Delaying what?” Lyssa looked at him. The guileless gaze she turned on him would have almost convinced him she had no inkling of what he meant, but the flush in her cheeks gave her away. Even her breathing increased, and her hands tugged and twisted the hem of her oversize sweatshirt as he approached.

Leaning forward, he pressed a soft kiss to her lips before responding, “Your punishment.” He bent to retrieve his bag, all the while watching her reaction.

She gave a small start at his words, then a gusty sigh. “Rule number one?”

Mike nodded, tracing her lips with the forefinger of his empty hand. “Again.”

Lyssa’s hand came up and tugged his fingers away from her mouth. “Why?”

It was only Ben and Vance.”

He twisted his hand free of her grip, then settled his fingers around her wrist. “What makes them exempt from the rule?”

“They’re just friends. Plus they’re gay,” she reasoned.

“They’re bi. And they’re men. Therefore a violation of rule number one.” Mike watched her face, monitoring her expression.

Although wary, Lyssa appeared neither frightened nor unduly disturbed by his announcement. “I really think we need to establish the where and when of the rules’ application. Are you expecting me to follow the rules at all times? Or only when they pertain to sex? I mean, there are any number of times when I might be in violation of rule number one. Like when I’m at the bank or the grocery store. Does that mean I deserve to be punished?” She remained reasonable as

Mike moved down the hall.

Mike stayed just as reasonable. “The rules are in effect at all times during your training.” He walked backward down the hall, facing her the entire time as he drew her with him.

“Why? That’s not how Mattie and Bryce use their rules.”

“I’m not my brother, and you aren’t your sister. Every dominant establishes the rules used with his or her submissive. I choose to keep mine in place at all times during your training.”

“What’s the purpose of assigning rules that are likely to get broken due to circumstances beyond my control?” She followed without hesitation, gesturing with her free hand and making no attempt to pull the one he held away.

“What are the rules?” he asked as they crossed the threshold into her bedroom. He set the bag with the toys and

his clothes on the bed.

“No other men; you decide how often and how long; and my body belongs to you.” She listed them, ticking each off on her fingers as she faced him.

He didn’t correct her mistake regarding rule number three. More than her body belonged to him, but Lyssa wasn’t ready to hear it. Instead he tugged her closer and held her gaze as he explained, “If you keep the rules in mind, you become more vigilant of situations.”

Lyssa gave an unladylike snort. “I don’t think—”

The press of his fingers over her lips stopped her words. “Stop and think. If you know an infraction will have a consequence, you’re less likely to simply walk into a room full of men without thinking first. You’ll determine if there’s another way to complete your task without breaking the rule.” He tugged her close, wrapping his arms around her

waist. "I want to keep you safe."

"Just how do the rules keep me safe? The only one punishing me for breaking them is you," Lyssa groused, but her hands smoothed over the material of his shirt as she spoke.

"If you keep the rules in mind, you'll be more aware of your surroundings." Taking a step back, Mike removed her hands from his chest and lowered them to her waist. "When I first arrived, my intention tonight was to indulge in a little role-play. Maybe, 'naughty sub earns a spanking' or something along that line." The glint in her eyes, the flash of heat at the mention of a spanking deepened Mike's grin. He shifted her hands behind her back and held them with one hand.

"Role-play?" Lyssa's voice caught as she blinked up at him. "Spanking?"

Mike moved his lips to the sensitive spot behind her left ear. "But that plan has been changed."

Lyssa groaned. "Punishment."

He nodded. "You broke the rule; now you need to receive the consequence." Mike waited, knowing she would have little tolerance for his dictate, but he wasn't about to back down.

"I still say they shouldn't count," Lyssa argued. She pulled her arms free of his loose hold and pressed both hands against his chest.

"Rules are rules. When you break them, you have to be punished." He waited, watching her expression as it shifted from irritated to petulant to resentful and finally to resigned.

"Fine." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

Her foot tapped an irritated rhythm as he moved to open the bag. "It's for your own good, Lys."

Her eyes narrowed more. "Bullshit. I'm a grown-up, Mike. Don't try to feed me

any of those lines. Even Maggie tells her daddy it's a crock when he spanks her and says, "This hurts me more than it does you."

Mike laughed. She was right. Their niece did call them like she saw them, even at three years old. "True. All punishments are supposed to hurt. That's why so many people avoid receiving them by following the rules."

"And you don't think the spanking you gave me last night got the point across?" Lyssa asked.

"If it had, Ben and Vance wouldn't have been here when I arrived." He watched her closely, noting the way her lips firmed and her eyes narrowed on him.

Uncrossing her arms and planting her fisted hands on her hips, she chided, "So what's it going to be? Another spanking? Tell my sister on me? Take away my sewing machine? Or maybe your favorite, ditch me like yesterday's

garbage.”

Mike moved faster than Lyssa expected. The moment her last comment slipped free, she knew it would piss him off.

Warm fingers gripped her chin, tilting her face up to his, forcing her to meet the heated expression in his deep brown eyes. His breath, smelling of mint and sweet tea, brushed her lips. “Only warning, Lyssa: no more lies. We both know who kept whom at arm’s length. Who avoided the truth. Who put the barriers between us. Push me again, and you won’t like what happens.”

Her vocal cords froze. There was nothing she could say to counter him. She *had* been the one to push him away. The one who avoided admitting how she felt about him. Refused to accept his apologies. And even his implied threat of retaliation didn’t garner the knee-jerk

response that always followed anyone else's attempts at intimidation.

She wasn't frightened. The frisson of sensation quivering through her held no relation to fear. Instead anticipation stirred in her belly. And excitement. On a visceral level, she knew Mike would never lift a hand in anger against her. He was nothing like her father in that sense. The doubts began to surface, percolating up to prod and push away the eagerness Mike always stirred within her.

Forcing aside the disturbing thoughts, Lyssa offered a simple nod of agreement. "I understand. I didn't really —"

Mike cut her off. "A submissive needs to understand that the master's needs come first. That his desires supersede hers. That breaking the rules is tantamount to ignoring the wishes of your master. To refusing him the pleasure he deserves."

Over the last four years, Lyssa had participated in similar debates with Mattie and Bryce over these very issues. With Bryce their discussions focused on a hypothetical, even intellectual, exchange. Her sister, on the other hand, had surprised her.

Considering the example of their parents, Lyssa was flabbergasted at the simple reasoning Mattie gave for following Bryce's rules. *"I love Bryce. If it pleases him that I follow his rules, it pleases me."*

The part of her that cringed at the thought of reenacting her mother's subservience to her father had howled in protest at Mattie's words. But when Lyssa saw the couple going toe-to-toe over some business venture or something to do with the kids, she knew the rules Mattie followed only applied to the D/s portion of their relationship. That her sister's trust in her husband's love and control gave

Mattie the freedom to stand as a partner in their marriage.

Lyssa returned her attention to Mike. He eased his hold on her chin then moved back to the bag he'd left on the bed. "So honoring the rules is essentially honoring the master?" she offered, still trying to steady the blood thrumming through her veins at the intensity she could feel emanating from Mike. He might look unaffected by her comment, but his displeasure at her earlier taunts was still palpable.

He glanced over his shoulder at her as he set several items on the quilt covering her bed. "You could say that."

Curiosity got the better of her. Lyssa asked, "If punishment is a result of disregarding a master's rules, what is discipline?"

Mike settled on the edge of the bed and shed his sneakers and socks. "Discipline is the steady training of a sub

in various methods of meeting the master's needs."

"If punishment is correcting behaviors, and discipline is building skills in pleasure, where does spanking fit into the picture? Is it discipline or punishment?" Lyssa moved a step closer.

"It can be both," Mike answered.

"How can that be?"

"It varies for every submissive. According to your response last night, you like a good spanking. Heating your bum with a few well-placed swats from my hand, a flogger, or even a paddle is more titillating than off-putting for you." His grin hinted at later plans to do just that.

Lyssa's nipples peaked, rubbing against the soft lace of her bra as she absorbed the information Mike provided.

He continued, "For other subs, spanking is a humiliating experience. It works as a retaining wall between their

sexual self and their nonsexual self. If the spanking is delivered in front of others, it makes the situation even more unbearable.”

“But how can it be considered discipline?”

“Discipline is often a component in role-playing or scene work. For you, pet, a good spanking is like foreplay. It gets your juices flowing. It turns you on. When I use it for discipline, the focus of our play will be to train you to hold off climax.”

“Then you aren’t going to spank me?” Lyssa couldn’t keep the disappointment from her voice. She quelled the protests of the submissive within her.

“I am.” The look on his face was a blend of cunning and amusement.

“But you just said—”

Mike smiled. “For some submissives, physical punishments work to curb

behaviors. But only temporarily. The most effective lessons are those of denial.”

“Denial? You mean delayed gratification?” For some reason, Lyssa was finding it difficult to process the information.

“In a way.” Mike rose from the bed and motioned her to step in front of him. “Until you recognize what you’ll be missing, denying it to you is a waste of time.”

“And you think I’ll grow so attached to your attentions that when you take it away, I’ll start doing anything you want?” She deliberately injected disdain into her voice to bolster her confidence. A confidence on a suddenly shaky foundation when she admitted to herself that his reasoning wasn’t too far off the mark.

“Mmmhmm.” Mike grinned. “Think of it as a big girl’s time-out. Follow the rules and you can play all you want.

Break the rules and no more playtime.”

Before she could ask another question, his hands gripped the bottom of her sweatshirt. “Enough talking, Lyssa. The sooner we get started, the sooner we can get back to proving me right.”

“Or proving me right,” she suggested. She lifted her arms and let him strip off her sweatshirt. “I still think this is a waste of time,” she grumbled.

It seemed reasonable that the sooner she went along with him and let Mike show her the error of her ways, the sooner he’d grow tired of dealing with her. But that didn’t mean she had to go along without protest. Despite the twinge of disappointment pricking her, Lyssa knew it was better for her if Mike recognized that his feelings were infatuation and not love early on in this thirty-day training period.

He didn’t bother responding to her comment. His fingers stroked the straps of

her bra from her shoulders, the callused tips lingering before sliding down to unfasten the hooks in the back and removing the simple white cotton undergarment. His fingers then worked the button and zipper of her jeans free before he eased them over her hips.

“No clothes again?” she quipped. Thirty days of his focused attention would be synonymous with stepping blindfolded onto a minefield.

“My dad always said there was a spot, halfway between the neck and the knees, where you could get your point across without doing permanent damage,” Mike teased. “I acquainted you with it last night.”

“My father didn’t care where he hit as long as it left a mark to remind him he was in charge,” Lyssa muttered, bitterness and anger welling at the sudden memory.

Rough fingertips cupped her chin,

lifting her gaze back to his. “Your father wasn’t a dominant. He was an abusive son of a bitch. Nothing he ever did was done with forethought or control, let alone another’s pleasure in mind. A true master never ignores the needs of the one he... rules.”

The deliberate pause before his final word told Lyssa Mike had reconsidered what he’d started to say. Before she could dwell on the flutter that thought produced within her, he crouched and stripped the shoes and socks from her feet. She rested her hands on his shoulders, rubbing at the warm fabric of his shirt. The flex and bulge of muscle beneath her fingertips heated her body while thoughts of making love with him in her bed again stirred.

Mike finished tugging off her jeans and the panties beneath and tossed them toward the pile of discarded clothing on the floor nearby.

The events from Halloween and the

night before still made her body tingle. Four years ago, she'd imagined living the rest of her life without a lover would be easy. Lyssa discarded that thought now. Her body craved the sensations Mike could bring it. If his application of the paddle tonight was anything like the spanking he'd bestowed on her last night, she was in deep trouble.

Lost in her thoughts, Lyssa was only barely aware of Mike rising and stepping closer to the bed. He drew her with him, positioning her nude body between his spread thighs as he sat on the edge, his hands around her waist.

“Second thoughts, pet?” he asked.

The play of his fingers against the base of her spine sent tendrils of warmth flowing through her center. The wicked threads of heat pooled between her thighs before eddying upward into her breasts.

“No.” She cleared her throat to try to rid her voice of the husky tone his touch

invoked.

Mike stifled his smile, but she could see it twinkling in his eyes. “Positive?” he asked. He leaned forward, her gaze held by his, and slid his tongue over the hard tip of her breast.

Determined not to succumb too quickly, Lyssa shook her head. “I can handle anything you choose to dish out, kid.”

Something flashed in his gaze. Whether it was irritation or humor, she couldn’t tell, but the nip of his teeth against her sensitive nipple made his warning very clear.

Don’t push.

Lyssa couldn’t stop herself from arching her right eyebrow in silent response to his caution. She’d spent too many years relearning not to be intimidated by anyone—male or female—to knuckle under simply because Mike

could play her body so well.

His mouth surrounded the firm jut of her nipple, drawing on it while his tongue stroked and teased it into an even harder crest. Then he drew away and repeated similar attentions to her other breast. The hands kneading her back moved down, cupping her bottom, squeezing and massaging the rounded cheeks in rhythm with the suckling of his mouth.

Lyssa fidgeted, the fire growing in her belly. She felt moisture on the insides of her thighs when she flexed and shifted her legs, hoping to still the burn between them. The evidence of her arousal probably coated her vulva in a glistening sheen as well. Perhaps he wasn't mistaken in reasoning that familiarizing her body to his would work to his advantage.

Dazed and focused only on the sensations Mike stirred within her, Lyssa

jumped when the sting of clamps encircled first one nipple and then the other. Instinctively she reached up to remove them, but Mike halted her, capturing her hands and lowering them to her sides.

“Leave them.” His command was firm, and the look he gave her matched.

Determined to meet his challenge, Lyssa drew a deep breath and forced herself to relax. The pressure of the rings wasn't painful, merely...unfamiliar. The tips of her breasts throbbed, and the fire in her core doubled.

“Is this it?” Lyssa flinched when she heard herself ask the question.

Mike's expression reflected amusement more than irritation. “Not enough, love?” he asked as he dipped his head and nipped the tight crown on her right breast.

Lyssa jumped but stood her ground.

“Depends on how much you have planned,” she stammered.

Mike rose from the bed, keeping Lyssa close. The fabric of his shirt and jeans rubbed along her chest and legs, sending tingles of sensation skittering along her nerve endings.

“Nothing too drastic.” Mike grinned, easing around her so her back rested against his chest. His arms wrapped around her waist, and his hands caressed the soft curve of her belly before moving lower to her waxed, bare mound. Rough fingertips spread the swollen folds and teased the firm nubbin from beneath its hood. “Merely an exercise in control.”

Lyssa allowed her eyes to shut, and her head to drop into the curve of his shoulder, a groan spilling from her lips. “Whose control?” she whispered, fighting the temptation to arch into the caress as he collected the moisture from her body and used it to ease the slide of his thumb

along her clit.

His laughter vibrated against her back, warming her body even more. “Why yours, my love.”

I was afraid he'd say that. Lyssa heard and felt the moan rising in her chest. If Mike's promises were to be believed, Lyssa knew what form this particular punishment would take.

“Turn around,” Mike prompted. He emphasized his command with a light slap to the right cheek of her derriere.

The amusement in his voice induced a tingle of foreboding as she complied. He stood watching her, the slightest smile quirking his lips. The urge to comment rose, but Lyssa stilled her tongue. For the rest of the month, she needed to assume the role of submissive but remain diligent in protecting her heart. Her breasts throbbed, the initial pain of the clamps having faded but not forgotten.

“We need to take this particular task in stages,” Mike informed her.

A quick tug from his fingers on the chain connecting to the clamp sent fire from the captured flesh straight to her womb. The muscles deep within her spasmed, and the spill of her juices trickled onto her thighs, but Lyssa remained still, allowing only a swiftly stifled gasp to escape.

He drew her close to him using the chain. Her wobbly legs made her stumble, nearly toppling into him. Only Mike’s lightning reflexes kept a paper-thin slice of space between their bodies. He nuzzled her temple before moving down to her cheek.

“When you masturbate, you imagine it’s my hands touching you, correct?” The question was a soft whisper as he nibbled on her earlobe.

“Yes, Master.” It would be foolish to deny. Even now she trembled at the

thought of his fingers stroking over her aching body.

“Show me.”

Lyssa blinked up at him in confusion. “Huh?”

The fingers of his left hand strummed a soft beat against her nude pussy. “I want to see you pleasuring this body that belongs to me.” He held her gaze with a firm look. “And you are not to come unless I give you permission.”

Mike gave her no time to climb onto the bed. Instead he lifted her in his arms and gently set her on the mattress, her bottom close to the edge, her legs dangling over the side. “Spread those pretty legs and show me how you finger fuck my pussy,” he ordered, his lips pressing against hers in a quick kiss before he released her and stepped away.

Heat filled Lyssa’s cheeks as she watched him shed his clothes in a slow

striptease.

“Show me,” he told her as he dropped his underwear onto the neatly folded pile and palmed his erection.

Hyperaware of his gaze, she lifted her knees so her heels could find purchase on the edge of the mattress. She propped herself up using her left arm and lifted the fingers of her right hand to her lips. If he wanted an exercise in control, she'd give him one.

Her eyes locked with his, Lyssa leisurely suckled on each of her fingers, wetting them thoroughly before lowering them to the silky flesh of her exposed sex. Lubrication was the least of her needs; she was soaking wet with excitement. She used two fingers to caress the swollen folds up one side and down the other. Moisture pooled beneath her, coating her fingers as she circled her opening before shifting upward to the bud of nerves aching for attention.

Heat flared in Mike's eyes as he enjoyed the show. Lyssa moaned. Her clit was so sensitive that the softest touch from her fingertips caused her internal muscles to jump.

"Pinch it, pet. Squeeze and tug it just as I do. Remember, your fingers are my fingers," Mike commanded.

Her hips lunged upward the moment she complied, a cry of surprise and need escaping her lips.

"Fill up my empty cunt, pet. I want all that hot, sweet cream smeared over my fingers and palm." Mike gave the guttural directive as he moved between her spread thighs.

He didn't touch her, merely hovered there for a moment before dropping to his knees so he was eye level with her sex.

Lyssa moaned, need coiling in her center, ready to combust. She pushed one finger inside, but it wasn't enough. She

added a second finger, stretching her pulsing sheath, sliding in and out, seeking out the pleasure spots Mike instinctively knew to hit.

There. *Oh yes!* Lyssa hummed with ecstasy. Again and again she rubbed and prodded the spongy spot, glorying at the tremors each stroke produced.

“More, baby. My pussy can take another finger. Show me how much you love the way I touch you.”

His words registered on the periphery of her senses. Lyssa was consumed by the sensations, the powerful heat building in her core. His voice blended with her motions, reinforcing the fantasy that the hands arousing her, pleasuring her were an extension of Mike's touch. Pulling back, she added a third finger. It fit, but the stretch stole her breath. She dug her heels into the mattress, her left arm lost purchase, and her body tumbled back onto the bed.

Between her thighs, she worked her fingers in and out of her sopping pussy, but that sweet spot eluded her.

Something wet and rough lapped at her naked mound, startling a cry from her lips.

Breathless, on the cusp of orgasm, she whimpered and looked down her body as Mike pulled her fingers free of her pulsing channel, denying the release her body so desperately craved. His brown gaze locked with hers, and she watched as he sucked the cream from her fingers and palm, humming with exaggerated relish at the taste of her juices. Forced to wait, her ardor slowly cooled, easing her away from the edge just as Mike stood up and tugged her upright.

“You don’t have permission to come, Lyssa.”

Her body throbbed, and her blood raced through her veins. She ached with the need to climax. She wasn’t sure how

long she'd be able to handle her body's need for release, but she'd do it if it killed her.

"Now, I want to feel your mouth around my cock," Mike instructed. He helped her from the bed, holding her arms until her quaking legs could support her.

The moment she heard what he wanted, she wasn't sure she'd survive the night. She dropped her gaze to the thick length of his erection. The tattooed crown was damp, the crimson and black barbed looking. Though his words registered, having never gone down on a man, Lyssa was unsure how to proceed. For the first time, she balked at his request.

His thumb coasted over her lips as he tilted her face up to his. "You have the prettiest mouth, and I know how beautiful it'll look wrapped around my dick, swallowing me down."

The words painted an image in her

head. Anticipation stirred as she wondered what he'd taste like. How he would smell. Would going down on him stir the same sensations making love with him generated?

She swayed on her feet before him, a moan whispering from her lips as her already overstimulated body responded to the pictures growing in her mind. His hand cupped her chin, drawing her gaze to his.

“As my submissive, my pleasure is your only concern. See to my needs, pet. Make me come with those pretty lips. And don't spill a drop.”

Indignation tried to rise at his command, but the minute shift in his expression warned her he was aware of her flare of discontent. She tempered her emotions. This was about control. About who held the reins over the other. And she had every intention of keeping a firm grip on them. It was the only way she'd

survive. If not heart-whole, then at least she'd still have her pride. Resuming her role as sub, she dipped her head in a quick nod. "Yes, Master."

She lifted her chin from his hold and gracefully lowered herself to her knees before him. She took her time, allowing her body to skim along his, a bubble of precum dampening her belly, smearing the edge of her breast as she caressed his erection with a firm grip, careful to avoid tangling the nipple chain around his jutting length.

At eye level with his tumescence, Lyssa stifled her gasp at discovering that at the halfway point along his shaft, the tattoo covered his skin all the way around. The head was completely inked, a pale drop of fluid filling the slit at the top. Remembering all the ways he'd used his mouth on her, Lyssa explored his length with her hands first. "It's so big," she marveled, wrapping her fingers around it,

the tips not quite touching.

His fingers threaded through her hair. With a short tug, the soft waves caressed her shoulders and down her back as he removed the band securing her ponytail. She ignored the loosened blonde waves; her focus never strayed from stroking the soft skin of his penis. The way it shifted beneath her fingers and the firm pulse of his arousal fascinated her, compelled her to move closer.

Her body responded to the aroma drifting up, the musky male scent that tickled the need weeping between her thighs. Tentatively she leaned forward and rolled her tongue over the broad head. The salty flavor of his precum wasn't distasteful. Beneath her fingertips, she felt him shudder. Looking up, she watched his face as she coasted her tongue around the crown a second time. A moan escaped Mike's lips, and a flush washed over his cheeks as she opened her

mouth and covered the flared tip.

The fingers cupping the back of her head speared through her hair. "That's it, baby; suck it. Take it in." His muttered encouragements were augmented by another moan as Lyssa stroked her tongue along the underside of his shaft, savoring the taste of him.

She worked her way over the head, sucking and licking before releasing it with a soft popping sound. When Mike groaned and his fingers clenched in her hair, Lyssa hid her smile.

Power surged through her, but she was unsure if it was based on her ability to stay in control or if it was pride in bringing him pleasure, as a good submissive was supposed to do. She moved her mouth beneath the head, lapping at the rigid vein underneath. Another tug on her hair sent a sting through her scalp, and her moan blended with the one Mike let loose. A smear of

precum wet her cheek as she continued her exploration down his shaft to the heavy sac dangling behind its base. Much as she disliked doing so, Lyssa removed one hand from Mike's cock to gently hold his balls.

They were warmer than his penis, the bundle drawn tight and close to his body. With one hand, she squeezed and stroked his aroused penis, moving slowly from base to head, then back down, while the other weighed and fondled his balls.

"Not too hard, baby," Mike warned, his fingers tugging at her hair to raise her gaze to his. "Take 'em in your mouth. Taste 'em," he prompted, watching her.

Lyssa's eyes must have gone wide, because Mike smiled and a throaty chuckle rumbled out of him. Dropping her gaze to the parts of him filling her hands, she wondered if he became as aroused as she was when he used his mouth on her. She'd enjoyed the quick taste she'd had so

far. Curiosity as well as the desire to please Mike drew Lyssa to lower her head and take the lightly furred sac into her mouth. A voice whispered a warning about indulging the submissive within, but she ignored it.

“Oh yes. So fuckin’ good.”

Her breasts tingled at the heat lacing his words. The vibrations working outward from her center pulsed in time with the heavy rush of blood through the veins beneath her lips. Wanting more, she flicked her tongue along one side, then the other before letting them go and licking her way up the length of his cock. Did all subs feel this power? This thrill at satisfying their master?

“Let me feel your mouth, pet. Suck me,” Mike ordered, his hand covering hers on his shaft.

That was Lyssa’s goal. She opened her lips and covered the head. Taking her time, she swallowed more, rocking forward

and back in tandem with the light thrust of Mike's hips as he coaxed her to fill her mouth a bit more each time.

"God, it looks so pretty. Just like I imagined," he assured her.

The tension in his body climbed. Was he keeping himself from moving faster, forcing his cock deep into her throat? The soft slurping sounds she made as she bobbed her head up and down on him, even the ache in her cheeks from suckling him barely registered as she listened to the rasp of his breathing increase.

The fingers in her hair clenched. The sting in her scalp arrowed through her body to her pussy, making her moan. The sound vibrated around his cock.

Mike groaned and tugged again. "Look at me."

She ran her tongue over and around the glans as she pulled back and looked

up at him. She could feel saliva dribble from the corner of her lips, but she ignored it.

“Swallow all of my cum,” he told her. “You must not waste any.”

Mind adrift in the sensations building inside her, Lyssa nodded and returned to stroking and sucking his cock. Her eyes closed, she moved her hand over the part of him she couldn't hold in her mouth. The coil of arousal tightened in her core as she felt the beginnings of Mike's climax pulse through him.

She swallowed down the cum filling her mouth without a thought, barely tasting it. Heat filled her cheeks, and her eyes opened. They met his and went wide as she tried to follow his command while enjoying how his face tightened into a grimace of pleasure and his body went rigid. Watching him, feeling his response fill her mouth, Lyssa trembled with her own need to orgasm, but she held it off—

barely.

The tension in his frame eased as he began to pull away. "Don't come," he reminded her.

Lyssa shuddered as his cock slid free of her lips, still semihard and wet. On her knees, she rocked in place, unaware her hands had moved to his thighs to keep herself upright.

"Stand up." Mike slipped his fingers from her hair and waited for her.

He did nothing to help her rise to her feet, merely watched. Her legs felt like half-set gelatin, wobbly and unsteady, and her breathing was ragged. Until she stood, Lyssa was unaware that her cream coated the insides of her thighs. Her body throbbed, desperate for release, for climax.

"A submissive's pleasure comes from pleasing her master. You've done well, pet. I am very pleased."

His words filled her with a warmth unconnected with her arousal. A hint of unease invaded her mind, but her need to come overwhelmed it.

Mike's hands cupped her full breasts. The heat and scrape of his callused fingertips caressed her soft mounds, then touched the pinched nipples. She wasn't able to contain her soft cry at the unexpected pain. She lifted her hands to grasp his forearms as she swayed in front of him.

"You do not have permission to come, pet. That is your punishment."

The information registered as his fingers moved to the clamps and then waited. Frustration welled inside her, but Lyssa left it unvoiced as another feeling presented itself—acceptance.

"The pain will push you, and you'll want to give in, but you aren't allowed to. Do you understand?"

Breath ragged, tears welling in her eyes, Lyssa nodded. The tenuous hold she maintained on her body grew shakier by the second.

The moment he released the clamps, Lyssa sobbed and her knees buckled. On the periphery, she knew Mike had caught her and held her close as her body quaked and shuddered, but the pain filling her breasts was a bit more than she'd expected. The blood rushing back into her nipples hurt, but the pleasure that rippled through her body in its wake almost broke her resolve. She pressed her head against Mike's chest, gripping his arms tight, unconsciously digging her fingernails into his skin as she fought to retain control.

When she could breathe easily again and dared to look up at Mike, she read the pride in his gaze. Before she could take another breath, he swung her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. With a

bit of maneuvering, he tugged the bedding down and settled her against the cool sheets.

“Very good, Lyssa.” He smiled down at her and pressed a kiss to her brow.

A tiny part of her, long buried and left unfulfilled, heard the satisfaction in his words. Fear rose. Aware now that her plan to keep from allowing herself to be affected by this month of training didn’t appear to be succeeding, she wasn’t surprised to hear the automatic response that fell from her lips. “Thank you, Master.”

Need coiled low in her belly, a steady throb, the slightest bit painful. Lyssa focused on that feeling, knowing that should she break one of Mike’s rules, she would experience it again. Throughout her ruminations, she was acutely aware of the sounds Mike made as he left the room and moved through the house, turned off lights, set the alarm, secured doors and

windows before returning to the bedroom to slide beneath the covers.

His arms wrapped around her, tugging her up against his body as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

The tree-lined drive was similar to the one that led to the Club, but the turreted rooftop with its distinctive widow's walk and the crash of waves on the nearby beach set Pirate's Folly apart from the Diablo Blanco Club. Mike eased his foot off the accelerator as he slowed his truck and parked in the curved drive of his brother's home. His mind wandering through the pleasant events over the last week with Lyssa, he grimaced at the ringtone that resembled the theme song to *The Exorcist*, and pulled his phone from the clip on his belt. As much as he respected Max Landry's business acumen, there were times Mike could easily have

shot the bastard. After he fired him, of course. “Halsey.”

“I swear to God, boy, if you don’t get your head on straight—”

He cut the older man off. “What are you calling to complain about this time, Max?”

“You haven’t been right since you went back to that hick town,” Max growled.

Mike shut off the engine and dropped an arm over the steering wheel. “Did you call for a reason, or are you just wasting my minutes to bitch at me?”

A rumble of curses and growls echoed against Mike’s ear, but Max didn’t hang up. “I’ve got a job. You don’t even have to leave that Podunk hole-in-the-wall of yours if you don’t want to.”

Mike’s gaze traced the railing surrounding the front porch of his brother’s home. The thick Ionic columns

supported the second-floor balcony before rising to the edge of the railed widow's walk. "Keep going."

"A photographer canceled on *Upscale* at the last minute. Some spread to show off a bunch of wedding dresses."

Mike stayed quiet; he could hear the disgust in his agent's voice at the idea of Mike wasting his time on a fashion shoot. The *click* of a lighter and the sound of Max drawing on a cigarette came before his agent's raspy cough. "And you'll like this part. It's for that designer broad you've got a hard-on for."

Mike could feel his lips thin with anger. "Want to try that again, Max?" His voice carried a clear message. A message the older man received with ill grace but absolute clarity.

"I told 'em I'd call you, but their price is too low. It'd barely cover my commission at your regular rate," Max complained.

“Tell them to add another thousand and I’ll do it.” After the last week, Mike had no intention of leaving San Diablo until his month with Lyssa was up. There were two possible outcomes to this next month: one, he convinced Lyssa who owned her and that his intentions were permanent; or two, she refused to admit to her feelings, and he began formulating another plan to win her over for good. He refused to turn his back on the years he’d loved her and start looking for another woman who would return his affection. If it came right down to it, he’d employ his big brother’s method for keeping his woman—he’d get Lyssa pregnant and make her marry him.

“Damn it, son. You can’t start going backward—”

Mike ignored his agent’s protest. “I’m retired, Max. I’ve been telling you that for four years, but you’re not listening. When do they want to schedule

it?" He tried to remember the other commissions waiting for his attention, but he'd never been that great about keeping track of time. If he was going to make his studio productive, he'd have to find someone to help manage it. "You said it was wedding dresses?" Mike asked. The thought of getting Lyssa alone in his studio required him to shift his position on the front seat to accommodate his body's reaction.

With her as his submissive, there should be no reason for her turn him down if he asked her to pose for him. Hell, the only reason he'd stopped asking her to do it was because her refusals began to get physical. Now would be the opportune time to finally get her naked and in front of his camera.

Oh, the pictures he'd imagined...

"I'm telling you, Mike, this is a shit job. Let me get back in touch with Hargreaves. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to

get you on board,” Max coaxed.

Mike tensed at the mention of the other man. There was no proof of the activities he suspected Hargreaves was involved in. Activities that would have even a hardened cynic like Max gasping. Instead Mike snapped, “When does *Upscale* need the proofs, Max.”

“End of the month,” Max grumped.

“You said the photographer bailed on them at the last minute? Did they have a location and date already set?”

“Yeah, that old Catholic mission halfway between Ayerstown and San Diablo this weekend.”

“Tell them I’ll be ready to shoot this weekend, and we’ll change the location to my studio.” He slapped the phone closed without waiting for a reply and shoved it back onto the clip on his belt.

His gaze wandered over the curved gravel drive to the expanse of lawn

stretching out on either side of the huge home. Coming through his open truck windows, the sound of the ocean to the west of the house helped soothe the tension from Mike's shoulders.

Perhaps it was time to cut ties with Max. The man had been a pain in Mike's ass since he'd told his agent about his plan to set up a studio and retire here in San Diablo. From the seat beside him, Mike grabbed the bag holding his cameras before swinging open the door to his truck. When he'd left Lyssa earlier, he'd told her he had an assignment. He grinned and wondered what she'd do if she knew the job was to take shots of her sister and his brother in an intimate setting.

Again his body responded to the idea of taking the same type of pictures of Lyssa. He could practically see the photos developing in his mind. Images of them making love while cameras recorded

every touch, every move. Lyssa's full curves and sensual nature would only enhance the pictures.

With a spring in his step, he jogged up the stairs onto the porch and knocked on the door. What he wouldn't give to see Lyssa's face if she only knew what he'd be doing for the next hour or so.

* * *

Bryce's studio took up the entire top floor of one of the turrets of the Greek Revival-style mansion. A bed was positioned near the center of the room, covered with cream silk sheets and mussed by the heated movements of the couple occupying it.

The image through the viewfinder was erotic. The thrust of slender fingers through thick, white blond waves; a delicate spine arched, breasts quivering beneath the mouth suckling a taut nipple.

The shutter whirled silently as Mike

moved around the room, using the light filtering through the open French doors, wide windows, and broad skylight to highlight the angles of flesh stroking flesh, lips coasting over curves, and the ripple of muscle beneath sweat-soaked, sun-bronzed skin.

Voyeurism was never something that interested him, and even as he shifted to take another series of photographs, Mike viewed the couple making love as subjects rather than a stimulus to his libido, not that he hadn't seen Bryce and Mattie in similar clinches at the Diablo Blanco Club. Hell, he'd participated in his own sexual exhibitions at the Club in the past, going so far as to engage in a ménage with another dom and his sub, as well as a couple of spankings while other members of the Club looked on.

The connection between his brother and sister-in-law was unique, not because

of the sex but because of the trust and commitment between them. Mike had no problem admitting to being somewhat jealous of the bond between Bryce and Mattie. A few weeks ago, he'd been dreading this job because of the continued refusal of the woman he wanted to be with. For the next twenty-one days, though, she was his.

He allowed himself a slight grin as he shifted positions and took another series of photos. Having Lyssa—or more precisely, having the opportunity to be with Lyssa for the next three weeks—went a long way to easing the envious feelings he harbored.

Settling onto one knee, the other upright to prop his arm on and steady the camera, Mike's body was on autopilot, clicking the button, adjusting an angle, tilting the lens, without any conscious input from his mind. Instead the actions in front of him played out like a sensual

film.

The cries slipping from Mattie's throat as she climaxed resounded against the high, curved roof before echoing off the walls. As Mike watched, his brother drew away from his wife, bracing his forearms on either side of her hips, and carefully studied the woman beneath him.

Mattie's cheeks flushed at Bryce's close scrutiny. Mike caught the wave of color rising from her throat and into her face with his camera. Time seemed suspended, leaving Mike breathless at the very stillness of the pair. Bryce's hands settled over her breasts, causing Mattie to arch again and moan with arousal. From the hardened peaks, Bryce drifted over the plump curves, slowing as his touch reached her belly. Tracing the faint pink lines attesting to her motherhood, it didn't take long for Mike to figure out what fascinated his brother. When Bryce cradled the lower curve in one hand and

dipped his head to kiss the soft skin, Mike squeezed off several shots, capturing the wonder and pride in his older brother's usually austere expression. He suspected that, based on Mattie's tiny nod and his brother's reaction, Bryce had just discovered his wife was pregnant for the third time.

The twinge of envy held Mike still for a moment. Lyssa was the only woman he'd ever imagined having children with. He swallowed back a curse at the thought that a moment as special as this could possibly elude him. Shaking off the momentary melancholy, Mike lifted the camera and refocused on the couple before him.

Moving lower, Bryce eased Mattie's thighs farther apart and lapped at the bare skin of her pussy. A low, throaty hum of appreciation whispered through the room. "Strawberries." Bryce chuckled, glancing up into the blushing features of

his wife. Dipping his attention back to the delicate flesh before him, Bryce tasted and teased, nibbled and licked the pink folds.

With his camera, Mike captured Mattie's pleased expression as her hips arched and her hands tangled in her husband's hair. Her small heels dug into the silk sheets and thick mattress as she drew her knees up. Keeping his movements slow, Mike stood and backed toward the door, adjusting the setting on the lens to take in the couple and the open French doors behind the bed. Gauzy curtains stirred in the breeze, blowing into the room as Mattie tugged Bryce away from her center. Her mouth claimed his as she shifted her arms to his waist and wrapped her thighs around his hips.

Pulling away, Bryce grinned down at Mattie, his Southern drawl heavy in the stillness of the room. "Is this what you want, baby?" He settled his cock against

her damp opening before the motion of his hips and the expression on Mattie's face confirmed to Mike and his camera that Bryce's body had mated with his wife's.

From his position near the door, Mike continued to snap photos as the couple moved together, their bodies straining close, eyes focused only on one another. There was beauty in the way Bryce's lean body dwarfed his wife's, and it showed in the images forming in the viewfinder. The disparity in their heights and the lush curves his sister-in-law sported only made the pair a more striking couple.

Bryce had requested he take the photos. Inspiration for one of his paintings, Mike guessed, noting the broad canvas, blank and propped on the paint-splattered easel in one corner of the studio. In his mind he was already skimming through the proofs, identifying the images he would alter, crop the face or

blur a feature in order to insure the anonymity before displaying it in his studio.

The edge of the door pressed into his back as it opened behind him. Spinning, he was prepared to halt one of the triplets, most probably Maggie, from entering the room, but instead came face-to-face with Lyssa.

Her blue eyes grew wide at the sight beyond his frame. Unable to halt his wicked grin, he ushered her out of the doorway and into the hall and followed, closing the door quietly behind him.

"I thought you were on assignment this afternoon?" Lyssa stammered. When her gaze dropped to the camera he held in his hand, the pink turned red.

"You might"—Mike enjoyed the tide of embarrassment filling her cheeks at the heated cries filtering through the door as the couple inside reached their climax—"wait a few minutes."

The color deepened as she stared wide-eyed at him. “You were taking pictures?”

“Bryce wanted some for a painting.” There were times like this when he wondered how Lyssa, six years his senior, could seem as naive as a ten-year-old.

“But you were taking pictures of them having sex.” Lyssa shook her head and turned for the stairs.

“Yes. I thought you were working on some of your designs this afternoon.” Mike followed her. He shut the camera off and set the lens cap in place despite his urge to sneak a few pictures without Lyssa knowing.

On the second floor, Lyssa stopped and faced him. He could tell she was fluctuating between surprise and anger. “I was until I got a call from the editor at *Upscale*. I came out here to talk about it with Mattie. Jake was trying to get all the kids down for their naps, so I helped him,

but Maggie isn't as inclined to sleep as her brothers."

"So you thought you'd see if Bryce was in his studio?"

"Considering he's one of the only ones who can get the girl to nap," Lyssa admitted with a nod.

"True, she's always been partial to her daddy."

"Are you trying to distract me from asking what you were doing taking pictures of them like...like that?" Lyssa gestured with her hand toward the stairs leading up to the studio before she crossed her arms over chest.

Her tone verged on disgust, but curiosity was there as well. "Have you ever seen any of Bryce's paintings?" Mike asked.

"Just the landscapes he has in the office. How does that relate to you standing over them taking pictures while

they're having sex?" From the way she watched him, it was apparent that Lyssa found the incident unnerving.

"Making love," Mike corrected. "Bryce has never had sex with Mattie." He leaned close, smoothing his fingers along her jaw before coasting over the curve of her lips. "Just like what we share isn't sex."

Lyssa cursed the jump in her pulse and the way her body responded to his touch. It was bad enough that her thighs had turned to gelatin the second she'd spotted his truck when she drove up, but to have her insides go all squishy at the husky way he said "making love" made Lyssa want to vomit. Or wrap her arms around his neck and kiss the breath out of him.

Shaking away the temptation, she took the opportunity to discuss with him what she'd originally thought to talk to

her sister about. “I think we have other things to discuss besides our differing opinions regarding our relationship.”

Mike stayed silent. Only the arched eyebrow over his left eye communicated his amusement at her redirecting the conversation.

Lyssa continued, “Vickie called to tell me the photographer bailed on the shoot scheduled for this weekend.”

His expression didn’t betray anything he might be thinking.

“I’m sure your agent called you,” she prodded.

Again he stayed quiet.

Spotting the open door to Bryce’s study, Lyssa grabbed Mike’s hand and pulled him into the room. The door made a solid *thump* when she shut it and turned to face him. “Don’t go all silent dom on me, Michael Jedadiah Halsey. I know you pulled something to mess with

my photo shoot.”

“If you mean did I accept the job when the original photographer backed out, then yes, love, I knew about it.” Mike pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her waist as he stared down at her. “The suggestion, though, that I may have done something regarding the reason the man backed out of the shoot is unfounded. I wasn’t even aware of the assignment before my agent called me two hours ago with the job offer.”

She saw no subterfuge in his eyes. His cool gaze met hers without flinching. “You know I hate last-minute changes, Mike.”

And she always had. Surprises led to unplanned things, which led to feelings. As things were now, she had a pretty good idea what Mike would do at any given moment, and she could deal with it. In the last week, she’d worked very hard to maintain control over her emotions,

despite the powerful pull Mike represented. Then there was the constant temptation to give in to her desire to submit to him. If he was upping the ante by horning in on her business, it would mean a whole new set of rules and behaviors. Not to mention requiring she keep up her guard, especially if she was to spend hours watching him flirt and ogle the models selected by *Upscale* for the shoot.

Before she could sink any lower into the morass of worries, Mike shrugged. “I know you dislike last-minute changes, hon, but this is not my fault. I only agreed to do it because you’re right here and my studio is available.”

There was more to it than that. Lyssa could see it in his eyes, but she wasn’t about to call him on it. “Did your agent tell you the models will be here this weekend?”

“Yes.”

“And did he elaborate on the subject matter of the spread?”

Again Mike nodded. “Wedding gowns.”

Lyssa swallowed, her lungs frozen at the expression on Mike’s face, the gleam in his dark brown eyes, and the way his fingers flexed against her hips and tugged her the slightest bit closer.

“Yes, wedding gowns. And a few formal and cocktail dresses for parties and special events.”

“Are any of them going to look like Mattie’s gown?”

Lyssa shook her head. No one would wear a gown designed by her that resembled the one she’d made for Mattie’s wedding. “No, these are dresses I’ve put together over the last few years.”

“Good.” Mike leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. It was soft, more a rubbing of his lips along hers than a full

caress. “I don’t think another woman could carry off that particular style with the same panache Mattie did.” He chuckled. “And I sure as hell know no other man but my brother would be able to handle just how sexy it makes a woman look.”

Lyssa smirked, pride filling her at the reminder of Bryce’s heated looks and determination to get Mattie out of the dress as quickly as possible, to hell with propriety and tradition. “As I recall, Bryce did compliment me several times on the design.”

“But only after a very long and satisfying wedding night, if I recall.”

The comment reminded Lyssa of what she’d seen him doing when she’d entered Bryce’s studio. She stiffened in his arms at the thought of Mike taking pictures—intensely intimate pictures—of her sister.

Mike seemed to read her mind. Or

perhaps the way she drew away from him was warning enough. “You don’t believe me about the paintings, do you?”

“I never said—”

“You didn’t have to.”

Much to Lyssa’s disappointment, there was no argument from Mike. Instead he released her, took hold of one of her hands, and walked to one of the built-in bookshelves beside the broad fireplace.

His hand coasted along the edge of one of the dark wood edges. A barely audible *click* sounded, and a gap appeared at the edge of the shelf.

Lyssa blinked and stepped closer. “A secret passage?”

Mike smiled down at her. “Pirate, remember? You don’t honestly think old Cole Halsey would leave anything to chance. Especially where his family was concerned, do you, Lys?”

Mattie had read her some of the entries in the diaries written by Cole and Margaretta Halsey more than two centuries ago. “No, I don’t think he would have left any method of escape unused.”

Considering the dangers associated with his privateer occupation and the barely tamed land he’d won on the turn of a card from the original owner, Lyssa was quite certain Mike’s ancestor would have created several secret passages throughout his home.

Even as Mike led her into the narrow hallway behind the shelf, Lyssa’s mind pondered another question. “Are there any secret areas in the Club?”

Mike stayed silent. He pressed a switch on the wall beside them. A dim glow illuminated the tight hall. When they reached the end, Mike flicked two more switches and extinguished the light in the hall. Light filtered up from below, glowing along a flight of stairs that

curved back toward the study and downward.

They moved down the stairs. At the bottom, the passage branched to the left and right of them. On the right, the path ended at a door. On the left, the hall continued for another ten feet or so before ending in a doorway as well.

Mike turned right and pulled a key from the top of the doorsill. He still held her hand, and once the door swung open, he led her through it and into the room. He flipped the light switch beside them and waited.

Lyssa couldn't speak. The room was easily the size of the study above them, if not half again as long. The paneled walls with their subdued lights gleaming down on the individual frames reminded Lyssa of a portrait gallery she'd once explored during a trip to New York. In the open areas around the room, small tables and pedestals held sculptures of various

materials, from wood to marble. Scattered around the room, set near groups of paintings or statues, were chairs and chaises. Comfortable areas to sit and rest. Or perhaps a bit more.

Mike said nothing. He merely let go of her hand and waited. Speechless, Lyssa was unsure what to say. The paintings were exquisite. It was easy to see they dated back to the years Cole Halsey and his family had resided at Pirate's Folly. Then there were other portraits from eras following that of Mike's great-great-grandfather.

And the paintings weren't the typical portraits either. If Lyssa had complaints about Mike's taking pictures of her sister and Bryce in flagrante, then she definitely would have to take issue with the subject matter of a few of the paintings. And it wasn't just paintings hanging on the wall. There were also photographs. Some of the pictures dated

back to the era when cameras were first developed.

The sculptures weren't much different. There were several marble and stone pieces depicting sexual acts and embraces that increased Lyssa's heartbeat. As she made her way back toward Mike, she halted near a group of paintings and photographs. One stole her breath, while a second brought tears to her eyes. Mike stepped up behind her, his hands settling on her shoulders.

He said nothing, but he seemed to read what stirred within her. One photograph Lyssa recognized from her sister's wedding day. She recalled catching a glimpse of Mattie and Bryce as they stood near the picture window looking out onto the back lawn. The setting sun bathed them in gold and fiery red as Bryce held Mattie's left hand in his, his right arm wrapped around her waist, her back snug against the front of

his body.

The painting beside it showed Lyssa's sister asleep in bed, her curly hair tangled around her face, with only a pale cream sheet draped over her hip. The open curtains beyond the bed showed the glow of the full moon, her left hand, wedding and engagement rings glittering in the moonlight, resting on the rounded curve of her belly.

"Tell me this is only sex, Lyssa." Mike motioned to the painting of Mattie asleep.

Tears prickled Lyssa's eyes; she blinked to stem them. Her throat burned, and she could hardly swallow for the knot that seemed lodged there. Every brushstroke screamed adoration and devotion. There was no doubt about the feelings of the artist for his subject.

Mike stepped between her and the painting. The look in his eyes and on his face sent her mind reeling. Common

sense encouraged her to ignore the desperate desire to believe the emotions visible in his expression were real and not merely the temporary side effects of misread lust. It was so sincere, so stirring, the way he watched her.

His broad palms cupped her cheeks, tilting her face up to his as he lowered his mouth to hers. Against her lips, he vowed, "If you were pregnant and beginning to show, maybe even before, one of my cameras would never be far from my hand."

The dark intensity of his gaze stilled Lyssa's breath. Her heartbeat stumbled, then resumed at a faster pace. The gentle prodding of his tongue enticed her lips to part and coaxed her tongue into play. The warmth of one hand cradled her neck while the other skimmed along her jaw to the curve of her shoulder.

Dizzy from lack of oxygen and the slow buildup of passion, she swayed in

Mike's hold as he lifted his head. Unbidden, her hands clutched his waist, tugging him closer. The hand at her shoulder lowered onto her chest, cupping her breast, thumb stroking the rising peak of her nipple.

"I would capture images of you from the moment the little stick turned blue until they put our baby in my hands, crying and wet in the minutes following her entry into this world from your womb."

It wasn't hard for Lyssa to imagine him smiling at her, teasing her from behind the lens. After hearing the emotion in his voice as he described the scene, it wasn't difficult to picture pain darkening his brown eyes if he learned about the baby she'd lost. She pushed the thought aside before it could fully form.

"With the precautions you're taking, there's little likelihood I'll get pregnant." She hated to ruin the fantasy he'd built,

but if she stood any chance of remaining steadfast, she couldn't allow her emotions to influence her. No matter how similar his dreams were to hers.

"True," Mike admitted as he lowered his other hand so both moved to her waist at the same time. "But that doesn't mean I don't want to photograph you." He tugged at the T-shirt she wore, scooting his hands underneath to stroke the warm skin on her belly.

"What?" Lyssa stammered. A whisper of memory surfaced as she rocked closer to Mike, edging her hands under his shirt to caress the smooth muscles flexing beneath her fingertips. A private little bet between Mattie and her that Lyssa had lost.

"Pose for me."

A bet left unpaid until now.

The press of his mouth against her throat didn't distract her from the fact

that Mike had eased her shirt up over her breasts. Twelve years ago, when he'd first asked her to pose nude for him, she'd dismissed it as an attempt to tease her. Eight years ago, when her repeated refusals didn't deter him, she'd begun to think his requests were only to keep her off balance. Four years ago, when he stopped making the request, she'd denied the disappointment that seeped through her. She berated herself for feeling saddened that the attention he'd paid her for so long was gone. It was simply proof that he had realized what he felt for her was infatuation and his purposes would be better served if he turned them elsewhere. At least that was the excuse she'd given herself.

“Pose for you? Why?” she asked.

Tugging the shirt over her head, Mike smiled down at her. “Because you’re beautiful.”

Warm, callused palms rolled over

her shoulders and along her collar as Mike smoothed aside the straps of her white cotton bra. Lyssa snorted. "Liar."

Mike made quick work of the hooks. "No, I'm not. You are beautiful."

He looked so serious, so determined she believe him, Lyssa found it hard to fight the tingle of joyous satisfaction that filled her heart. "Okay, to you I am, but why waste film?" she argued.

He cupped her breasts and teased her stiff nipples with his thumbs. "I want to have something to look at when I can't be near you. Not that I ever intend to be very far from you for the next three or four decades."

Again that damned sneaky feeling tried to burrow inside, but Lyssa pushed it away. "Mike," she started to warn him, but he cut her off.

"Come on, baby; you know you want to."

Lyssa rolled her eyes and grimaced. "I do not."

"But you do," he assured her, his lips pressing against hers in soft, swift kisses as his hands lowered to the button and zipper of her jeans. Unfastening both, he continued, "You get so hot and flushed when I watch you. Imagine how it'll be: me off on an assignment that ended up becoming an overnight. I'm missin' you so bad. I pull out your picture."

Caught up in his story, Lyssa remained oblivious to the fact that she'd toed off her shoes until she helped him shimmy her jeans and panties over her hips and off her legs.

"Oh yes," he growled hungrily, stepping back from her to run his gaze over her naked body. "These soft, plump breasts." His hands squeezed her before he dipped his head for a quick nibble of each hard crest. "These curvy hips meant to fit in my hands." He palmed her hips,

rolling his hands over them before reaching back to grip her bottom and pull her close. “A perfect ass, round and tempting. Then there’s your thighs; they hold me so tight.”

The words blended with his touch, which aroused her, sent reason into the ether, and placed need and passion center stage. It wasn’t like he was wrong; since the first time he’d asked, Lyssa had wanted him to photograph her.

Mike used a camera like he used his hands or his words. It was another tool capable of seducing both the subject and the viewer. The pictures he took evoked responses. She wanted a reaction, even if it was just from him and only fleeting. Much as the confession shamed her, Lyssa wanted to know that he might one day look back on their time together with pleasant thoughts rather than disdain.

“I want to be able to wrap my hand around my cock and see your pink, bare

pussy so I can pretend it's your hot, wet body clenched around me tight," Mike whispered.

Groaning at the heat filling the very place he mentioned, Lyssa succumbed. "Okay, yes, I'll pose for you."

"Thank you, baby." His hands kneaded her bottom as his smile faded and his expression grew intent. "And after we're married and you get pregnant, Lyssa, I want to record it all. Every change, every kick. I want to watch your luscious breasts swell, your belly get big and round. I want to listen to our baby's heartbeat by pressing my ear to your stomach."

Emotion welled up, startling her as tears again began to fall. She wiped at the tears sliding over her cheeks before she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed close against him. She wanted it too. She wanted him to share every minute with her. Perhaps if he did stay,

she'd finally feel safe. The sensation of being cut adrift, separate from everyone even when in the same room—maybe if Mike was with her, that feeling would disappear.

When he lifted her in his arms, Lyssa secured her legs around his waist and buried her face against his neck.

“Tell me these feelings are only about sex.” The challenge was in his voice. He settled onto the closest cushioned surface and laid back, draping Lyssa over him, his fingers threaded through her hair, pulling the ponytail free and tangling in the long curls spilling over her shoulders, hiding their faces behind a curtain of golden silk.

Lyssa shook her head. She couldn't acquiesce. Determined to keep control, she muttered, “Maybe not, but I want you.” She fumbled at his waist. Their fingers tangled together as both of them worked to free the thick length of his

erection. The crinkle of foil brought her attention to the distinctive black wrapper Mike tugged from his pocket and held out to her.

She rose onto her knees, straddling his thighs, to shove aside his jeans and boxer briefs until the hot length of his flesh warmed her palms. The rip of cellophane and the sound of latex sheathing skin mingled with the rasps of their breathing. With a shift and a gasp, Lyssa settled into place over him, taking the tip of his cock inside her. Her eyes met his, heat and passion flaring between them as she moved, sinking down over him, burying every thick inch deep within her.

His hands smoothed up her back from her hips to her shoulders, pulling her down, rubbing her full, aching breasts against his bare chest. What had happened to his shirt, Lyssa couldn't remember, but she pushed the

inconsequential thought aside. All she cared about was having him joined to her, their bodies melding into one as she rocked over him.

His mouth captured hers, tongues tangling, breaths shared, teeth nipping at lips before drawing away to come back together at a different angle, a deeper connection.

Climax exploded between them, dragging cries from each of them as their bodies convulsed, sliding against each other. Her internal muscles milked the pulsing length of his erection as they shuddered and clutched at one another.

Lyssa collapsed over him, her breathing rapid and out of control. Her hand trembled as she alternately clutched and stroked his shoulders and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold in the emotions tearing at her.

“I love you.”

The barely there whisper echoed in Lyssa's ears. For the briefest second, she panicked. Had she said that? Was she insane? How could she do something so stupid as to confess—

Then it came again. "I love you." It wasn't her voice whispering the words. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Lyssa flexed her fingers into his hard, muscled flesh. And she clamped her mouth closed. Sealing in the words that clawed and scratched for freedom.

He didn't mean it. He thought he meant it, but it wasn't true. He couldn't. And she knew the second she let herself believe in forever, it would all be snatched away. The ache seeping into her chest warned her she might already be too late. There'd be pain when he left.

But she hated to lose this feeling. Not yet. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, snuggling closer. The way his body froze and his fingers hesitated on

her back signaled his reaction to her silence.

She waited. Any moment he'd push her away, reject her as she'd done to him. Not that she wanted to reject him. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but it was better to have him walk away not knowing how she felt about him than to have him turn her into a needy, spineless mass, desperate to please him at any expense. It was frightening how being with him could make her start to forget the lessons of a lifetime, but the voices in her head weren't easily silenced. It was inevitable that he would walk away. That would happen sooner rather than later if he ever found out about the pregnancy she'd kept a secret from him four years ago.

When he drew her closer, his hands stroking up and down her back, Lyssa breathed freely again. A reprieve. One more day. Twenty-four more hours to

store up memories to pull out once he left and she was alone.

Again.

* * *

Mike shouldered open the door to his apartment and hit the light switch. He hadn't wanted to leave Lyssa's house, but there were some things he needed to organize for the photo shoot. Dust dulled every surface in the room. The broad windows let the morning sun in, highlighting the empty living space. The second, secured phone tucked into his pocket rang.

Adrenaline surged through his system; his heart increased its beat. The distinctive ringtone identified the caller before Mike flipped the phone open. "Tin Man, I've already contacted Aunt Em. I am not heading out again. I'm on leave."

"I heard. That's not why I'm calling." Trent Beyrs's East End accent vibrated in

Mike's ear.

Mike headed to the kitchen area of his apartment in need of something, anything to stop the sudden burn in his stomach. Much as he knew his importance on the team, Lyssa came first. From now on, she was his first priority. Now if only he could convince her of that.

"Did you get to celebrate your holiday?" Trent asked.

Mike grimaced at the bundle of mail he'd dumped on the counter days before. "Holiday? What holiday?"

The humor in Trent's laughter was genuine. "Halloween. Wasn't there a costume party at your family's club?"

"The Midnight Masquerade?" Mike asked as he pulled open the refrigerator and reached for the milk.

"Yes, your masquerade. Did you miss it or do I have my dates askew?"

The sour smell of spoiled milk

confirmed the container was past its expiration. "You don't have your dates wrong. It was on Halloween, and I did attend."

"The rumors that have circulated about that party have me curious." Trent chuckled. "Most of the stories about your club have me wondering."

Mike laughed. "Any time you'd like to come to San Diablo and take a tour of the Diablo Blanco Club, you only need to let me know, Beyrs."

"Be careful. I may take you up on that offer, chum, if I can ever find the time."

"You're welcome whenever you want to show up," Mike assured him.

Again Trent sounded amused. "It may be sooner than you think."

Mike gave up on finding anything edible in his refrigerator. "Oh, getting a yen to check up on the American

cousins?" The organization Trent and he worked for maintained units in each of the five nations contributing to the task force.

"No, to make sure Tumaini is nicely settled in with you."

"Tuma? What are you talking about?" Mike demanded. He turned away from the refrigerator and tracked the empty confines of the living room. "She's in Edinburgh. Working at the High Street gallery. Isn't she?"

Trent cursed. "She didn't contact you?"

"No, damn it, Trent. Would I be asking you about her if she'd contacted me?"

"She flew out of Edinburgh late yesterday afternoon. I received confirmation that she went through customs at JFK just after two this morning Eastern Standard Time. She

should have arrived at LAX by now.”

Mike rubbed at the pain developing behind his forehead. “You should have kept her there, Trent.”

“Damn it, man, I have my hands full —”

“You’re supposed to be protecting her,” Mike snapped.

“So are you, Mike. She’s told you for years what her plans were. You just never listened,” Trent shot back heatedly.

Was this a sign that all the women in his life were going to test his limits?

“I did listen to Tuma. I thought she’d enjoy staying where her friends are.” He moved out of the kitchen and back to the living room. “LAX is only an hour or so from here. I’ll call you when she arrives.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Trent replied coolly.

“So was she the only reason you called?”

“No.”

He knew before he heard the words why Trent sounded wearier than Mike felt. The gruff sound of his friend's voice gave evidence that the man hadn't slept much in the time since Mike had left the Middle East. The plastic of the cell phone creaked with the pressure of his grip. His right hand tightened into a fist at his side. “They didn't make it, did they?”

“No. I'm sorry.”

His eyes burned with angry tears as he glared into the morning sun. The profanities bubbling on his tongue ached to escape into the stark silence of his home. A lengthy string of curses wouldn't change the situation. They would simply be a waste of energy. “Evidence?” There wouldn't be any, Mike was sure, but he asked anyway.

“None.”

“Damn it, Trent, this can't keep

happening.”

“I know, but we can’t get anyone inside. He’s too bloody careful.” Trent’s heavy sigh carried through the phone. “Listen, I wanted to be the one to tell you.”

“It’s okay, man. I understand you’re as frustrated as I am. We’ll find something. Eventually.”

Neither of them said good-bye; they simply disconnected. Mike slid the encrypted phone back into his jeans. He curled his hands into fists. The urge to tear something apart, anything, surged along his tendons and muscles. It would do no good; he was fully aware that the fury bleeding through him was useless in bringing down the bastard responsible. He’d seen the results of what Trent had told him—little bodies piled one on top of another, so desperate to escape the darkness, the cold or heat, the cramped confines of the box that they clawed at the

walls until their fingers bled.

Ten years of slow, steady investigation—first by independent agents and then the current team he'd been assigned to—had left the organization with a surprise suspect. A man who seemed both the most and least likely to perpetrate such horrendous acts. The first hint of his involvement came from a single photograph from four years ago. But there was still no proof that he was the head of the snake.

"This has to end." Mike's words were resigned, almost defeated. Feeling as weary as Trent had sounded, Mike wondered if he retained enough energy to follow this mission through to its conclusion.

A pounding on the outside entrance to his apartment kept Mike from descending further into his thoughts. Knowing who it might be, he slipped the locks free and yanked the door open.

Her dark, brown-black hair twisted into thin palm-rolled locks and secured in a ponytail, the girl on the steps grinned up at him. Her white teeth gleamed against her ebony skin. The pink of her full lips was enhanced by a sheen of colorless lip gloss, and golden brown eyes, clear as amber honey, gazed up at him.

The soft lilt of Africa blended with the rough Cockney edge in her voice. “Hi, Daddy, I’m home.”

Mike waited until his adopted daughter entered and left the large suitcase she dragged behind her propped against the sofa before responding. “Tumaini Nonkosi Nagweni, I should beat your ass for this little stunt, young lady,” Mike growled as he paced in front of the sofa and watched Tuma wander around the apartment.

“When you said you had a flat above the studio, I hadn’t expected it was this big.” Tuma held her arms out and turned

in a slow circle in the middle of the open space of the living room, before moving to face Mike. "And the light. *Abani*, this is beautiful." She threw herself into his arms for a warm hug.

"You aren't listening to a word I'm saying, are you, Tuma?" Mike returned her hug. Closing his eyes, he inhaled and enjoyed the scent of baby lotion and sandalwood that always clung to her.

"It's all blah blah blah. You know you need me here." She pulled out of his arms and moved to the dust-covered coffee table. Running her finger across the dull surface, she wrinkled her nose at the film coating her fingertip before wiping it on the faded jeans she wore. "Judging by the condition of this apartment, you need someone to clean up." Her gaze roved the stark walls and minimal decorations in the room. "If this is the way you live, *abani*, I shudder to think what I'll find in the studio

downstairs.”

“And what about your education, *anuli*? You didn’t spend five years working on an art degree and training in restoration to answer phones and book appointments for me.”

“Which is no different than what Seamus would have expected me to do,” Tuma reasoned.

Mike rubbed his hand over his face and tried to remain rational. “Don’t you see what I mean? He owns and runs one of the most respected galleries in Edinburgh. He’s a brilliant collector and having him as a mentor would do so much for your career.”

“But that isn’t what I want to do, *aba*. I’ve told you. I love photography. I want *you* to teach me more. Show me how to capture the emotions in the light and shadows.”

“What about your friends? Won’t

you miss them?”

For a moment Tuma appeared confused as she slowly lowered herself into the oversize chair. “Aba, are you ashamed of me? I know I am not your real *basha*—your real daughter—”

Mike crossed the room and tugged her out of the chair and into his arms. “No, Tuma, never think that. Darlin’, you are my little girl in every way but blood. I could never be ashamed of you.” He leaned back and wiped the tears from her cheeks before hugging her again.

“Then why? Why don’t you want me here?”

“It’s not you, Tuma. Things are—complicated right now.”

Tuma wiped at the remaining tears dampening her eyes. “You mean with your lady? Maybe I can help you—”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” Mike snapped.

Her eyes narrowed, and she tipped her head to the side. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Mike grimaced and sighed. “I won’t be around very much, *kainda*. She thinks she doesn’t want me, and I’m going to have to work long and hard to get through the walls she’s built around herself.” He settled onto the sofa and leaned his head back against the cushions.

“Abani, you have told me for years about your feelings for Miss Lyssa. How can you think I would want you to abandon the field of battle to entertain me? A *kafil*—a protector—like you cannot walk away from the woman he has loved for so long. I would not ask you to.”

“If you stay, I will not be here, Tuma.”

Tuma shook her head and set herself in his lap, just as she had done when she was younger and needed his reassurance

that the evil men who'd tried to harm her wouldn't return to take her from him. Despite the fact that she was now a young woman of twenty-three and not a scared twelve-year-old, Mike wrapped his arms around her waist and waited.

“No, abani. No. You must fight. I will be fine by myself. You have an alarm, and you taught me how to defend myself.” The thick sound of Africa filled her voice, reminding him of the first few years when her excitement or emotions would make her blend her native tongue with the newer English language she'd worked so hard to learn. “You are my abani, my father. You are *zuberi*—strong. Miss Lyssa, she must see that the feelings you have for her are true. That you are her *issa*—her salvation, just as you have been mine since you took me from the evil ones.”

She raised her hands and cupped his face between them. Her golden eyes held

his. "You will show her. Make her understand I need a *nina*—a mother." Tuma let him go and rested her head on his shoulder. "You will do this for your daughter, for your anuli. You will get me a mother."

Mike leaned his head against hers and smiled. "Yes, my anuli. I will get you a mother."

Chapter Ten

The first notes from a familiar song tugged Lyssa awake with visions of Ray Bolger crooning “if I only had a brain” whispering through her mind. The sudden tension and soft curses from Mike stilled any movements that might give her away. When he rolled out of bed and grabbed the cell phone from the nightstand, Lyssa pretended to sleep, curious why Mike wouldn’t ignore the call and let it ring through to voice mail. Nervous knots twisted in her stomach when he stepped out into the hall instead of speaking in front of her.

Was this it? The call that would pull

him away? If he did leave, was she ready to stand by her ultimatum to him—no starting where they left off if he came back? Did she even want to contemplate him not returning? It was difficult to keep her breathing steady as anxiety bubbled to the surface of her mind.

The only illumination in the dark house came from the glow of streetlamps through the curtains on the front room's bay window. Through the gap, his body was a shadow lighter than the ones surrounding him in the hall.

"Yes." Mike's response was gruff, nothing like his usual greeting.

The caller spoke for a moment before Mike answered with a question. "What kind?"

She was careful to keep her eyes barely open; she could feel Mike's gaze on her through the open door. She shifted into the spot he'd abandoned when he left the bed, wanting to make sure she could

hear him clearly. "Background?" He asked before he paused as if searching his mind for anyone he might know. "Shoot."

"LaTreace Barrows." Lyssa was surprised she could hear the caller's accented voice as he told Mike about being "tipped" on the woman's interest in "the ruby slippers." It made no sense to Lyssa, but apparently Mike understood.

Shoes? What kind of photo shoot could they be talking about? The last she'd heard, LaTreace was in Europe acting as a spokeswoman for a children's rescue foundation.

"She's good people, Trent. Be careful with her."

"Rumor says your brother was with her for a while." The question sounded more like a statement to Lyssa.

"It's true." Mike seemed to anticipate the next question, so he forestalled it. "If you want confirmation, yes, I was her

lover a few years before she hooked up with Bryce.”

Lyssa squeezed her eyes shut and fought to keep from gasping at the information. It was a known fact that Mike had had lovers before her. She shouldn't let that upset her, but it did.

The other man, Trent, didn't ask for the details Lyssa wanted, such as who broke it off and when. He only asked, “Can she be trusted?”

“Yes. Just don't use her as bait. Keep her in the loop, and she'll follow all instructions,” Mike warned. It was clear to Lyssa that Mike was uneasy with whatever the caller was planning. A part of her wondered if it was because Mike still had feelings for LaTreace.

“Will do.” The other man didn't bother with good-byes; he simply disconnected the call.

Mike closed the phone and hovered

in the doorway. She suspected he was brooding over the call. Despite her own fears of losing him, she couldn't withhold comfort when she knew he needed it. Keeping her voice soft and sleepy sounding, she called out to him, "Mike?"

Setting his cell phone on the nightstand, he climbed beneath the covers and cuddled Lyssa close. "Go back to sleep, baby."

"Mmm, 'kay." She nuzzled her head against the curve of his shoulder and draped her arm over his waist. The need to take care of him had intensified in the weeks they'd been together. Internal alarms sounded, but she ignored them. She'd worry about it tomorrow.

She heard him inhale and didn't have long to wonder about his reaction to the mixed scents of her favorite honeysuckle perfume, their sleep-warmed bodies, and sex. He tugged her closer, and his body slowly began to relax. She

couldn't do anything about the phone call. No evidence she could point her finger at other than that her gut instincts told her Mike was keeping a secret much greater than hers. But would it really matter once he walked away?

* * *

It amazed Mike how much could change in just twenty-four hours. He'd heard of things going from bad to worse, but he'd never been on the receiving end of it until that very moment. At the same time the bell over the front door jingled, Tuma laughed up at him as they descended the stairs from his apartment into the studio. They both had a clear view of the three women hovering inside the doorway.

The tall redhead at Lyssa's left muttered, "Lucky bitch," loud enough that everyone in the room heard it.

The way Lyssa's face paled and then

iced over made Mike want to curse. He could imagine what his woman was thinking as her blue eyes moved from him to Tuma before dropping to the shirt he'd loaned his daughter to wear over her tank top and jeans.

He'd promised Lyssa a surprise when he'd left her house this morning, the intent being that he expected to have a few minutes alone with her before the models arrived to introduce Lyssa to Tuma. With Charlene and Elaina next to her, Mike wasn't about to make such an important announcement.

"Abani?" Tuma probably sensed his frustration as she stood beside him.

Drawing a deep breath, he let it out slowly. "It's okay, anuli. Come on; let me introduce you to everyone."

With his hand on her back, he led Tuma over to Lyssa and the models. "Tuma, this is Lyssa Lawrence, the designer. And Elaina Kregre and

Charlene Vynes. Ladies, Tumaini Nagweni, my new assistant and office manager.”

Tuma shook hands with the models before smiling warmly at Lyssa. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Mike hasn’t mentioned hiring an assistant.” Lyssa’s smile was tight and barely polite as she quickly shook Tuma’s hand and then released it.

The smile dimmed on Tuma’s lips. “I only arrived yesterday. He has been very kind to let me stay in his apartment until I find a place of my own,” Tuma explained.

Charlene snorted, her expression sly. “I’m sure he has.”

Elaina grimaced and reached over to lightly shove the redhead’s shoulder. “Knock it off, Char.” Turning to Tuma, she asked, “Please tell me you have some coffee. The boss lady dragged us out

before I got my caffeine fix.”

Tuma motioned toward the open partition between the reception and display area and the studio section. “Right this way.”

Mike leaned down to whisper reassurance to Tuma in Swahili before she led Charlene and Elaina away. “Lys —”

Her glare cut him off. “We both have a job to do. Let’s just get it done and leave the autopsy for later.” She headed out the door to the van parked in front of the building.

Definitely not an auspicious start, Mike determined with a sigh as he pushed through the door and followed her. He’d play it her way for now.

Just over four hours later, Mike was rethinking his earlier decision to allow Lyssa time to avoid him and cool off. The studio was a beehive of activity. Lights,

reflectors, and a rack of gowns and outfits were scattered around the room. The renovated warehouse was the perfect spot for his work, with its refurbished hardwood floors, painted cement columns, and bare pipes along the ceiling. The front half of the studio acted as a reception area, with the movable partitions left closed when he was in the middle of a shoot or open when he wasn't. Today he'd left them closed, and he was glad. His frustration built faster than usual.

After the awkward start to the morning, he'd hoped things would improve. Four hours in, Lyssa's hostility hadn't ebbed, Charlene grew ill-mannered about not being allowed to wear certain designs, and Mike's nerves were frayed. With only half the outfits and dresses photographed, he felt like slamming his camera down and running everyone out of the studio. Elaina

deferred to Lyssa on what she should wear and played referee to keep a judicious distance between Tuma and Lyssa. Lyssa reasoned with the women and spoke with him in a cool and professional manner, but a decided chill entered her voice whenever she addressed Tumaini.

And *that* was what was irritating. He'd come to the studio before Lyssa earlier that morning in order to organize the lighting, cameras, and other fine details. It had also given him a few minutes to catch up with Tumaini and make sure she was ready to take on the assignment as his assistant.

Since her arrival with the models at seven thirty, Lyssa had been careful to keep a safe distance from him, and she'd done everything possible to avoid speaking to Tumaini. Her standoffish nature and efforts to avoid him and his assistant pressed his patience.

Mike felt like growling. The only woman Lyssa took offense to was the one person he hoped she'd connect with most. Tumaini was going to be a big part of their life together, and Lyssa needed to learn to accept that.

With a shake of his head, he refocused his thoughts and lowered his head over the camera to line up the next shot. He'd dealt with models hitting on him since he first started working in the industry, and it had never been a big deal. Even Charlene had played her little games on past shoots with him, but today it set his teeth on edge. Grimacing, he moved from behind the tripod and approached the model to remove the silky scarf he'd asked her to take off three times already.

"Listen, Charlene, if Lys had wanted a scarf to go with this dress, she'd have made one." Reaching for the fabric, he unwound it from around the skinny

redhead's neck, all the while fighting the urge to strangle her with the length of silk.

“But it looks so much more sexy,” the model whined and tried a sultry pout. It only succeeded in making her look petulant.

The distinct scent of alcohol emanated from her. Looking closer, he noticed the unfocused gaze and the fact that she wasn't exactly steady on her feet.

When her arms snaked around his waist and she tried to slide her hands into the back pockets of his jeans, he exploded. “Enough!” He thrust Charlene away from him and glared down at the woman as she teetered, off balance on the high heels she wore. “I'm not on your fucking menu. So keep your hands to yourself.”

Turning to find Tuma, the makeup artist, Elaina, and Lyssa staring in wide-eyed disbelief at him, he gave up. “That's it. We're done for the day. Get your shit,

Charlene, and get out. I don't want you back here unless you're sober." He ignored her halfhearted denials.

"We'll take it from the top tomorrow at eight, Elaina." Mike waited for the other model to nod her agreement before turning to Tumaini. "Basha, make sure everyone gets their things before they leave."

Leveling his gaze on Lyssa as she stalked toward the rack of gowns, he shook his head. "Not you, Lys. We need to talk." Motioning to the only walled-off section of his studio, Mike waited long enough to see Tumaini following Charlene and Elaina to the dressing area. At the mirrored table, the makeup specialist began packing her brushes, pots, and tins into her case. Drawing a deep breath to calm the irritation pulsing through him, Mike moved to follow Lyssa toward his office.

Slamming the door behind him, he

shoved his fingers through his hair. “Damn it, Lys. Why the hell did you pick Charlene for this shoot?”

Lyssa relaxed into the overstuffed armchair. “I didn’t. *Upscale* selected her for the spread.”

“Yeah, probably because she’s been too high or drunk to be trusted with any runway work,” Mike snapped.

“I noticed she was a little off this morning,” Lyssa admitted.

“Off, my ass. I’ll bet that bottle of water she’s been sucking on is straight vodka.” Mike paced the area between his desk and the table across the room with a light box on top.

“I don’t usually allow her anywhere near my designs, but *Upscale* didn’t give me any choice.” Lyssa shrugged and watched him.

Mike scraped his fingers through his tousled hair. “We still have tomorrow.

With luck she'll dry out tonight."

"And if she doesn't?"

"She won't be in the ad." He pushed his fingers through his hair a second time. "To be honest, I don't like the way her shots are turning out."

"The dresses?" Lyssa looked worried as she rose from the chair and moved toward him.

"No, those are great." The tension in her shoulders eased. "You've done a fantastic job on the designs." He rubbed his forehead. "No, she's lost too much weight since I last saw her. The clothes aren't hanging correctly on her."

"I can try to make some adjustments," Lyssa offered.

"It wouldn't work. She's all angles. Hell, she looks like a damned swizzle stick instead of a woman."

"There isn't anyone else. Vickie said she tried everywhere before she finally

settled for Charlene.”

“I’m not worried about the pictures, Lys. We can get Elaina to do all the dresses if we have to.”

Before Lyssa could respond, Tuma rapped on the door. As his daughter stuck her head into the room, Lyssa stiffened.

“Everyone’s ready to go. Did you want me to put the equipment away?”

“No, I’ll take care of that.” He caught Lyssa around the waist with his hands, halting her move toward the door. Tension radiated from her as she avoided looking at Tumaini and wriggled to free herself from his hold. Mike stilled her attempts to pull away as he addressed Tuma. “Can you make sure the models get back to their hotel, anuli? I’m going to be working with Lyssa for the rest of the afternoon, so maybe you can take the opportunity to check out the town. Get the lay of the land.”

“Okay. Call me when you’d like me to come home, aba.” She smiled at Lyssa, her amusement at the way Mike wasn’t letting her leave evident. “Have a great night, Miss Lawrence. The gowns are beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Her attempt to force some warmth into her tone failed. With the flash of hurt in his daughter’s golden gaze, Mike signaled his displeasure to Lyssa with a firm squeeze.

Neither of them budged until the outer door’s chime sounded.

Mike glared down at her. “What the hell do you have against Tuma?”

“Nothing.”

Determined to hear the truth, he countered, “Liar. You’ve been colder than a witch’s tit in December since you walked in the damn door this morning.” He slid his hands away from her waist and stepped back. “Considering the way you

ignored Charlene's behavior, you couldn't possibly be jealous."

Lyssa stiffened and crossed her arms over her chest. Did she even recognize the jealousy eating her up? Was she afraid it would inflate his ego if she admitted how she felt?

"Since my actions seem to have upset you, why don't I go home and we'll get back to work tomorrow when you and your *assistant* have had a good night's sleep. And when the models return."

Mike pounced on the emphasis she'd placed on *assistant*. "You are jealous!"

"Of Charlene? Ha, not likely." Lyssa rolled her eyes and started to turn away.

Mike caught her arm and pulled her back to face him. "No, not of Charlene. Of Tuma."

"I—That's ridiculous," Lyssa huffed, avoiding his gaze.

"You are."

Lyssa tugged free of his hold. "If I'm feeling anything, it's disgusted."

"Disgusted?" Mike was surprised. There had been nothing in his behavior with Tuma that could be construed as inappropriate.

"She's what? Twelve?" Lyssa overexaggerated. "For God's sake, Michael, I may be pathetic screwing around with a kid six years younger than me, but you! Did you even bother to wait to take a shower after you left my house this morning before crawling into bed with her?"

"Where the hell did you get that thought, Lys?"

Did Lyssa seethe at the thought of him touching another woman in the same way he'd touched her? Maybe she was finally willing to admit to feeling more than just a physical connection to him.

Lyssa moved close to him, her fists

propped on her hips as she glared up at him. "She was wearing your shirt, Mike. You and she were chattering away in some language I've never heard you speak as you came down the stairs. And you can't stop whispering to each other." She shook her head. "It was a mistake to think you'd—"

"If anyone should be pissed, it should be me," Mike returned. Moving closer, he reached up to grip her chin. "You didn't bother asking why Tuma was here. You jumped to some asinine conclusion because you *want* to think I'd cheat on you."

"Can you honestly tell me, as beautiful as she is, you didn't sleep with that girl?" Lyssa watched him as if searching for the slightest hint that he lied to her. "That you weren't sleeping with her four years ago when you left me waiting in that restaurant?" Her expression screamed, *Ha, got you there,*

Mike.

Four years ago? “Four years ago, she was attending university in Scotland,” he explained, baffled how she—A memory floated to the surface.

Lyssa ignored him. The light of triumph shone in her eyes. “If she was in Scotland, how could she have answered your phone while you were in London?”

“It *was* you! Why were you calling me after you swore you’d never speak to me again?” Mike demanded.

Lyssa paled slightly, seeming to realize she’d given some terrible secret away.

“Answer me, Lys. Why did you call me?”

She seemed to flounder about for an answer before stammering out, “I—Mattie. I was concerned about Mattie.”

Something warned Mike she wasn’t being completely honest. “If you were so

concerned about her that you tried to call me, why hang up? Why not leave a message?"

The sneer reappeared on her lips. "I didn't want to interrupt your 'sleep.' Your little friend seemed particularly intent on letting you get your rest. She must have given you a hell of a workout. Just like this morning."

"Not now. Not four years ago. Tuma is gorgeous and sweet and loving, Lyssa, but I'd no sooner sleep with her than I'd sleep with Maggie when she grows up." Mike left no time for her to respond before he added, "She's my daughter, Lyssa."

Lyssa blinked, her eyes wide and unfocused as she stared up at him. "Your daughter? How? When?"

Mike lowered his hold from her face. He settled his hands at her waist, keeping her still as he explained. "Remember the job I did during the revolt in Central Africa?"

Lyssa nodded, confusion in her eyes, even as she relaxed into his arms.

“Some bastard tried to sell her to me for five hundred American dollars.” Mike shook his head, remembering the stench surrounding the man who’d approached him in the bar. “I gave him the money. He gave me Tuma. I’ve been taking care of her since she was twelve.”

“Do Bryce and Jacob know? Where has she been all this time?” Lyssa frowned.

Mike shook his head. “No, Dad and Bryce don’t know about her.” He led her to the small sofa against the wall and sat next to her. “A friend of mine knew someone, who knew people in the governments of Central Africa and Britain. Tuma had no one. Her entire family had been killed. Everyone in her village. I was able to get her into a boarding school, first in England, then in Scotland. She could speak some English,

so communication was difficult but not impossible.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone? Why keep her a secret from your family?”

He couldn’t tell her the entire truth, but he could tell her a version of it. “To keep her safe. The man who sold her to me didn’t know me from Adam. But the friend who helped me with Tuma, suspected the guy had been part of a larger white slavery ring. If I suddenly showed up with a daughter after leaving Africa at the same time one of their pieces of merchandise went missing—”

Lyssa filled in the rest rather accurately. “Then not only Tuma but your brother and father would be in danger.”

“Not to mention Dad and Bryce would have raised hell until the people behind Tuma’s kidnapping and abuse were buried in a cell for the rest of their lives.”

Lyssa went pale. “They didn’t—” She couldn’t say the horrible things he could see she was thinking.

He shook his head. “No, hon, they didn’t rape her. She was more valuable because of her virginity.”

“Then what?”

“You saw the scar on Tuma’s cheek?” It still incensed him all these years later when he thought of the damage done to his daughter’s face.

“Uh-huh.”

“The man who sold her did that to her because she fought him. Fought the drugs he tried to use to quiet her. She was able to get free of his bindings most of the time.” Mike smiled at the memory of Tuma’s determination not to give up. “When beating her didn’t stop her screaming and her attempts to escape, he used a knife on her face. The second he did that, he knew he was dead. So he

found the first scum-filled bar in that war zone and tried to sell her.”

“And that’s where he ran into you?”

“Yes.”

“If she’s safer in England than here, why is she in San Diablo?”

Mike laughed. “Did I tell you how stubborn she is? She finished her courses at Stirling University and is intent on getting my studio organized.”

“Those trips during the holidays?” Lyssa seemed to be putting the clues together.

“To see her.”

“Even the hurried trip four years ago? After the incident with Mattie at the Club?”

“After you kicked me out of your house, I needed some time, and Tuma’s birthday was coming up. I was going to tell you about her during our date, but a friend had a job he needed help with and I

had to cancel.” He looked down at her. “She told me some woman called but hung up without leaving a message or a name.”

For a moment, Lyssa looked like she intended to explain why. Then she closed down; her expression went blank, telling him nothing.

It was all he could do to keep from reaching out and shaking her. Just when he thought he was making progress, she shut down, slapped up one of her walls, and dug in. Frustration was becoming a familiar feeling, and he was getting tired of it.

She changed the subject. “Now that she’s here, when are you going to introduce her to your family?”

That distracted Mike temporarily. He grimaced. “I was thinking Thanksgiving. It’s only a couple of weeks away,” Mike admitted.

“Why not sooner? I think you should

call Tuma and tell her to come back here, then—”

Ah, so that was her plan! “Oh no you don’t. You aren’t weaseling out of our agreement.” Mike rose and tugged her to her feet. “There’s plenty of time later to tell my family about Tuma. Right now you have a wedding dress to model,” Mike determined, pressing her toward the door.

“Mike, be reasonable; you need to let the family know about your daughter. Besides, *Upscale* will never approve pictures with me as the model. Why don’t we just—”

“The pictures aren’t for the magazine, pet; they’re for me.”

“I didn’t bring the gown with me—”

Mike moved to the closet and opened the door. He pulled out the padded satin hanger with the dress in question. “I had a feeling you might conveniently forget it, so I took it with me when I left this

morning.”

When Vance and Ben had learned of Lyssa’s agreement to pose for Mike, they’d suggested she wear this particular dress. Lyssa had protested, but the thought of her in *this* wedding dress had taken Mike’s breath away. He’d insisted.

“What about makeup? And my hair?” Lyssa continued to argue as he guided her into the empty studio.

“I haven’t spent the last twelve years in the industry without learning some tricks. And I’m sure the same could be said for you.” Mike smirked as he settled her at the table and turned on the bar of lights over the mirror.

While she watched his reflection, Mike retrieved her tote bag from the floor near the standing screens and held it out to her.

“I’m sure you’ve got some makeup and a brush in here. I usually have some

of the basic necessities.” He pulled open one of the drawers on the vanity. “Yeah, here you go.” Mike pointed to the few brushes, hair bands, decorative sticks, and top-of-the-line makeup neatly arranged in the drawer.

“Mike—” Lyssa grimaced.

“Get changed and ready. I’ll get the cameras set up.” He allowed her no time to argue or wheedle her way out of their bargain before he walked away.

Chapter Eleven

Lyssa applied gloss over her lipstick as she watched in the mirror as Mike arranged tripods. An area of the studio resembled a bedroom suite. Two horseshoe chairs sat on either side of a small round table. A colorful rug covered the polished hardwood floor in front of a huge four-poster bed. When she'd first seen it that morning, her belly had developed knots, imagining one of the models draped over the ivory sheets, or worse—Tuma curled in Mike's arms and snuggled beneath the plush comforter. After learning the truth of Tuma's relationship with Mike, the mistaken impression that had plagued Lyssa since

the phone call four years ago had subsided. It also prodded her with the realization that her own insecurity had sabotaged any potential happiness she might have had with Mike.

“How do you get them all to take pictures at different intervals?”

“Autotimers.” He tapped a knob on one of the cameras. “Once I’ve set them, all I have to do is press the button and they’ll start.”

Finished with the light layer of makeup, Lyssa took the dress Mike had hung nearby and headed for the changing area. “I suppose you brought the matching shoes?”

“Nope, you can go barefoot. And wear your hair up with the stick things in it.”

Lyssa shook her head but hung the gown behind the screen. She had already twisted her hair up into a simple roll;

adding a couple of decorative ivory-colored hair sticks wouldn't require any more work.

"You know, Ben and Vance were wrong," Lyssa told him as she carefully removed her shirt and jeans.

"About what?" Mike asked.

"Last night, when they compared me to Marilyn Monroe and Bettie Page. They were wrong."

"I disagree. Gil Elvgren would have worshipped you. You would have made a beautiful pinup girl. You're just upset they spilled the beans about that dress." Mike laughed. "If they hadn't mentioned it, you would have picked another outfit to dress in."

Lyssa remained mute as she heard the scrape of the partitioning wall being locked into place. The lighting dimmed, casting shadows behind the dressing screen as she reached for the gown.

“Get the dress on, pet,” he ordered.

“I am.” Lyssa grimaced, the nerves jumping in her belly as she removed the dress from the padded hanger. “You know, when I designed this dress, I never actually intended for anyone to wear it.”

“Why?”

She hedged on her answer, knowing it wasn't the complete truth. She had intended only one person wear it. Her. “Because it was an experiment.” Lyssa rubbed the soft satin, her mind wandering to the underlying reason she'd created a design meant to entice a man, but not just any man. Against everything she'd known, every instinct that warned her not to care—not to love—after the first night at the Club, she'd wanted Mike to look at her, to desire her with the same intensity she'd seen in Bryce's eyes when he watched Mattie.

“An experiment?”

Mike's question pulled her from her musings.

Sighing, she tugged the gown over her hips and fastened the three hooks at the back. "Yes, an experiment. I wanted to see how this material would drape. What kind of tucks and folds could be a natural part of the fabric and which ones would have to be constructed by stitching." She adjusted the swath of satin that swept around from the back to cross over her breasts, then drape over her shoulders in a soft U shape along her back. Reaching beneath her skirt, she slipped off the panties she wore since the design of the front and back of the skirt didn't allow for undergarments.

Her fingers rubbed the soft fabric again, and her mind wandered, conjuring images of what might happen if she revealed *her* secret. Though it had been over a week, Lyssa was coming to see that Ben and Vance were right. Mike had a

right to know about the baby she'd lost four years earlier. The voice inside her that argued against it hissed that since there was nothing he could do about it now, nothing either of them could have done about it when it had happened, there was no point in telling him. The submissive inside her urged her to cede all control to Mike. To let him know everything in order to determine how best to protect and heal her.

Telling him might actually drive him away and, reluctant as she was to admit it, the thought of Mike actually turning his back on her again hurt. Even more than she'd realized.

"Lyssa? You okay back there?" Mike called out.

The clear plastic strap securing the bodice stretched from the outside edges of the crossed panels of satin and across her back, right below her shoulder blades. She fumbled with it as she assured him, "I'm

fine.”

Built into the top were lightly padded underwire cups. The dress fit perfectly, with the skirt riding the top edge of her hips before dipping into a wide v-shape in the front and back. Gathered fabric along the skirt yoke repeated the crisscross design of the bodice at the center front and back of the skirt. At the intersection, a cluster of pearls and clear crystals formed a small rose design, with short strands dangling beneath the flower. Rows of strung pearls and crystals winked in the folds of the bodice and skirt sash.

“Come on.”

Adjusting her breasts so they settled more comfortably in the cups sewn into the bodice, she blew out her breath and stepped out from behind the screen. “I swear, Halsey, if you laugh, I’ll slap you.” The threat was weak and she knew it, but considering how much she’d dreamed of

using this gown to capture his attention, she wasn't sure what she'd do if he made an amusing remark about it.

Heat suffused her cheeks as she watched the play of emotions flicker across his face when he caught sight of her for the first time.

Steal his breath didn't even come close to explaining what seeing her in that dress did to him. "You're wearing that when we get married, Lyssa." The idea of her wearing the dress when she married anyone other than him went against Mike's every instinct.

She laughed and shook her head. "I don't think so. By the time you get ready to settle down, I'll be in a retirement home, kid."

"Ready to retire already, are you, love?" Mike retorted. "Either that or you have me confused with my brother."

Lyssa's expression grew befuddled. "How so?"

"I won't be waiting until I'm forty to tie the knot. Once you realize I'm not walking away and that I'm not letting you walk away, I won't be wasting any time. I'll be getting you properly married to me with a baby on the way. Now step a little closer." Mike wondered if the sudden flush in her cheeks had actually happened or was simply wishful thinking on his part.

"Said the spider to the fly." Her gaze held his as she moved across the room to him, the skirt of the dress carefully gathered up to keep from dragging on the ground.

"And what a yummy fly you are, pet." Teasing her seemed the safer solution. If he gave in to the heat suffusing his body after his first sight of her, he'd never get the photos done. Although the way she looked and the design of her gown perfectly suited the

role-play theme he'd devised.

Motioning with his finger, he directed her to make a single turn so he could see the dress from all sides. His cock pressed against his zipper, making him doubt the sense in changing into the black leather pants and losing the roomier fit of his comfortable jeans.

If sexy and unattainable were the criteria for this gown, she'd done it. The contrast of silky, lightly tanned skin against lustrous white satin left him wondering where to look next. The skirt in both back and front dropped from the top of her hips on the sides down into a wide V. In the back, it dipped just enough to expose the twin dimples at the base of her spine, with the tip of the V practically pointed at the crease separating her bottom. The scoop created by the extra satin from the bodice swayed teasingly above it and tempted a man to move it aside for a longer look. In front, the V was

the perfect frame for her tattoo. The edges skimmed the haunches and claws of her dragon, while the small pearl accent drew the eye to the sexy flesh hidden behind the cloth.

He didn't have to ask if she wore panties; there was no way she could. That fit perfectly within his plans for the outcome of this lesson. He'd ease her into play first.

"Here, we'll start with a few to show off the design." Leading her to one of the horseshoe chairs, he stepped back, picked up his camera, and sighted through the viewfinder. "Hands down, Lys. Don't hide that gorgeous tat." He waited for her to drop her hands before pressing the button. The camera whirled and his body ached. She'd have to grow used to the camera being turned on her, just as her sister eventually learned that Bryce was never without paper and pencil when the mood to sketch struck.

She looked stiff, uncomfortable. He needed her to relax and pretend the camera wasn't in his hands. "So what made you decide to design wedding dresses?" he asked, his tone casual as he pressed the button and the digital camera whirred. A simple discussion between them as he moved around to try various angles.

"A few friends of Bryce's approach me after Mattie's wedding," Lyssa told him.

"Okay, turn around. I want to get some shots of the back of the dress." Mike set aside his camera and assisted her with her next pose. Kneeling in the chair, arms draped along the curved back, her cheek rested on her arms to display the provocative exposure of her spine, he stroked his fingers along the silky skin of her back. She arched beneath his touch; a sigh slipped free of her lips as he pressed a kiss to her nape.

“Have to admit, her dress was unlike any wedding dress I’ve seen before or since,” Mike admitted, his tone impressed.

Recomposing herself, Lyssa shrugged. “I believe every bride should look not only beautiful but sexy on her wedding day.”

Mike chuckled. “I know Bryce’s mind was more on the wedding night than the reception.”

Lyssa laughed, her face heating at the memory of her brother-in-law’s determination to send off the wedding guests long before the festivities had wound down. She eased up in the chair. “He was rather focused, wasn’t he?”

“Definitely. Come on over here to the bed,” Mike directed her. He set his camera aside to smooth the slight creases in the skirt. “I don’t think a single man there blamed him.”

Lyssa actually stopped and looked

closely at him as she settled one hand around the thick post of the antique bed. “Even you?”

Mike held her gaze for a moment. “To be honest, I was having my own share of fantasies at the time.” Behind one of the cameras mounted on a tripod, he adjusted the focus and angle. “But none of them centered around Mattie.”

“Oh?” Lyssa watched him carefully.

“Let’s just say the dress you wore that day conjured some wishful thinking,” he admitted as he moved to one of the cameras on a tripod. Lining up the shot, he pressed the button and listened to the autotimer engage.

“Really?”

Mike smiled at her and moved on to a second camera. He knew her body accepted what he could make her feel; he needed her mind to trust the feelings in her heart. “Oh yeah. I had a few fantasies

of dragging you off.”

He adjusted the focus on the second camera and started the automatic photo function before stepping over to the third tripod. “When you were a little girl, did you ever pretend to be a princess?”

A soft smile lifted her lips. “After Mattie started school and we could play together there.” Shadows entered her eyes. “We weren’t allowed outside very often.”

Silently cursing her bastard of a father, Mike wouldn’t allow her to dwell on the unhappy times of her childhood. He held her gaze, kept his emotions shackled, locked down. “What adventures did Princess Lyssa have?” he teased.

A blush heated Lyssa’s cheeks when Mike looked through the viewfinder of the fourth camera. He pressed the button, then moved around it toward her. “Tell me, pet,” he coaxed. “Was Princess Lyssa a naughty young lady who needed

rescuing by a handsome prince?"

"Yes. No. I-It was just a game," she stammered, avoiding his gaze.

"Tell me your game." His tone didn't allow for misdirection. Based on the look in her eyes, and the way her left hand dropped to absently stroke the tattoo on her belly, Mike suspected that even as a young girl on the edge of puberty, Lyssa had imagined scenes of an unusual nature.

Defiance gleamed in her eyes as she scowled up at him. "Mattie and I would play catch the dragon."

"Ah, and did you catch the dragon?" he asked. Before she could answer, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Or did the dragon capture you?" A zing of triumph shot through him as he watched her tremble, the gooseflesh rising along her neck, arms, and down her back.

He stepped away and lifted the

camera he'd set on the table. "Take down your hair for me, pet." He lifted the camera. The click and whir of the shutter blended with the sounds from the other cameras around the room.

For a moment she was confused. "I thought you wanted me to wear it up?"

"I've changed my mind." Mike didn't elaborate, merely waited for her to comply.

Cognizant of the subdued lighting and the cameras surrounding her, she raised her hands and tugged the ivory hair sticks free, then removed the few hairpins she'd used to secure the French roll. Mike held his hand out for the items and set them on the table between the chairs. The soft waves brushed her shoulders and tickled her back as she pushed her fingers through her hair.

"In your game, how did the princess

catch the dragon?"

Lyssa smiled as she recalled the adventures she and her sister and occasionally some of their friends had entertained themselves with at school. "It depended on the type of dragon we went after." The bag of colored stones and glass beads they'd used to determine the dragon was still somewhere in her house. "The person playing the dragon would pick the color from a bag of colored stones and glass beads Mattie and I had collected."

"So what types of dragons did you and Mattie catch?" He moved around the bed to one of the nightstands flanking it.

"White and gold dragons were easy to persuade to help in battles against evil princes and wizards trying to take over the kingdom." Lyssa wrapped her arms around the bedpost as she watched him open one of the drawers. "Red dragons were harder to reason with, but if you

could figure out the riddles and promised them treasure, they would help. Green dragons were trickier. You had to prove your honesty through tests and challenges.”

“What about black dragons?” Mike asked as he began to toss items onto the bed.

Lyssa swallowed heavily and admitted, “We didn’t try to catch black dragons.”

Heat pinked Lyssa’s cheeks as a pair of white leather restraints bounced onto the ivory counterpane in front of her. She tried not to think about the other items Mike had produced, but it was impossible. The nipple clamps at either end of a string of pearls made the tips of her breasts sting in anticipation. She swallowed a moan when she spotted the graduated curves of an anal plug. The glossy black color looked sinister against the alabaster scarf beside it.

“What type of dragon would you choose to be?” Lyssa asked, although considering the toys he’d laid out, she probably wouldn’t be too off base if she guessed.

He held her gaze as his fingers stroked over the ebony plug. “Black, pet.”

The muscles of her bottom twitched, and her empty sheath clenched and ached for him to fill it. Thoughts spun, and excitement spilled through her system. Lyssa tore her gaze from Mike’s and looked at the other toys on the duvet.

He followed her gaze. “The princess strayed too close to the caves,” Mike offered as he picked up the length of silk on which her focus had returned.

“Are we finished with the pictures?” The soft *click* and *hum* of the autowinders emphasized the quiet of the cavernous studio. The subdued lighting only added to the fire stirring in her center. Darkness filled the rest of the converted warehouse.

The barrier that closed off the reception area allowed none of the afternoon sunlight inside.

“Only just starting.” Mike stepped behind her. “Close your eyes, Lys.”

Lyssa hesitated.

“Trust me.”

It wasn't a question of trust. No, she trusted *him*; she simply didn't trust the emotions he professed to feel. She knew this couldn't last. In the hidden gallery at the Folly, he'd whispered he loved her. It hadn't been the first and probably wouldn't be the last time he professed to loving her.

She hadn't taken his words for granted. She'd hoarded each confession from him, kept it tucked away in her memory so she could remember them after he was gone. But she continued to keep her own feelings carefully locked away, acutely aware that if she gave in

and Mike didn't leave, if she allowed him to tether himself to her, he would be the one condemned to a life he'd grow to resent when he realized she wasn't worth loving.

Lyssa shut her eyes. She tensed briefly at the brush of silk against her cheeks and over her nose, but the thought of not being able to see fanned the ardor already simmering inside her. Two tugs and a bit of pressure settled the silk over her eyes. His fingers stroked her loosened hair. "We dragons love our gold."

Frozen in place, Lyssa fought to still the moan trembling on her lips when his fingertips skimmed along the edge of her skirt. The heat of his touch taunted her nipples until they ached for the return of his attention. When he stepped closer, she couldn't keep from arching into him. The heat between her thighs intensified at the feel of silk against leather. She'd recognized the full-sleeved shirt and

black leather pants he'd changed into earlier as the same ones he'd worn at her sister's collaring ceremony. Instead of the round-toed boots he'd worn during the ceremony, though, tonight Mike was barefoot like her.

"Hold out your hands, princess." His breath warmed her throat as his lips nibbled at the sensitive curve.

The scrape of leather against fabric as he leaned around her to collect the cuffs seemed much louder with her eyes covered. The *click* of the cameras continued to go off in a rhythmic pattern. *One. Two. Three. Four.* She'd never dealt with the overwhelming sensory shift a blindfold created. The sounds and scents around her heightened the longer her eyes remained covered. Even the simple act of turning to face him held an element of mystery since she could never be sure she actually faced him.

The cuffs slipped over her wrists,

and the rattle of the buckles overwhelmed the near silence in the studio. A pulse of anticipation startled her. “The magazine isn’t looking for porn shots, Mike,” she taunted, desperate to regain a modicum of will.

“Remember your place, princess,” Mike replied as he moved away from her.

“My place?” Lyssa snorted. She lifted her hands toward the blindfold. The temptation to play along with his game frightened her. Nerves jangled as the level of excitement climbed inside her.

“Don’t move.” His tone held the same power he’d exuded every night since the Club.

Lyssa fought the urge to submit further and instead ignored his tone and command. Turning back toward the bed, she began to fumble with the silk. A firm swat on her butt stilled her movements. Lyssa kept her hands raised, fingers trembling on the knot, ready to be free of

the silk covering her eyes. “What was that for?” Excitement thickened her voice, and the crease between her thighs grew slick with her cream. Her craving to please him grew.

Mike ignored her question. “Testing me?”

“No.”

“Then don’t move.” Mike’s hands settled over hers. Instead of shifting them to her sides, he eased her hands higher over her head. “Perhaps you need a reminder of who your master is?”

The slick heat between her thighs increased. “I thought you were playing a dragon?”

Mike kept quiet. Lyssa cocked her head to the side at the rattle of metal on metal. A brief tug on her arms confirmed her suspicions that Mike had somehow secured her cuffs near to the top of the bedpost. He stepped away as soon as he

finished and moved far enough that she couldn't detect his exact location based on the warmth of his body.

The soft click of one of the cameras recalled her to why she'd agreed to pose in the first place. "Are these photos really necessary? Don't you have enough by now?"

Somewhere to the side of her, she detected the rasp of fabric over flesh. Was he taking his shirt off? The sound of leather didn't make that swishy, whispery sound. She listened again, but it was gone.

"I'll share them with you, pet."

She undulated close and stroked her body against his, teasing the thick bulge of his cock as it strained to be free of the leather confining it.

The feel of his head lowered near hers allowed her lips to find the edge of his jaw and press kisses along it.

Despite the heavy bulge nudging her belly, Mike held steady. His fingers smoothed along the clear band that secured the bodice before he released it and slid his hands beneath the soft cups to caress her breasts. “Dragons like to play with their sacrifices, princess.”

She stiffened slightly beneath the caress of his fingers. The whirl of the cameras was audible over her increased breath. Her heartbeat sped up as the drape of fabric was lifted over her head, and the crossed bodice lowered, revealing her breasts. The rough skin on his palms and fingers rasped over nipples that strained for attention. She trembled at the rasp of his tongue, first over one nipple, then the other. Heat simmered at the apex of her thighs. She squeezed them together to still the ache. “Sacrifice?” she croaked.

Mike chuckled. “I spotted you. Way up in your tower, princess. First time I

laid eyes on you I couldn't wait to get my hands on your sweet ass."

"But—"

His mouth whispered against hers. "Exactly. Yours is so nice and round and full, Highness. Just perfect for spanking—or fucking. And you do like to be spanked."

Lyssa wasn't sure how to respond. She hesitated, then returned his kiss.

Mike nipped her bottom lip with his teeth. "Princess?"

She sighed. "Yes. I like when you spank me."

"I'm glad you enjoy it. Perhaps if you're a very good captive, I'll warm your backside."

"You won't spank me now?" Lyssa flinched at the disappointment in her voice.

With the blindfold over her eyes, she couldn't see a thing, but the amusement

she heard in his voice assured her a smile probably lifted his lips. “No, not now.” Mike found the hooks that held the skirt in place. Loosening them, he eased the dress over her hips and helped her step out of it. She heard it land on fabric, so Lyssa hoped he’d tossed the dress onto one of the nearby chairs. Her legs wobbled as his fingers inspected the plump lips of her pussy.

“Hmm, no panties, princess?”

“The dress doesn’t allow for them.”

“Or perhaps you hoped this dragon would be distracted by how wet you are?”

He smoothed one hand over her ass while the other drifted to her wet crease. The insides of her thighs were coated in her juices; she could feel it.

“You weren’t serious, were you? I mean about...you know, my butt?” Lyssa croaked even as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other and arched

closer.

Mike paused, and the hand occupied with cataloguing the contours of her ass eased between her cheeks to tease his fingers over her anus. "Mmm. Yes." His mouth covered hers, coaxing her lips to part and her tongue to twine with his. Long minutes later, he released her and moved his mouth to her throat.

"I've never—I haven't—" She stumbled, unsure what to say.

"I know. A sweet virgin sacrifice for this dragon." He leaned forward, rubbed his nose against hers, and then nuzzled along her cheek and jaw. "You'll love it, princess. The pain blends with the pleasure. Like the sting of the paddle on your bum."

Even as he pulled back, her mind whirled at the idea, the imagined painful pinch. Determined to retain control, she took a deep breath and nodded. "What do I have to do?" she asked.

“Relax, but don’t come,” Mike commanded.

“Don’t come?” She heard several beeps but couldn’t figure out what they meant.

“Correct. No matter what I do or how much you want to. You aren’t allowed to climax.”

She flexed her fingers around the post, and braced her feet, toes curled into the soft rug covering the polished wood flooring. “For how long?” She could do this.

“Until I give you permission.”

“And if I can’t handle it? If I need to climax?”

“Stop yourself, Highness. You did well last weekend; you can do it again.” Mike cupped her breasts, fondling the warm curves and plucking at the erect centers.

“Wha-what about our safe word?”

“If you think you can’t hold out, use it.”

He took his time to explore the soft mounds filling his hands.

A drawn-out moan was her only response as Mike settled his mouth over her breast and sucked the firm nipple inside. It felt so good. The way his mouth suckled at the taut peak, his teeth nibbled on the sensitive tip, his tongue pushed it up so it rubbed against the ridged roof of his mouth. Between the fingers of his other hand, he pinched and tugged her other nipple. Lyssa couldn’t hold back her husky moans or keep from arching against him.

She shifted beneath his touch, undulated closer, rocking her hips forward to brush the thick jut of his erection. Releasing her nipple, he moved his hand from her bottom to her hip. “Stay still, princess.”

“You didn’t say anything about—”

The swift thrust of his fingers into her wet sheath sent her up onto her tiptoes with a gasp. “Dragons like to savor their meals. Play with their food.” He worked his fingers deeper, pressed past clenched muscles and slick walls. His thumb coaxed the hood from her clit and teased the sensitive bud. “We take this at my pace. Slow and easy. Or I do it hard. And fast. Again and again.”

His lips brushed hers, and his teeth nipped her lower lip before licking away the sting. The whimper she gave as he removed his fingers from her warm body pulsed over his lips, sending embarrassed heat into Lyssa’s cheeks. She needed to stop the emotions. Stop her slipping control. Beat back the submissive taking over her body, her mind.

Lyssa shook her head. She drew her breath in with slow, deliberate care as she eased away from him and rested her back along the post of the bed. “Whatever

pleases you, Master,” she conceded reluctantly but noted the frisson of energy her use of his title sent through his body.

Lyssa tightened her fingers around the chains securing her to the post. She clenched her teeth and fought the moan in her chest. She stifled the cries when the slide of cool metal encircled one nipple and tightened before a second ring surrounded her other nipple. The chilly caress and weight of the pearls strung between the clamps vibrated with the heavy beat of her heart.

The sensations built one upon another as Mike worked his way down the front of her body. The brush of his lips, the nip of his teeth, the way he traced the dip of her navel before going lower sent fire flickering through her veins. Four years ago, she'd considered the way he could play her body an aberration, but after the last week, she'd revised that

opinion. Now she knew he had to be part incubus. The things he could make her feel, the way he fed off her building need, and the explosive climaxes reinforced his almost demonic ability to read her mind.

Her breath grew short as the need to come twisted in her womb. The fire and heat climbed as his fingers parted her labia and played at the entrance to her body. She pressed her head against the post at the rough scrape of his tongue over her clit. Her thighs quivered at the strain to keep from wrapping them around his shoulders and tugging him into her. And his fingers. Damn those fingers. Tickling the wet lips, sliding through the thick cream coating her pussy and thighs before sneaking into the crease between her cheeks and rubbing along the puckered rose of her ass.

How many times had she teased Mattie about anal sex being kinky? And here she was desperate, biting her lip to

keep from begging Mike to push his finger inside. On the verge of coming, Lyssa held her breath, her body stiff as she forced the need down. *Count. Breath. Visualize the careful construction of a pattern for one of your designs.* Lyssa used any and every method she knew to combat the wave of climax rushing toward her.

Then he stopped. His hands slid away from her skin, and his mouth pressed a soft kiss to the throbbing nubbin before his heat disappeared.

Breath shuddered into her lungs, the tension seeped from her limbs, and the pounding desire stumbled to a confused buzz. A moan swelled and exited her lips as a mixture of groan and sob. It was clear he had more in mind for her than an introduction to a butt plug. If she read the situation correctly, Mike was also using this as an opportunity to help her learn discipline over her body's need to climax. She bit her lip as another wave of

sensation buffeted her.

Cellophane ripped. Lyssa's heart thumped against her ribs. At the whisper of rubber covering skin, the strand of pearls swayed over her sternum, tugging at her swollen peaks. If he was putting a condom on, Mike certainly intended to fuck her.

The *pop* of a cap sounded behind her, drawing Lyssa's attention, and caused her to turn her head. The temptation to rub the blindfold off was difficult to suppress, but she refrained. Something within her whispered encouragements, assured her that whatever Mike planned would bring pleasure, just as everything he'd done since Halloween had only resulted in bliss.

But the devil within her sneered at the sensations filling her. It took the momentary consideration she gave to submission as a personal affront to the

power she'd established over the years. The *click* of the cameras recorded her behavior and only added salt to the wound.

“Giving up?” Lyssa wasn't sure if her question was meant to goad Mike into abandoning the role-play or spur him into increasing his attentions.

His lips pressed against hers. The fingers of one hand probed the pouting lips of her mound. “No, love. Merely preparing my treat.”

His dampened fingertips moved backward, rubbed at the hypersensitive skin, eased past the first ring of muscles, and drew a gasp from her lips. Lyssa shuddered at the awareness tingling through her, the way the scent of his skin surrounded her. The feel of his body close to her. The sharp edge of his teeth along her bottom lip.

Something hot and slick rubbed across her belly. The impressions

bombarding her spun around in her head and required a moment to identify the object as part of him. The silky tip of his cock, covered in latex, pressed close, then pulled back. His mouth moved from her lips to her ear, caressed the curve before teasing the lobe with a tug from his teeth.

The rasp of his breath stirred the hair beside her ear before he spoke. “I know you’ll like this, Princess. Like I told you, I’ve dreamed of giving it to you for a very long time.” The finger inside her slipped free, but only to allow his hand a firmer grasp on the rounded cheek that exposed the rose of her ass to something thicker than his finger.

Lyssa arched away from it, pushing into Mike’s unyielding frame as the first bulb on the plug breached her. The slick lubricant coating the toy was chilly against her heated skin. She tensed, fighting the fire rekindling in her core. The image of the black graduated curves

of the cone sent a barrage of conflicting emotions zinging through her.

“Master, I-I don’t—”

“Shhhh. Just feel, pet. That’s all I want you to do. Take a deep breath and relax. Let your senses guide you.” He pressed a soft kiss to the spot behind her left ear. “I won’t let go. I swear I’ll never let you fall, baby. Trust me.”

Lyssa turned and rubbed her cheek against his. “Kiss me.” The plea was soft, gasped as she struggled to catch her breath. It took everything she had to follow his instructions and relax.

His lips rubbed against hers, parted them so his tongue could stroke inside. The same careful motions of advance and retreat echoed the systematic insertion of the plug into her backside. Lyssa moaned and writhed, sliding her body along his, conflicted in determining if she wanted to aide or fight against the probe.

“Press against it,” Mike encouraged as he placed kisses across her cheeks below the edge of silk covering her eyes. “Let it in. Feel how it stings and stretches, burning through you, making you wet. Ready. I can smell how turned on you are.”

The soft rumble of his voice amped up the intensity of the desire flowing through her. She couldn't halt the whimper as she rolled her hips, flexed down onto the pressure filling her rear, and fire danced through her core.

“Don't come, love. Not yet.” Mike's teeth nibbled the tendon stretching down the side of her neck. “It isn't time yet.”

“Oh please, Master,” Lyssa begged, her voice rough with need. Her body shook in reaction as the third, then the fourth curve slid inside. The sting and burn intensified; she shifted onto the tips of her toes, dragged her weight upward by pulling on the chains holding her arms in

place. The wood of the post creaked and groaned. Need weakened her resolve as sensations built within her. Waves of emotions she'd kept firmly reined in tugged at their restraints.

The fingers cupping her ass bit into the round flesh. He lifted her off her feet. Lyssa gasped with relief, her head dropping onto his shoulder as she fought to bring her body back under control.

The reprieve didn't last. Her breathing had barely evened out when Mike whispered his warning against her lips. "Hold tight, love." His mouth covered hers, sealing in the cry when he released her slowly at the same time he finished seating the plug. Fire seared, poured a trail from her stretched ass to her clenching womb.

She bucked against him. Climax hovered close; control scrabbled for purchase on wet, slippery ground. The brush of his fingers didn't distract her

from the pending explosion ticking toward detonation. Her vaginal muscles contracted and released, seeking relief where none was present.

“Master, please,” she sobbed, her eyes squeezed shut, tears leaking from beneath her lashes. The silk banding her head slipped free.

“Open your eyes, Lyssa.”

Lyssa’s eyes fluttered open, gaining focus in slow increments. The tip of his cock slid between her swollen folds and rubbed at the entrance to her body. With the same tortoiselike pace, Mike tunneled through gripping muscles and wet tissues until his hot, thick shaft filled her completely.

“Look at me.” His voice demanded compliance.

Lyssa gave it without hesitation. The fire engulfed her, but she held it off. Waiting. Anticipating his approval.

Dreading a refusal. Her gaze focused on his. She watched him as he watched her. The flush to his cheeks, the narrow ring of brown around his dilated pupils assured her he wasn't as unaffected as he sounded.

"Listen to me, pet. I want you to hear this and know I mean it." He eased his body out of her, ignoring the pulse and flex of muscles fighting to keep him inside.

Lyssa sobbed, shook her head, but didn't lose contact with his penetrating gaze. "*Please.*"

"Whether you admit it or not, you belong to me. Not just for this month, but always. Forever."

He shifted forward, filling her again. The hand behind her wiggled the plug, increasing the overfilled sensations spreading through her.

"Forever," he repeated, tugging her

closer. His retreat was faster, the return firm. Hard. Just what Lyssa needed but not enough.

“Yes,” she agreed. Anything if he’d just do it. Just let her come. Holding off, resisting the fire sizzling through her veins, singeing her insides was driving her mad. “Please, Master. Please let me come.”

“Even if you deny me with your dying breath”—the expression in his face, the heat in his eyes softened—“I love you.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart seemed to explode, and the fire within her erupted. It shot through her body, stiffening her legs, stopping the breath in her lungs, melting her brain, and turning any coherent thoughts to mush. She was barely cognizant of Mike’s hands clutching her against him as the convulsion spread outward, growing more intense with every wave coursing through

her until it culminated in a gush of fluid coating both her and Mike where their bodies melded.

Her eyes flew open, and she stared in stunned amazement at the wicked grin and satisfaction filling Mike's expression. "That's so fucking hot, Lys."

Exhausted, her body spent and still pulsing with aftershocks from her climax, Lyssa shook her head. "I've never—"

Mike's grin grew wider. "Can you do it again?"

"I-I didn't kn-know I c-could do it this time," she stammered.

"Ah, perhaps I'll just have to work you a little harder next time, hmm?"

Warm, firm lips smothered her groan. Lyssa succumbed to the urge to wrap legs that felt like wet noodles around his waist. Her internal muscles contracted around his thick flesh, tempting her toward another release despite the wash

of lethargy sweeping over her.

Denial was futile. Containment of her unruly emotions was crucial. If it meant crushing the last bit of hope slowly taking form in her heart, snuffing it out forever in order to protect herself, she'd do it.

Chapter Twelve

Easing out of the bed, Mike worked silently to pull on his jeans before drawing the Sig Sauer from under the mattress. He kept it tight against his leg as he left the room without waking Lyssa. Exhaustion kept her motionless beneath the covers as Mike watched her from the doorway for several minutes. Before he moved down the hall toward the kitchen, he tucked the P226 into the back of his waistband.

They'd be getting up in a few hours to meet the models at his studio again. He'd cleared away the cameras and tripods while Lyssa dozed. As soon as

Tumaini had tiptoed back in just after sundown, Mike had helped a very sleepy Lyssa dress, loaded her into his truck, and brought her home.

Tired as he was, though, sleep had eluded him. No sooner had his eyes closed than an image of Trent would flash through his mind. Or LaTreace. Sweat sheened his skin when he'd pictured Lyssa anywhere near some of the scum he'd gone after in the last few years. Instinct told him something bad was coming. Tin Man—Trent—admitted he'd heard Mike was on leave, but that didn't mean he'd accepted it. Not to mention some of the other operatives on the team. Glenda and Wizard were the first who came to mind.

The svelte blonde Russian could coax honey from the bees, but she wasn't a lady to cross. If she thought his taking leave could set back any of the multilayered investigations the team was

focused on, she'd be on his doorstep, Tokarev TT-33 in hand if her smile didn't work.

Wizard, on the other hand, was just flat-out scary. A six-feet-five Chinese man with jade green eyes wasn't someone you could ignore or miss. If there was one thing Mike admired, it was that Wizard was good at hiding in plain sight. And when he wanted something, he got it. His magic centered on his ability to remove obstacles—human or otherwise—to achieve his goals. If his aim was to capture a key player in an organization, he could work any number of spells to get that person. Lately, though, Wizard's plans had been thwarted by an elusive person yet to be identified.

If Wizard determined Mike's presence would be best used somewhere other than San Diablo, it wouldn't surprise Mike if he suddenly woke up one morning in Wizard's fortress in central

China. And keeping Lyssa in the dark was getting harder to do. Especially after he'd explained the circumstances surrounding his adoption of Tuma. She'd stayed quiet, but that wasn't likely to last very long. If she decided to drag Bryce and his father into her plans to get more information, it would not only complicate matters but possibly put his entire family at risk.

For the first time in the nearly twelve years he'd been part of Operation Zulu Team, Mike regretted his decision to become an operative.

Taking a deep breath, Mike rested his hands on the kitchen counter and tried to relax. He let his mind drift for a moment, the details and information dropping into safe little compartments for him to analyze.

It was unlikely Wizard or Glenda could make it here without him knowing. Both were currently deployed in Asia and

Europe respectively. Tin Man, on the other hand—he could have left almost immediately after he called to ask about LaTreace.

Again instinct kicked in the second Mike thought about LaTreace. Things didn't feel right. Tin Man would take care of her, but the woman had a stubborn streak a mile wide. Mike knew the situation she'd been placed in wasn't dangerous, just sensitive.

Mike rolled his head on his neck. Pushing away the thoughts distracting him, he turned his attention to what unsettled him most. The exhaustion pulling at him wasn't physical but emotional. He hadn't been wrong when he'd assumed Lyssa would remain mute about her feelings. The woman was obstinate. Hell would house figure-skating penguins before she'd ever confess to loving him.

Which frustrated the crap out of

him. There were moments when he wanted to use everything he knew about how her body responded to force the words from her. It was that sense of desperation that drove him from her bed to pace the darkened confines of her kitchen. Food would never satisfy the craving he battled daily. He doubted Lyssa realized the measure of control she'd ceded over to him this evening by the simple act of calling him Master without him prompting her. But he was sure once she realized it, she'd begin reinforcing her walls, pronto.

“If she would only stop and think.” Unfortunately that was exactly what she was doing, but she was applying skewed logic. Mike knew her barriers were connected to childhood traumas. It had taken his brother eight years to get past Mattie's walls and defenses, and Lyssa had experienced six years more exposure to the derision and abuse meted out by their father. Then there was the fact that

Lyssa's mind didn't trust her heart. As Mattie had mentioned the morning after the masquerade, it was her head he'd have to convince, not her heart. And the

A movement along the side yard drew Mike's attention from his thoughts to the windows facing the edge of the property. The motion sensors that triggered the floodlights must have malfunctioned. With his heartbeat increasing and adrenaline beginning to stir, he continued to watch. Until he confirmed it as a possible threat to Lyssa's safety, he'd wait.

When the shadow separated itself from the hedge marking the boundary between Lyssa's house and the one on the left, Mike removed the pistol he'd tucked into the back of his jeans and checked the alarm pad near the door leading into the garage. The display was black, no lights or words flashing along the LED strip.

Whoever was out there knew how to deactivate security systems, which meant his intentions weren't to be trusted. There was no way he'd allow anyone close enough to harm his woman. Mike tracked the man as he moved toward the backyard and the covered patio. Easing the dead bolts open, Mike stepped into the garage. From there he slipped through the door leading onto the side yard, making sure to stay as quiet as possible.

He'd scouted around Lyssa's house in the days since they'd struck their bargain. The placement of the various shrubs and plants along the side of the house were familiar, and he used their shadows to move in on the intruder. "Better to prepare for an enemy and live, than expect a friend and die" was one of Trent's favorite sayings. In that moment, Mike took it to heart. Friend or enemy, whoever was skulking around out here was about to learn a hard lesson

regarding manners.

Mike approached from behind, noting the man was built along lean, compact lines, similar to Bryce. He suspected the intruder might be as strong as Bryce, and the way the guy moved without making much noise warned Mike surprise would be to his best advantage. Slipping the safety on his gun, he returned it to the back of his jeans and then made his move.

Going in low, Mike aimed for the man's knees, sending him crashing into the flower bed. His suspicions about the other man's fighting ability weren't wrong. The fall would have stunned an untrained thief; this one came up swinging. His right fist slammed into Mike's shoulder as Mike shifted out of the way. Using the momentum of the blow, Mike grabbed the man's wrist, pulled him forward while moving aside and rising to his knees. Without the leverage of Mike's

body to stop him, the man landed face-first on the damp grass, his right arm pinned beneath his torso.

Mike gave him no opportunity to wriggle loose. With his free hand, Mike twisted the man's left arm up and back, pinning the hand between his shoulder blades. The scuffle ended as Mike shifted his leg so his knee pressed over the kid's forearm and his shin kept the kid's upper body secured to the ground. With his right hand free, Mike tugged the gun from his jeans and tapped the threaded barrel against the intruder's cheek.

Leaning in close, his voice soft, he demanded, "Who sent you?"

"I'm sorry. I was trying—"

Mike heard movement nearby. Every instinct braced him for the worst. He'd rattled quite a few cages over the years. Despite the anonymity of his position with OZ, traitors weren't unheard of, and identities were often compromised.

Shifting his position and weight, he secured the arm he'd twisted against the kid's back beneath his leg and settled his knee at the base of his prisoner's skull. He tapped the barrel of the P226 against the kid's cheek a second time. "Not a sound," he warned. The kid had been trained somewhere. The lack of noise and speed with which he'd reacted to Mike's attack was evidence of that. Which meant the threat of a dislocated shoulder or broken arm wouldn't slow him down, but the surety of a broken neck immediately immobilized the guy.

There was just enough light from the streetlamps for Mike to distinguish the stealthy movements of a second figure approaching off to his left. Lifting the gun, his voice pitched low enough to travel but not loud enough to wake Lys, he called out, "Your choice. One more step and I'll put a bullet in you and snap the kid's neck."

A flashlight beam landed on the kid's face from a spot to Mike's right. He cursed softly. Three on one. Not his favorite odds but he could make do. At the very least, if he made enough noise, Ben and Vance should arrive in plenty of time to protect Lyssa.

"Damn it, Corvus, what grab-ass stunt are you up to now?"

Mike relaxed slightly the instant he recognized Vance's disgruntled snarl.

The kid groaned softly before replying, "Hey, Gunny."

"You know this kid?" Mike asked, lowering the gun and blinking to allow his vision to adjust to the light from the flashlight. Ben stepped forward out of the shadows, flashlight in one hand, a gun in the other.

After releasing the hammer and flipping the safety on, Mike tucked the Sig into the waistband at the back of his

jeans.

“Yeah, Lance Coolie Eugene Corvus. Corvus, apologize to the man for disturbing his sleep.”

“Yes, sir.” Corvus grimaced as he tried to shift his head enough to look up at Mike. “My apologies, mister. If I’d known this was your house, I’d never snuck up.”

“And disabled the motion sensors, the security lights, and tripped the perimeter alarms,” Vance growled.

“Yeah, that too,” Corvus agreed, before adding, “I’d really like to be able to breathe now, sir. Could you maybe take your knee off my neck?”

Mike shifted his weight and rose. “Interesting way to introduce yourself to the neighborhood, kid. I wouldn’t recommend you try it again.”

Rubbing his arm and rolling his head on his shoulders, Corvus eased into

a sitting position, his gaze roving between the three men standing over him. "Wasn't tryin' to introduce myself, sir. Just wanted to see if gunny was still sharp since he's been outside."

Vance reached a hand down and assisted Corvus to his feet. As soon as the soldier was upright, Vance smacked the back of the lance corporal's head. "That's for acting like a gomer, Corvus."

Corvus winced. "Aye, sir."

"And quit calling me 'sir.' I may have retired, but I work for a living," Vance barked with another pop.

"Yes, gunny."

Mike stifled the urge to laugh at the soldier's discomfort under Vance's glare. The kid stood at least four inches taller than Vance, but he deferred to the ex-marine as if he were still his commanding officer. "I'll leave you three to your reunion." As he moved past Ben, he

asked, "Did the alarm signal get to the sheriff's office?"

Ben shook his head. "We reset it once the sensors registered a single body."

"Figured you and Vance could handle it?"

Ben eyed Mike carefully before he nodded. "Been taking care of her for four years, Mike. One bad guy is a piece of cake. You handled yourself pretty well."

Mike brushed at the grass and dirt on his jeans. He gave the excuse he'd always used in the past. "You don't get through war zones and civil uprisings without learning a little something."

"Well enough to take care of your lady." It wasn't a question, but one gleamed in the other man's eyes as Ben watched him.

"About as well as you and Vance, I believe." There was no need to go into detail, but he was sure at the first

opportunity Ben and Vance would be making some inquiries.

“For how long?” Ben asked.

Mike lifted his bare shoulders in a shrug and admitted, “Forever. Whether my lady wants it or not.”

* * *

The nip of approaching winter was in the air as Lyssa waited on the porch of Pirate’s Folly four days later. The moment the front door swung open, she pounced.

“You told him about the bet, didn’t you?” Lyssa left no time for Mattie to answer as she stepped into the house and shut the door behind her. Mattie gave nothing away as she shrugged and led her down the hall.

“All’s fair in love and war, right?” Mattie chuckled as she moved into the sitting room and eased her youngest son onto the quilt spread over the carpet

beside the settee.

“This isn’t about love, Mat,” Lyssa grumped as she dropped into the winged chair facing her sister.

Mattie eyed her closely. “If it isn’t about love, then what is it about?”

A sudden swell of nausea made Lyssa swallow quickly. She took a few deep breathes until the feeling eased. “Sex.”

Mattie’s eyebrows rose, and she tapped her chin with a finger. “Now where have I heard that excuse before?”

“Mat.”

The other woman ignored Lyssa’s warning tone. “Oh yeah, I think I said the same thing about Bryce and me a few years ago.”

Determined to put the conversation back on the track *she* wanted, Lyssa leaned forward in her chair and shook her finger at Mattie. “Don’t change the

subject. You had no right to tell Mike about our bet.”

“I take it he finally asked you to pose for him.”

Lyssa stayed silent. Posing had little to do with what had passed between her and Mike in his studio. Her suspicions about Mattie divulging the details of their bet four years ago hadn't surfaced until long after she and Mike returned to her home, he carried her to bed, and crawled in beside her. It had taken her nearly a day to recover. The other three days she'd been too distracted by the damned man and his determined lovemaking every night. His assumption about her growing used to his closeness was slowly proving true, which made Lyssa nervous as hell. That unease only cranked to full throttle when she caught herself thinking up ways to please him.

“Lys? Hellooo.”

Mattie's laughter and singsong voice

brought Lyssa back to the present and the question that had set her mind to wandering. “Yes, he asked me to pose for him.”

“Nude?” Mattie’s dark eyebrows wagged up and down in amusement.

“No, he didn’t ask me to pose nude.” Lyssa couldn’t stifle the gurgle of amusement that slipped free at the pout drooping the corners of her sister’s mouth. No way was she going to give Mattie any more ammunition.

“Well, you survived it.” Mattie settled onto the quilt beside her son and leaned against the sofa. “And from the looks of you, your night at the Club must have netted a nice romp.”

“My sex life isn’t under discussion,” Lyssa replied.

“Oh, I think fair’s fair, sister dear.” Mattie cuddled Sean close as he crawled into her lap. “Not so long ago, you were

tossing out advice about how I should conduct my relationship with Bryce.”

“I doubt Mike’ll get through the rest of the month without rushing off to some war zone at the drop of a hat.” Lyssa winced at the hoot of laughter her words brought out of Mattie.

“Woo wee”—Mattie lifted Sean up and grinned at him—“did you hear that, sweetie? Uncle Mike has Auntie Lys all tied up.”

Lyssa watched Mattie settle her son on her lap. Her own arms ached to hold the baby, but she knew what would happen if she reached for him. The need to have one of her own would gnaw at her. Better to let Mattie tease her about Mike than figure out the real reason Lyssa had decided to use her masquerade invitation in the first place.

“Is he tying you up? Or down?” Mattie laughed.

“Phffft.” Her nephew bounced and laughed in her sister’s lap when Lyssa blew the wet raspberry at Mattie.

Mattie ignored her response and asked, “Yummy, isn’t it?”

Again Lyssa refused to admit how right Mattie was.

“If he’s half as good as Bryce, not going back for seconds is a losing battle.”

The purr in her sister’s voice had images surfacing of the nights she’d spent with Mike. “Okay, I’ll concede the sex is good.”

Mattie laughed. “Better than what’s-his-name from high school?”

Lyssa shuddered at the memories from that single mistake. “Yes. Much.”

“What was his name? I can vaguely remember him. Dirty blond hair, brown eyes. Curtis or Chris—”

“Craig.” Lyssa grimaced at the memories. Before Mattie could ask, she

added, "We dated from sophomore through senior year." Lyssa could tell the moment Mattie concluded the reason for the breakup, and Lyssa fought the habit of reaching up to rub at the scar on her shoulder.

"So we've established the sex is good. Mike is still hanging around. What's so bad about that?"

Lyssa shook her head. "Give me a break."

"Come on, Lys, fess up. You've always had a soft spot for Mike." Mattie grinned.

"He's a kid, Mat. It's hard not to like kids. Or puppy dogs. Or kittens."

"Don't try that lame excuse. He's the same age as me."

"So?" She wasn't about to admit anything to Mattie. Lyssa reminded herself, if she wasn't careful, her little sister would be pulling the details of her

bargain with Mike from her. Wouldn't that just deflate all the little fantasies she knew Mattie was dreaming up? "There's six years between us"—Lyssa motioned to herself, then her sister—"which means I'm six years older than him."

"So, there's ten years between Bryce and me." Settling her son onto the quilt again and handing him several of the toys littering it, Mattie grimaced over her shoulder at Lyssa. "You aren't going to pull some stupid 'it's different for a man than a woman' thing, are you?"

"But it is." Lyssa squirmed in her seat, only half believing the argument she was trying to make.

"Only if you let it." Mattie watched her even as Sean abandoned the toys he'd been given and crawled back into her lap.

Her close attention and something in her soft brown gaze triggered Lyssa's flight response, but she quelled it.

“What are you afraid of, Lys?”

I so do not want to go there. Just thinking about Mike staying and her having to confess to the loss of their child made her sick to her stomach. Lyssa shook her head. “Nothing.”

“There’s something more, isn’t there? What else are you afraid of?”

“Leave it alone, Mat.” Lyssa hoped her sister would pay attention to the warning this time.

“Can’t. I have the solemn duty of little sister’s to uphold.”

“Duty?”

Mattie nodded. “Yup. I take the job seriously. I carry the heavy burden of bugging the crap out of you. Especially when a guy is involved.”

Lyssa chuckled, appreciative of her sister’s attempt to lighten the atmosphere. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You do that. In the meantime, tell

me what has you scared about this. Mike is a good man. And he loves you.”

“For how long?” The thought slipped free.

“If I know Mike, I’d say forever.”

Lyssa flopped back in the chair, intent on ignoring the thrum of satisfaction her sister’s words invoked. “Do you think Mom thought the same thing? And Dad?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember either one of them talking about it.”

“I do.” Lyssa squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to corral the emotions trying to take over. She needed to stay in control, but the urge to scream and yell was surging to the surface. “Maybe if they’d just dated longer, they would have realized what a mistake they were making being together.”

“I think they figured that out pretty early on.”

“Yeah. But not until after Mom was already pregnant with me.”

A heavy silence fell between them. Compelled to make Mattie see why it was foolish for Lyssa to believe Mike could keep loving her, Lyssa continued. “Dad used to make me sit with him when he drank. Day or night, he’d sit there and tell me how I’d ruined everything for him. That because Mom went and let herself get knocked up and refused to get rid of it, his life was ruined. All the great things he was supposed to do—college, business, everything—had been destroyed because of me.”

“Lyssa.” Mattie’s voice was rough with tears.

She couldn’t tell her sister about the nights their mom had sobbed out nearly the same accusations. How Alise Lawrence had regretted loving Aaron so much that she’d burdened them with a child that forced them to stay together.

Mattie didn't need to hear that. "It's okay, Mat. When I grew up, I realized he and Mom made their choices."

"But you don't believe in loving someone?"

Lyssa shrugged. "Not the forever kind you find in books and movies."

"Do you think it won't last for me and Bryce?"

There wasn't any worry in Mattie's voice, more indignation. Lyssa smiled. *Typical Mattie*. "No, I think the two of you are an exception to the rule. I just don't think it'll happen for me."

Mattie snorted. "Ha. That's where you're wrong. Mike loves you, Lys. And considering you're *my* sister and he's *Bryce's* brother, I think the two of you are an exception to the rule as well."

She only wished they were, but Lyssa refused to delude herself. Mike would grow tired of her. He'd realize

loving her wasn't worth the effort, and he'd walk away. Either that or he'd learn the secret she'd been keeping from him, and he'd turn his back on her for good. No matter the outcome, he'd leave and she'd be alone again.

Mattie cuddled her son closer as she rose and crossed the floor to stand in front of Lyssa. "Okay, we've cleared that up. What else is bugging you?"

Lyssa swallowed, unable to look away from Mattie. "Being alone."

"Not gonna happen," Mattie assured her as she sat her son in Lyssa's lap. "Scooch over," she ordered as Mattie shoehorned herself onto the seat beside her sister.

"We're both a little big for this, Mat." Lyssa chuckled as she grinned down at her nephew and scooted over as far as possible. Curvy ran in their family, so it was a *very* tight fit.

“Now don’t ever think you’ll be alone.” Mattie’s arms wrapped over her son and around Lyssa’s shoulders as she hugged her close. “You have me and the kids. Bryce. Even Jacob considers you another daughter.”

“It’s not the same.” The warmth filling her went beyond the sharing of the chair with her sister. “I know if I need you guys you’ll be there for me. Even Gino and his boys will come running if anything happens.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ in here somewhere. And I’m not talking about the ones we’re sittin’ on.” Mattie leaned back to get a better look at Lyssa’s face. “You’re not telling me something.”

“I want a family of my own, Mat.” She pressed a kiss to Sean’s forehead as the sleepy baby yawned and snuggled against her shoulder. “I want a baby or two all my own.” Reaching her free hand down, she patted her sister’s thigh. “Don’t

get me wrong, hon; I love all four of your kids, but—”

“They aren’t yours. I get it, Lys. No offense taken.” Moving her hand from her son’s back, Mattie rubbed at her belly. “If you want a kid, you’re definitely going about it the right way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Considering the genes on Mike’s side of the family, it’ll be hard for you *not* to get pregnant.” Mattie rested her head against Lyssa’s. “Maggie, Dylan, and Duncan were planned from the beginning. Not that he expected we’d have triplets, but Bryce did everything possible to make sure I got pregnant as soon as we married.”

“You told me about that. Are you still giving him grief over it?”

Mattie laughed. “Of course, but I can’t really be too hard on him. Being the big bad dom that he is, my darling

husband and his doctored condoms have been quite useful. Not to mention he poked about a dozen pinholes in my diaphragm and made sure to conveniently ‘forget’ protection a few times. All ploys I’ve used to my own end.”

“To get Sean?” Lyssa stroked her hand over the soft blond hair on her nephew’s head.

“Yes and no. Sean and this one”—Mattie patted her belly—“they weren’t exactly planned, even if I did use Bryce’s tools against him.”

“How so?”

“I wanted another baby. Bryce figured the triplets were enough. So I made sure I didn’t use my diaphragm.” Mattie grinned.

“How long did it take? Three, four months?”

“Twice.” Mattie rolled her eyes and climbed out of the chair. Sitting on the

coffee table facing Lyssa, she grimaced. “Bryce noticed I hadn’t gone to the bathroom, did a bit of exploring, and made sure he put my diaphragm in every night and used a condom all the other times.”

“Wow, talk about fertile Myrtle.” Lyssa chuckled.

“Hey, don’t put this all on my shoulders. Look at the Halsey family history. Not a single couple in the family line had less than four kids. At least until Jacob came along.” Mattie crossed her arms over her chest. “Yup, I figure if you want a baby, just keep little Mikey hard and uncovered.”

It was Lyssa’s turn to roll her eyes. “Gross, Mat. Very gross.”

“But true, sister dear.”

For the briefest moment, as Sean snuggled against her, his soft breath wafting over her shoulder as he drifted off

to sleep, Lyssa imagined he was hers. Mike's son and hers, physical evidence of the connection between them. Proof of her love—

“Mommy! Daddy's bein' dom 'gain!” preceded the slamming of a door somewhere in the house.

“Margaretta Alise Halsey, you get back here!” Bryce's voice thundered through the house before the door shut firmly again. “Lawrence!”

“Ah, my master is home”—Mattie laughed, shaking her head as she headed for the door—“and hot on the heels of our vexing little girl.”

Lyssa soothed the startled baby as she eased out of the chair and followed her sister toward the sitting room doorway.

* * *

Cuddled close together in bed later that night, Lyssa asked Mike, “Do you

think Tuma enjoyed meeting Ben and Vance?”

Mike laughed, his fingers playing with the soft strands of her hair. “I think she did. It was nice of you to invite her along for Steak Wednesday.”

“I noticed you didn’t tell either of them that she’s your daughter.” Lyssa had been curious about the omission, but she reasoned Mike’s silence was rooted in his own justifications.

“Tuma and I decided to keep quiet about our relationship until we can tell the rest of the family.”

That made her chuckle. “Don’t want word getting to your big brother before you can tell him?”

Mike grimaced but nodded. “Definitely. Bryce would not take it well if he heard about Tuma from anyone other than me.” Rolling onto his side, he trailed his hand over her hip and pulled her

closer. "You certainly didn't help with your story about Maggie."

He felt like a warm blanket along the front of her body. The jut of his aroused penis rubbed against her belly, but he wasn't in any hurry to assuage his need. In the days since she'd posed for him, Lyssa had noticed Mike's tendency to draw out their lovemaking. Where before he'd focused on stimulating her body so she achieved climax quickly, now he seemed intent on demonstrating the satisfaction to be found in a long, slow burn.

She was growing more and more aware of the fact that her desire for him was developing into an addiction. A frisson of unease skittered through her at the thought of the repercussions that could ensue if she grew too dependent on Mike's presence. The ripples of their breakup could extend beyond simply the two of them. If it went badly, Mattie and

the kids could catch some of the fallout. Lyssa never expected Bryce or Jacob to take her side over Mike's. And that type of discord would create issues in her sister's marriage—

“Lyssa?” Mike's concerned query drew her from the thoughts spiraling through her.

Remembering his earlier comment, she quipped, “And just how did my story about Maggie put Tuma off?”

“Put her off? Uh-uh, it only made her more intent on meeting the family.”

“So the idea of a cousin who comes home with baby rattlesnakes for pets didn't faze her?” Lyssa allowed her hand to explore the firm contours of Mike's shoulder before moving on to his chest, then his hip, and finally his flank. The tips of her breasts rubbed against his hair-dusted chest, their increased sensitivity making her gasp at the sensation of each crisp curl twining

around her swollen nipples.

“I think Tuma believes it will be her responsibility to keep the minx out of trouble.”

Lyssa laughed. “I wish her luck. Did she not hear what Ben said?”

Mike’s fingers curled around the back of her thigh, drawing her leg over his hip, opening Lyssa’s body to further exploration. He continued the conversation as if they were still gathered around Ben and Vance’s dining room table. “Oh, she heard it. That only made her more determined. She told me nearly a dozen visits to the emergency room in three years of life was an indication that whatever guardian angel watched over Maggie was severely overworked.”

Lyssa couldn’t decide if she should groan or laugh. Tuma’s comment made sense, but the way Mike’s fingers gently stroked the flesh between her thighs distracted her. Unwilling to let him divert

her, Lyssa shook her head. “Overwhelmed is more accurate, I think. If the people in San Diablo didn’t know Bryce and Mattie as well as they do, I wouldn’t be surprised if someone at the hospital entertained thoughts of child abuse.”

“How can anyone equate fire ant bites and fleas with child abuse?” Mike demanded, his fingers going still as he stared at her.

Lyssa leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his brow. “Hey, don’t ask me, but there are also the dislocated shoulder, five stitches on her left shin, ten on her right, and the minor concussion to take into consideration. On top of the usual colds and flu.”

It took a moment as he considered the information before Mike relaxed and returned his attention to what he’d been doing. “True, that does seem a bit excessive for a three-year-old.”

“Until you consider the dislocated

shoulder and concussion resulted from her escaping the emergency room,” Lyssa reminded him. She paused, then added, “I have to admit, I’ve been tempted myself to see what it’s like to swing from one of the TV wall mounts in the waiting room.”

Mike groaned and buried his face against her neck. “Much as I love Maggie, I do not envy my brother the gray hairs that child is going to cause him.”

“I have to wonder what kind of man is going to be able to keep up with her when she gets older and starts to date.”

“Now that’s scary.” Mike seemed to think about something for a moment before he asked, “Have you ever thought about having kids?”

Lyssa held her breath for a moment. Twice in one day, she was having to confront this question. Although she’d hidden anything that might alert Mike to the plan that had sent her to the masquerade, she worried about how he’d

react if he ever found out. Keeping her tone offhand, she lied, "Not seriously."

"You have to wonder if there's a chance you could end up with a little Maggie of your own," Mike prompted.

"You make it sound like a bad thing." Lyssa grinned.

His fingers stroked through her loosened hair. "I'm just picturing you yelling for me to handle things if we have baby rattlers, feral cats, or half-wild stray dogs running around the house."

"It wasn't a stray dog; it was a coyote pup," Lyssa clarified. "I think I do rather well with Maggie's scavenger hunt prizes."

He cocked an eyebrow and reminded her, unable to hide his grin, "Aren't you forgetting that little incident with the tarantula?"

Lyssa shuddered and grimaced. "Eww. Little, my ass. That thing was

huge! Even Jacob was freaked out when she pranced in holding that icky bug.”

“You aren’t bothered by the thought that we could one day have a child as curious and fearless as Maggie?”

“We?” Lyssa looked at him. “Where did this *we* come from?” The censure in her tone hadn’t been intentional, but her heart hammered at the thought of his getting so close to her secret. Not to mention the feeling that spread through her at his mention of a child shared by them. The way he said it made it seem like he actually looked forward to the idea. As much as she did.

No, she couldn’t let herself fall into that trap. Or let him fall into it.

Reaching over, Mike switched on the lamp and sat up in bed. “I was speaking hypothetically.”

“Okay, so *hypothetically* if I were to have a child, what makes you think I’d

involve you in its raising?" The tone of confidence she'd wanted to feel was missing from her voice. Lyssa hoped it was only her imagination that put the thread of hope, wistfulness even, into her words.

"Rule number one means I would be the father. And that means I would be involved." Mike smoothed his hand over her shoulder before cupping the back of her neck. "There hasn't been an illegitimate Halsey in over two hundred and fifty years. I won't be the one to break that tradition."

"And that's supposed to mean what to me, Mike?" Lyssa tried to roll away from him, ignoring the protest her body made to abandoning his warmth. "I've taken care of myself pretty well. Any child I have will be *my* child, and I'll raise it the way I see fit." Though not painful, the hold he had on her was impossible to break without a significant struggle.

“Besides, rule number one won’t be around in two weeks, remember?”

“I assure you, it will be. And I’ll still be right here with you.”

“And if I didn’t want you around?” Lyssa tried again to ease out of his hold, but she wasn’t too surprised when Mike shifted their positions so she ended up supine beside him. He propped himself on his elbows over her.

“I would never leave you, Lyssa. And I would never leave my child.”

“Yes you would. You’d get some call to photograph invading armies or rebels fighting or something equally dangerous, and we’d be left behind.” A brief struggle reinforced Mike’s hold on her. “I understand. It’s your job. I don’t blame you.”

“It sure sounds like you do.” He looked irked at something, but she doubted he’d come right out and say what

bothered him.

Was it something to do with the phone call? The one from Trent she'd overheard last week? No damned way was he likely to reveal a secret, a weakness to her. That's how she played it, so she doubted he worked it any differently. Maybe he was on edge over LaTreace. There hadn't been any more late-night phone calls, but what about during the day? When he was at the studio?

His sharp rebuttal pulled her from her thoughts. "I wasn't the one who walked away the last time, Lyssa. I made every effort to connect, but you froze me out."

"You left me, alone, in the middle of a restaurant, with only a phone call from the airport."

"How long are you going to make me pay for that? I said I was sorry. I tried to make it up to you."

“Too late.” She bit her lip to stop the secret trembling on her tongue. She couldn’t bring herself to say the words. She lay there, soft and quiet beneath him. Before she could ask what was going through his mind, Mike let his opinion be known.

“Kids are precious. A gift that should never be denied or ignored. If you were to have my baby, Lys, don’t expect me to walk away.”

Dread rippled through her. “I feel the same way,” Lyssa admitted. “I just—”

“Despite all your arguments, Lys, if you got pregnant, we’d get married.”

She shook her head. “No. That would be a mistake, Mike. A huge mistake.” She could read how determined he was in his eyes. It was there for anyone to see how he thought he felt about her. Reason and common sense had disappeared, and it was up to her to return them to this conversation. “How did a discussion about

a hypothetical baby turn into a demand for marriage?" She kept her tone cool. "You aren't thinking clearly."

"I'm not thinking clearly?"

"No. First of all, there is no baby. And second, we're totally unsuited for one another."

"Unsuited?" Before she could anticipate what he intended, one of Mike's hands was between her thighs, cupping her pussy. "You're wet for me, babe. All the time."

"That's hormones—"

The careful nudge of first one finger, then a second inside her, and Lyssa arched against him. The satisfaction on his face wasn't arrogant as Mike asked, "How many of your other lovers could make you come with a touch? Or by whispering what he wanted in your ear?"

Lyssa groaned. "None, but—"

"Did any of them talk you into

letting them play with your ass?" His hand abandoned her cunt, slid over her hip, and eased between the cheeks of her bottom as if to emphasize his point.

"You know I haven't, but—"

"I remember." One of his fingers rubbed against the tight opening.

Now his expression grew smug, which pissed Lyssa off. *He wants to emphasize how great a lover he is?* Gripping his arm, she pressed on it until he pulled his hand away and braced it on the bed beside her hip. "You talk as if I've had an army of lovers, Mike."

"Not an army—"

It was her turn to cut him off, and she took pleasure in shutting him up. She held the forefinger on her right hand up and put it in his face. "One, Mike. Besides you, I've had one lover. And two near misses." Shifting out from under him, Lyssa sat up and swung her legs over the

side of the bed. "And it wasn't any great shakes the single time I did have sex."

Lyssa watched him slide from beneath the covers to follow her, but fought the urge to cuddle up against him. She needed to get this over with. Maybe then he'd understand why she didn't want him around. "You seem surprised." The robe he'd pulled off her earlier was draped over a chair. Grabbing it, she slid it on and cinched the belt tight.

"A bit." He kept his distance. "What happened?"

"Guys tend not to want to be around a girl accused of murdering her father. Especially when she supposedly did it not twenty minutes after being dumped at her door and told she's worthless and what a lousy lay she is." Lyssa was actually surprised at how bitter she sounded. She'd always considered herself over Craig's rejection, but perhaps some of the pain still lingered. "Blows the mood

entirely.”

Not to mention it served as proof that her father had been right. If the boy who'd professed to love her for three years could turn his back on her after one night, what chance did she have with Mike? Especially if he learned the secret she'd kept from him for the last four years.

“But you didn't do it. It wasn't you who pulled the trigger.” Mike's fingers slid along the cloth covering her left shoulder, directly over the scar.

Lyssa shrugged off his touch. “I did —”

“You didn't.” His eyes held hers, the steady brown gaze reassuring even as it demanded she admit the truth—something she'd never revealed in twenty-three years. “Don't try to convince me otherwise,” Mike assured her.

“Why would I say I did it if I didn't?”
How can he be so confident?

“For the same reason you took the blame. To protect Mattie.” His fingers went back to her shoulder. “Just like you stepped in front of her when your father was aiming at her.”

“How did you—” *Bryce*. It wasn’t a surprise that her brother-in-law knew things not even Gino could prove. But the fact that Mike knew and understood—Lyssa fought the burn of tears. “It was my responsibility—”

“You were seventeen.” Mike shook his head. “No one would hold you responsible for what happened.”

“I do.”

Mike cocked his head and watched her carefully. “Do you also take the blame for the boyfriend?”

Lyssa shook her head. “No, he was seventeen and hadn’t much experience. I understand that now. Hell, I understood that years ago.”

“He was an ass—”

His vehement response surprised a chuckle from her. “You’ve never met Craig.”

Mike stepped close. “He dumped you because he couldn’t perform.” His finger hooked through the knotted belt of her robe. “That kind of behavior doesn’t impress me.”

“I didn’t say he couldn’t perform.”

“You didn’t climax, right?”

Lyssa rolled her eyes but didn’t comment.

“And the near misses?” He tugged her closer, his fingers loosening the belt and easing the robe open. “Something tells me it wasn’t their idea to put the brakes on.”

“You’d be wrong,” Lyssa confessed.

“I doubt it, but enlighten me,” Mike argued. “Who were they?”

“No one important.”

Mike tugged her close. “Who were they? How old were you?”

His expression warned her there was no avoiding the conversation. Maybe if he realized other men knew how unlovable she was, Mike would figure it out as well. “Jerry was my partner in a design project in school. I was twenty; it was my senior year.”

“Did he try to push you?”

Lyssa chuckled and pulled out of his hold. “No, just the opposite. I thought that meant he cared. That there was something real between us. I even let him talk me into modeling the outfits.” She shook her head and settled onto the side of the bed, tugging her robe around her. “I didn’t find out the truth until I walked up on him snuggled up with one of the other design students. Seems he was glad he didn’t have to ‘fuck the cow’ in order to secure extra credit for *his* full-figure designs.”

Mike sat beside her, his hand covering hers, stilling the fingers plucking at the edge of her belt. "He was a brainless prick, babe. Not worth your time."

She didn't look up at him. "Maybe."

"No maybe about it." He didn't elaborate. "And the other near miss?"

This time she looked at him and grinned. "You'll find this funny."

"I doubt it. If he hurt you, he's a dead man."

"He was a photographer." She slipped her hand from beneath his and stood up. Taking a few steps away, she wrapped her arms around her waist. "And he asked me to pose for him. Nude."

"No fucking way," Mike snapped, pushing off the bed to follow her.

Again his hands went to the belt at her waist, loosening it before his hands slid inside and wrapped around her waist.

“I was twenty-three, Mike, just getting started. I didn’t pose for him, but he really knew how to turn a phrase. Drinks, dinner, compliments. Two solid weeks of his attention and I probably would have agreed.”

“But?”

“I walked in on him screwing another model. When I confronted him, he laughed. Told me I couldn’t expect any man to want me. Maybe for a romp in the sheets, but not forever. What man could bear to love me when there were more beautiful, skinnier women in the world?”

“Tell me his name and I’ll bury him.”
Mike tucked her close against him.

She shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I got over it.” Lyssa smoothed her hands over Mike’s shoulders. Staying mad at him was growing impossible. Like she’d told her sister, who could resist a puppy? Her eyes drifted over the taut lines of his chest and down his abdomen.

It was hard to suppress the smile the sight of his erection brought to her lips.

“What about after me?”

She could have sworn she'd heard an edge of jealousy in his tone. It would only boost his arrogance and give him the impression that she cared, but she couldn't lie. “No one.”

That made him pause and pull away to look down at her. “No one?”

Lyssa shook her head. “No one. It just seemed unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary?” Mike tugged her close, his hands warm on her hips. “Lyssa, a woman like you was made for loving. Sex fires you up. It practically oozes from your every pore.”

Lyssa laughed. “Well, if it does, the men around me are immune to my charms.”

Mike smiled and eased the robe off her shoulders. “Or maybe you were just

waiting for the right man.”

Lyssa draped her arms around his neck. Her senses hummed with excitement at the heat generated by his attentions. “Possibly,” she agreed, snuggling closer. “I guess I’ll settle for you until Mr. Right comes along.”

The slap to her bare bottom startled a cry from her that quickly turned into a squeal of suppressed amusement as Mike lifted her off her feet and carried her to the bed.

“Oh, you’ll *settle* for me, will you?” he growled, dropping her onto the bed and following her down. Crouched over her, Mike pinned her wrists above her head and nudged her legs apart to slide comfortably between them.

Lyssa rubbed against him, tempting him to move over her as she wrapped her legs around his hips. The base of his erection coasted over the taut bundle of nerves peeking from beneath its hood.

Labial tissue, plump with arousal, hugged his flesh as Mike rocked against her. "I'm sure you can produce a good argument." She laughed, arching close and rubbing his chest with her breasts.

"Perhaps I just need to make my point a bit more vigorously," Mike returned, releasing his hold on her to quickly don a condom before filling her body with his in a single, smooth stroke.

She hadn't moved her hands, and his fingers returned to grip her wrists. Lyssa gasped, her breath frozen by the fullness stretching her. Even with the numerous times he'd made love with her over the last two and a half weeks, it still required a few moments for her body to adjust to the thickness and length of his penis filling her. She wriggled her fingers, scrambling to hold on to something even as he shifted his grip so only one hand bound her arms above her head. His left dropped to caress the smooth length of

her thigh riding his hip.

“I want you to do it again, Lys.” Mike moved against her, thrusting deep, then retreating.

Lyssa wriggled against him. “What? Do what again?”

“Squirt.” He smiled at the surprised look she knew had to be on her face. “Do you know how fucking powerful that is? Knowing I can make you come so hard your body gushes?”

She rose with him, meeting each thrust, absorbing the force and power of his possession and craving more. “I don’t know if I can.” She wasn’t lying. Lyssa truly didn’t know what had created the sudden ejaculation when she’d climaxed.

Mike leaned close and kissed her, stroking over and around her tongue, rocking his body deep inside before pulling almost free, than sliding home in a fast, heated thrust. “Mmm, guess we’ll

just have to keep trying until we figure out what does it.”

Lyssa moaned at the images and temptations that flooded her mind. Her body trembled in anticipation. If there was one thing she'd learned about this man, giving up wasn't part of his vocabulary. Or his nature. The niggling voice whispered a warning, but Lyssa ignored it, surrendering to the fire and passion building inside and channeling those feelings back toward Mike.

Lyssa wrapped her legs tight around his hips, holding him as close as possible. Just thinking about Mike staying increased her arousal, her excitement.

At no time in their weeks together had he even hinted at leaving. As much as she fought the temptation to dream, it was getting harder to stay reserved, to keep her heart guarded against his promises to stay. Forever.

Chapter Thirteen

On the Steak Wednesday before Thanksgiving, the taillights of Tuma's new car had turned the corner at the end of the cul-de-sac before Lyssa and Mike gave a final wave to Ben and Vance and closed the front door.

"Do you think she'll make it back to the apartment okay?" Lyssa asked.

"She'll be fine," he assured her.

Lyssa glanced over her shoulder at him as she headed into the kitchen and packed the leftovers into the refrigerator. "I don't think she'll get any sleep tonight."

Mike had to agree. "You'd think it was the night before Christmas, not

Thanksgiving, as excited as she is.”

The water splashed into the sink, and Lyssa added a squirt of soap, her voice raised enough to be heard over the noise. “Well, she is meeting her family for the first time tomorrow.”

He leaned against the counter. “I think Vance knows.” He wasn’t sure how he felt about the other man being privy to his secret.

Lyssa considered his suspicion seriously before she nodded. “He might. I think he told me he knew a little African and Swahili. And many of the businesses in and around San Diablo have used him as an interpreter because of his language skills.”

“Do you think he’ll keep it to himself?”

She smiled at him. “Oh yes. About the only person he’d tell is Ben.” Her grin faded slightly. “And they’re both very

good about keeping secrets.”

When she turned to the sink and shut off the water, Mike had a niggling suspicion Lyssa was talking about more than the secret of his daughter. Not wanting to put a pall on the relaxed feeling he'd shared with Lyssa during the evening, he went into the dining room and collected the last of the dishes. Returning to the kitchen, Mike helped load the dishes into the dishwasher after Lyssa rinsed them.

When he'd set the last one in place, he told her, “Tuma and I can pick you up tomorrow around eleven. Mattie said she was planning Thanksgiving dinner to start by two.”

“I'm going over there at nine to help Mattie and Etta with the preparations.”

Mike wiped his hands off on a towel and then leaned against the counter. “Then we'll come over earlier.”

“Don’t change your plans for me.” Lyssa set the last of the leftovers in the refrigerator. “Besides, I think it’s best if you and Tuma arrive together.”

Mike wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. The clean scent of her body mingled with her honeysuckle perfume and the lavender-mint dish soap. “But I’d like to have you with me when I introduce her to our family.”

He sensed the tension spreading through her body, although her expression did little to betray it. Her hands pressed low on his abdomen, and she shifted back so their eyes could meet when she explained, “No... I-I’d rather we not show up at my sister’s house together. There would be too many questions.”

“Too many questions?” He released his hold on her. “What kind of questions are you afraid of, Lyssa?”

His gaze followed her as she wiped

the kitchen table off. "You know what I mean." She smoothed the cloth over the wooden surface one last time before she turned to face him. "Mattie would start dreaming up some happily ever after ending between us."

"And that's bad?" *Keep it cool. Getting angry will only make her freeze up.*

Lyssa nodded. "Yes, you know it would be. She'll be hurt and disappointed when our agreement ends in a week and we go back to the way it was before."

Mike was sure incredulity covered his face. He reined in the jumbled emotions wanting to detonate and focused on the note he heard in her voice. A part of her didn't believe a word she'd said. Somewhere, deep inside, he was certain she'd begun to trust in his vows to her. At least he hoped she had. "I told you I'm not leaving. After the time we've been together, can you really say you don't

believe my promise?”

“Do you?” There was a hint of skepticism in her voice, but Mike was sure it was forced. “I never promised anything beyond these thirty days, Mike. If I arrive for Thanksgiving with you, it would encourage my sister to hope for something that simply isn’t going to work. I won’t hurt her that way.”

“I could make it a command.”

The temptation to tell him to do so glittered in her eyes, in the flash of relief stealing across her face. It was a command he felt Lyssa truly wanted to follow, but she fought that desire. Just as she’d reined in her natural submission during their time together. Instead she snorted. “I don’t think so, Mike. You aren’t my master anywhere except when it comes to sex. No man tells me what I think or do, not even you.”

It was in every line of her body, in her set expression. Like words on a page,

Mike could read the way Lyssa fought the urge to give in to him. In the time they'd been together, she'd admitted to seeing why Mattie was so satisfied with Bryce. No other man had shown her the capabilities of her body the way he had. In the last few weeks he had seen how satisfied and content Lyssa was, at least sexually. The temptation to please him in other things beyond the sexual crept into her actions at odd moments. Mike had watched her dither over those behaviors. Sometimes she pushed the urge aside, but more often than not, she gave in to them, and her pleasure was palpable when he acknowledged his. Submitting to him brought her peace. He'd seen it. Felt it. Until now.

Mike watched her carefully as he asked, "And what if it pleased your master to have you arrive at Thanksgiving dinner with him?"

Her expression gave her away. Like

every other time he'd pushed too far, she shut down, slapping up the walls and hunkering down as if to ride out a storm. He wasn't surprised when Lyssa shook her head. "Then Master would have to be disappointed. And what's with referring to yourself in the third person? We agreed this whole Rite of First Claim thing was so you would finally realize we aren't compatible."

Mike moved forward, backing her up to the table, disillusionment poking away at his patience. "That's all you think we've been doing? Did you think to work me out of your system?"

The look in Lyssa's eyes was cautious, but not her voice. "It's why I agreed. It's why you asked."

He'd taken his time, pushed when it was necessary, and backed off when she became skittish, but the warning Mattie had given him weeks ago whispered in his head. *"You're going to have to break her."*

Contemplating the task and actually doing it were two very different things, but the dominant within him recognized that the only way to prove his commitment to Lyssa would be to rip down the last barrier she held between them. It would require locking down every instinct within him to protect her.

When Lyssa's eyes went wide, Mike knew determination showed on his face. It was in the very controlled way he held himself as he lifted her onto the table and braced his hands on the thick oak surface on either side of her hips. The tiny V at the base of her throat betrayed the way her heart pounded in her chest. If she was wondering if she'd pushed him too far, she'd have to wait to find out. In careful steps, he mentally locked down the emotions her distress could trigger. Nothing would stand between him and the lesson his woman needed to learn.

Intent on showing her how wrong

she was, he offered, "Then let's see if your plan is working, shall we?"

He stripped the buttons from the holes on her blouse and tugged the sleeveless covering off her shoulders and down her arms. The indigo dyed silk fluttered to the tiled floor. He loosened her matching wide-legged pants, eased them over her hips and off her legs before dropping them onto the top. Bra and panties were discarded next, and then followed the jeans, long-sleeved Oxford cloth shirt, and boxer-briefs he wore.

While his hands dealt with his clothes, his mouth seduced hers. Once finished removing his coverings, Mike lowered Lyssa onto the clean surface of the table and slid his attentions from her lips to the tips of her breasts. He'd noticed the swollen mounds had grown sensitive in the last week, and the firm tug of his teeth on one crest sent Lyssa's back bowing away from the surface beneath

her. Recently he'd learned how quickly Lyssa climaxed from simple stimulation to her breasts. He wedged his body between her thighs, the firm ridge of his aroused penis snuggled into place within the bare, moist folds of her pussy. The wiry curls at its base scraped along the pulsing opening and the wakening nubbin of nerve endings.

“Is this enough for you, Lyssa? Or do you need more?” he growled.

The hard muscles beneath his skin flexed in response to the slide of her fingers. Moving down, she traced the crease separating the thick curves of his pectoral muscles from the ridged line of his abdominals. Then she investigated the ribbon of hair dividing the washboardlike contours of his abdomen until it widened as she reached his navel.

The damp crown of his cock bumped the side of her palm. When she would have wrapped her fingers around him,

Mike grabbed her wrist.

“Answer me. Is this enough for you?”

Lyssa rocked her hips against him, nudging his shaft deeper between her labial folds. “No,” she admitted.

A tiny grimace and momentary flash of anger betrayed the frustration her honesty created. In the last three weeks, he’d worked her hard, but now he was sure she craved the feeling of his thick shaft powering into her. Pushing her past limits she’d never known existed within herself.

“Do you need more?” He teased, moving his body forward and back, rubbing, taunting, tempting her with penetration but not fulfilling it.

Her fingers clutched his waist, pulling him closer as she wriggled against his shaft. Without result. Gritting her teeth, she admitted, “Yes. I need... *I want more.*”

“And what if I don’t?” Mike stepped away, the only contact between their bodies the grip he retained on her wrist and the rub of her calves along the back of his thighs.

He watched Lyssa swallow the plea rising within her. During their time together he’d shown her numerous times that he was fully capable of denying his needs in order to prove a point to her. In answer to his question, she cleared her throat and replied, “That’s your decision.”

“And if my decision was to fuck you until you begged for climax but denied it to you?” Mike lifted her from the table and set her on her feet before him. She needed to know the difference between what he’d given her and what she thought she wanted.

A whimper sneaked past her control. The thought of remaining on the edge of climax indefinitely both frightened and stimulated her; he easily read that in her

expression. In their time together, he'd taught her the pleasure to be found within the pain of prolonged arousal. It worked to his advantage now. She swayed closer to him, her body rubbing against his, her juices slicking her thighs. "That would be your choice if you felt I needed it." She slipped easily into the role of submissive, deferring to his direction. He doubted she was even aware of her behavior.

"Very good, you remembered."

Lyssa nodded. "Rule number two."

Mike stroked his hands over her swollen breasts. He used his fingertips to pluck at her peaked nipples, registering the gasps and moans Lyssa couldn't stifle. "Do you need to be fucked, pet?"

Determination filled his voice. Lyssa lifted her gaze to his. What did she see in the dark brown depths of his eyes? Did she sense something stirring? He'd chosen each word for a specific reason. Confusion

fogged her expression. She didn't appear to have figured out what he was getting at. Not yet, but it was there.

“Do I need to be fucked?” she asked.

According to what Mattie had told him, Lyssa couldn't trust emotions. Need was based on emotions. Ergo, Lyssa refused to trust need. She refused to give in to need. Mike's gut twisted when he recognized the path she'd chosen. He didn't want to go there, but he would. He would because his woman had not yet learned to trust completely.

She held his gaze and lied. “No, I don't *need* to be fucked.”

He tried to hide the disappointment, but a flash of emotion flickered across her face, warning him she'd read it in his expression.

“Then you *want* to be fucked?” he asked.

Resolve glinted in her eye as she

nodded. "Yes, I want to be fucked."

She was so damned stubborn. Mike knew there would be no reasoning with her. No getting her to admit how she truly felt. The second the words left her lips, Mike knew them for the lie they were. He allowed her to believe he accepted them. But he never would.

How could a man walk away from the other half of his soul? He had already resigned himself to waiting her out if Lyssa didn't succumb in the next week, but he'd be damned if he would leave his woman ignorant of his displeasure with her recalcitrance.

There had been no other men since she'd made love with him four years ago. When he was through with her tonight, there'd be no way she'd allow another man to touch her. Leaning forward, he wrapped one hand around the back of her neck and raised her chin with his thumb. "You want to be fucked, Lyssa?"

Something must have shown in his face, because hesitation flickered in her pretty, blue eyes. “Y-y-yes,” she stuttered.

“Turn around and lean on the table.”

She hesitated, then did as he asked. The curve of her bottom was tempting. The puckered rose of her anus was hidden between the smooth round cheeks. But it was the wet pink folds beneath that drew his attention. Still aroused, her thighs flexed and relaxed as if trying to satisfy the internal muscles. He knew her body, knew what pleased her, but for just this moment, he forced himself not to care. He was tired of waiting. Tired of coaxing her along, trying to convince her of the rightness of their being together.

Everything he'd done to her in the past had been meant to show her how much he loved her. If she really thought fucking was all there was between them, he'd let her—for now. Make it all about the sex. It was all she'd admit to. It was

how she'd approached their bargain in the first place. Maybe if he made it simply about the sex, she'd let down her guard long enough to expose a weakness to him. If it gave her a taste of taking the lead, showed her the difference between topping and bottoming, she'd see that what he offered was far more to her than she imagined.

Moving close, he pressed her thighs apart and stepped between them. He covered her hands with his, slid his chest over her back, and aligned himself with her. She was wet, ready. Pressing forward, he sealed his body within hers, shoving his cock deep.

"You want to be fucked, Lyssa. And I want to fuck you." He pulled out and pressed forward, taking little care in the pace and force of his motions. He heard the scrape of the table legs over the tile as he pounded into her.

"Feel it, baby. Two bodies moving.

You want it so bad. I can tell. Your sweet pussy is squeezing me so tight.”

The dominant inside cursed him. He was ignoring his responsibilities. The argument that he was merely giving Lyssa what she said she wanted didn't fly. Mike knew better. The dominant he'd been trained to be knew better. Mike entwined his fingers with hers, providing her an anchor to hold on to, and he dipped his head so he could breathe in the scent of her hair, her skin. Whimpers squeezed past her lips as he hammered into her.

“Master?” Her breath came in ragged gasps.

He felt the climax building within her, the way her body pulsed around his, the flutter of her internal muscles, the way her hips pushed upward into his every stroke. Levering his chest off her, he met her bewildered gaze as she looked over her shoulder at him.

“What's wrong?” she asked. Her

question followed a low moan as he shifted and reached for another sensitive spot deep inside her.

Mike laughed. The sound was hollow and pained—exactly the way he felt. He lowered his lips to hers and whispered, “I need to stop wishing for miracles, baby.”

“I—”

Mike shook his head and closed his eyes. “No, Lys. Let me give you what you want, and maybe one day, *I’ll* get what I *need*.”

Their bodies slid together, then apart. Breath stilled, then rushed out in drawn-out moans. The table shuddered under the force and pace he used. Sweat beaded her skin and his, making slippery, wet sounds as they moved against one another. He could feel his climax build inside him even as hers erupted through her. The orgasm was intense, primal—and empty. Braced over her, Mike listened to the gasps she couldn’t hold

back.

She was always harping on about how unreliable emotions were, but in the quiet of the kitchen, the ache filling his chest assured him the pain of having to let her go would never leave him.

Lyssa Lawrence held his heart and soul, and that would never change.

Not a single word passed between them as Mike separated his body from hers. Breathless and panting, Lyssa lay still, tears wetting her cheeks and dripping onto the table beneath her. Her stomach churned, the delicious steak dinner threatening reappearance. Something was wrong. Very wrong. She couldn't control the wild mix of emotions bubbling through her. And she sure as hell didn't understand why she was crying.

The sound of water running brought

her head off the damp wood tabletop. The bright overhead light shone down on her like a spotlight, making her wince at how she must look. Before she could rise, the water stopped and Mike smoothed a warm cloth over her bottom, then between her legs. There was nothing personal in Mike's touch. No quips or comments as he cleaned her. She went still unsure what to do, what to say. His hands handled her the way a dresser handled a model—crisp, efficient, with a minimum of fuss.

The silence continued once she was clean and facing him, her clothes and his bundled in her arms. While she stood to one side, desperate to say something but terrified to speak, Mike wiped down the table and turned off the lights. He didn't touch her again. With a motion of his hand, he followed her down the hallway to her bedroom and pulled back the covers on the bed.

Shudders coursed through her body

as she stood beside the bed. After Mike took the clothes from her arms, careful not to touch her, he deposited them in the laundry hamper. He returned to her side and held the covers for her, his gaze on her until she climbed beneath them and let her head sink onto the pillow. Her nerves jangled in alarm as he gently settled the covers under her chin. He'd never looked at her with such regret and disappointment. Not even when she did everything in her power to push him away.

His voice was devoid of feeling as he leaned forward and smoothed a loose curl away from her cheek. "I won't be the dirty little secret you're embarrassed to admit to, Lyssa. I am not pleased that you lied to me tonight."

"I—"

The warm touch of his fingertips over her lips stilled her words. "You refuse to accept my love for you, which is your

right. But you lie to me when you say you don't love me. You cheapen the gift of my guidance and protection. For that you've earned a punishment."

Lyssa knew she wouldn't find enjoyment in whatever he'd decided to do, but for the first time since she'd agreed to his dominance, she gave no argument. It took several seconds of careful contemplation before Lyssa could put a name to the primary emotion filling her.

Shame.

She'd done this to Mike. Her stubborn refusal to tell him how she felt. To openly accept the love and care he'd offered her the last three weeks and then deny that it meant anything to her had been like a slap in the face for him. And she was ashamed of herself for her actions. Ashamed that she'd hurt and disappointed her master. Tears burned her eyes as he stood beside the bed.

"I swore I'd never leave you, Lys,

and I won't. But for tonight you aren't allowed any contact with me." He picked up a blanket folded at the foot of the bed and moved around to the other side. "I'll be right here all night. I won't leave," he assured her, laying down and draping the cover over himself. "But you can't touch or speak to me."

A quiet sob slipped past her guard as Mike rolled away from her and turned out the light. She inched her hand out from beneath the covers to hover near his shoulder before pulling it back. Fingers curled into a fist around the edge of the bedding, her voice hoarse with unshed tears, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

Silence filled the darkness. There was no response from Mike. Nothing to acknowledge her apology.

Lyssa stayed mute. She *was* sorry, but after all she'd done, after all she'd said, would he believe her? Could he?

Lyssa hadn't argued with the punishment he'd given her the night before. The dark circles under her eyes and the wounded look in her gaze attested to her awareness of how many times he'd eased her body away from his during the hours before dawn. He'd fought his own battle to keep his hands off her.

By the time the sun peeked over the horizon, both of them were eager to leave the bed. Lyssa looked almost sick as she hovered on the edge of the mattress.

"Are you hungry?" Her question was cautious, hesitant.

"You take your shower, and I'll fix us both something before you leave." He wondered if she'd ask about the length of time her punishment would last. He could see the question in her gaze.

But she only nodded and moved into the bathroom. The question remained

unasked until they were both dressed and he helped carry the pies and appetizers she'd made earlier in the week out to her car.

"Drive safely," he cautioned, careful to keep his hands tucked into his pockets. They'd both been very diligent at avoiding touching one another.

Hands gripping the steering wheel, Lyssa kept her gaze turned away from him. "When may I touch you again?" The words were soft, her voice full of longing.

At least he hoped it was longing as he squatted beside the car and waited for her to look at him. "Do you *want* to touch me or do you *need* to touch me?"

The flush on her cheeks assured him their coupling on the dining room table had shown her the difference. "I—I—"

Mike shook his head. "You have all morning with Mattie to think about it, hon." Standing up, he offered a

reassuring smile. "Drive careful. I love you."

She stayed silent. He watched her car ease down the drive and out of the cul-de-sac. The crisp scent of pine and pumpkin pie filled his lungs. Around the neighborhood, other families were loading up kids and food or unloading the same as the holiday got underway.

Would he be standing in this same spot next year? The year after? Uncertainty sat like a stone in the pit of his belly. He had a week left. If her response to the punishment he'd given her was any indication, he'd finally made some kind of impression on her. Maybe by the time Thanksgiving was over, he'd receive an early Christmas miracle and Lyssa would finally admit she loved him.

Three hours later, after brooding at Lyssa's, he finally headed for the warehouse to collect his daughter. The sound of Tuma turning on the shower

greeted Mike as he entered the apartment above his studio. Dropping his jacket on the couch in the living room, he gathered a quick change of clothes from his bedroom and moved downstairs to the second bathroom adjoining his office. He ignored the exhaustion dragging at him. He'd survived on less than four hours of sleep before. He could do it again.

He'd showered and shaved at Lyssa's earlier, but Bryce took holidays seriously. Suit and tie serious. Mike grimaced. Twenty minutes later, as he climbed the stairs to the studio, he wondered about making his leave from the unit permanent. Frustration at not seeing his assignments through gnawed at him. Until he married Lyssa, any other decisions would have to be put on hold.

"Tuma, are you ready—" Mike's sentence went unfinished. The sight of her brought a smile to his face. The rich gold-colored silk skimmed the curves of

her body.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Tuma asked, twirling around to show off the flare of the skirt around her knees. “My nina, she makes magical clothes, doesn’t she, abani?”

The corners of his mouth drew down the slightest bit before he nodded. “Yes, anuli, Lyssa makes beautiful clothes. But you, *basha*, you make them look even more beautiful.”

“Do you think your family will like me?”

Tuma barely stood still while Mike helped her into a coffee brown, knee-length coat. The way she clutched his hand as they walked down the stairs to the garage reminded him of the first day he’d taken her to the boarding school in Northampton.

“They are going to love you, Tuma. I promise.” He pressed a kiss to the back of

the hand he held.

“I just worry...” She nibbled her bottom lip. She seemed afraid to continue her thought.

“Worry about what?” Mike helped her into the passenger side of the truck, allowing her a few moments to compose her response while he rounded the hood and climbed in behind the wheel.

“That you haven’t told them about me because there is something you are afraid they will take offense to.”

Firing up the truck, Mike shook his head. “No, honey. I didn’t tell my family about you because I knew the second I did, Dad and Bryce would be on the first plane across the Atlantic, packing you up and bringing you home.”

“But I would have liked that.” Tuma laughed.

“No, anuli. I assure you, it would have driven you crazy.” Mike backed out

of the garage and waited until the door had shut before continuing. “Do you remember what happened the first time you asked to spend the holidays with a classmate?”

Tuma shuddered. “Yes. Abani Trent compiled a full dossier on everyone in the family, the servants, the neighbors, and the neighbors’ servants.”

“That’s nothing to what my brother and father would have done, love. What was it I told you the first time I had to leave you at the boarding school?”

“Halseys protect what’s theirs.”

“You’re a Halsey, Tuma, even if you chose not to carry the name. You belong to us, and we protect what’s ours.” Mike glanced at her and grinned. “Whether you like it or not.”

Tuma laughed and relaxed into her seat.

In the hour-long drive out to his

brother's home, Tuma alternated between anxious and excited at least three more times, so the sight of the Folly's roof over the trees was a welcome one.

“Oh my.” Tuma gazed through the windshield as they pulled into the drive and Mike silenced the engine. “This is even more beautiful than your home, abani.”

Mike laughed. “Come on, brat; let's get this over with.”

Aware of the nervousness plaguing her, Mike helped Tuma from the truck and held her hand as he led her up the steps onto the wraparound porch. He took his time getting to the broad, double doors, allowing Tuma the opportunity to take in the tranquil view, the soothing sounds of the ocean, and the homey feel inspired by the rocking chairs and porch swing.

Before he rang the doorbell, he looked down at her. “Ready, basha?”

Tuma nodded. "Ready."

Mike knew Bryce would have something to say the instant his brother opened the door. His ice green gaze flicked over Tuma, pausing for the longest moment on the way Mike held her hand wrapped in his. "Lyssa mentioned you would be bringing a guest, Mike." His brother's tone transmitted his displeasure.

"She did?" Mike led Tuma into the broad foyer of the Folly. A staircase leading to the second floor worked as a line of demarcation in the center of the stone floor. Doors on either side of the steps were open, and the sound of voices and laughter filtered toward them.

Mike stayed quiet and watched as his brother politely helped Tuma out of her coat and hung it in the closet with several others. He knew Lyssa hadn't explained his relationship with Tuma to his family when he passed his overcoat to

Bryce and received a “don’t think we won’t discuss this” look. Discuss interpreted to interrogation when it came to Bryce and his determination to know and control situations.

“Is everyone in the sitting room?” Mike asked, taking hold of Tuma’s hand again and heading toward a door halfway down the left hall.

“Yes.” Bryce followed, his hands tucked into the pockets of his trousers, the charcoal gray suit coat left unbuttoned to reveal a deep green shirt and patterned tie. He waited until they’d reached the sitting room before separating Mike from Tuma. “I need to have a word with my brother.”

The grin Bryce gave Tuma had often been likened to the smile of a great white shark.

Tuma’s smile wobbled as she looked at Mike. “Abani?”

Mike patted her hand and reassured her. "It's okay, basha. Go help Lyssa."

The ice in Bryce's gaze dropped another ten degrees, and the glare Jacob turned on Mike as he moved toward them would have unnerved him if Mike hadn't already suspected what they were so pissed about. Bryce stepped away from the center of the room, putting distance between them and the women.

Bryce kept a careful eye on Lyssa and Tuma, and it drew a curious mix of pride and resentment from Mike. Pride that his brother cared about Lyssa's happiness. And resentment that Bryce actually assumed he'd betray the woman he loved by parading a lover in front of her. As much as Mike had anticipated this reaction, it still irked him that this scene was unfolding. If Lyssa had arrived with him and Tuma, his brother and father would have been curious, not irritated. Mike reined in the negative

emotions, refusing to ruin Tuma's introduction to his family. He'd let Bryce and his father lecture him, and then—after he told them the truth about his daughter—sit back and enjoy their discomfort. That's what little brothers were supposed to do, at least in his experience.

Jacob was the first to weigh in. "I never believed there would come a day when I would be ashamed to claim one of my own sons. Boy, have you lost all sense of honor?"

Bryce didn't give Mike a chance to defend himself. "Did I not make it clear, little brother, just how much shit would rain down on you if you even *thought* of hurting Lyssa?"

Mike waited, knowing neither his father nor brother were ready to hear his explanation. Glancing past Bryce, he saw the mixed expressions on the women's faces.

Tuma's was concerned. Mattie looked incensed. And Lyssa had a confused but stunned look on her face. A poke from Bryce's finger drew Mike's attention.

"Not one month ago, Mattie and I both told you not to play with her. Were you not listening? Did you think we were joking? Damn it, Mike, where the hell do you get off invoking the Rite of First Claim if you had no intention of making things permanent?"

"He did what?" Jacob's growl was ominously soft.

Bryce nodded at his father. The Southern accent he'd never quite gotten rid of thickened. "Oh yes. Lover boy here made quite a show of claimin' ownership of Miss Lyssa during the Midnight Masquerade. Plucked her right out of Dayton Kringle's hands."

Across the room, Lyssa's eyes went wide as Jacob's and Bryce's voices grew softer. Though it was difficult to hear exactly what they were saying, the general tone of the conversation was clear. Jacob and Bryce were livid that Mike had dared to bring another woman to the family dinner. And their anger was obviously shared by her sister. The old saying about looks being deadly had exited the building long before Elvis had. If Lyssa was hearing her sister's muttered ramblings correctly, Mike would need a food tester for the next sixty years. At least.

"I cannot believe the gall—" Mattie cut herself off as Dylan trotted over to ask for a treat. She handed her son a cracker with cheese on it before urging him to go play with his brother, Duncan.

"Mat, what's going on?" Lyssa asked. There was no way Bryce and Jacob could be taking Mike to task over her? It was

inconceivable.

“Mike’s getting his ass chewed, the bastard,” Mattie fumed. The disconcerted protest Tuma started to make was soothed into silence as Mattie patted the girl’s hand and smiled at her. “It’s not your fault, honey. Mike knew better. Bryce flat-out promised to kick his butt if he wasn’t gonna do right by Lyssa. He should never have dragged you into this.”

“But, Mat, he’s family,” Lyssa pointed out before turning her attention back to the men across the room.

“Not when I get through with him. He’ll be lucky to be fish food. Hell, he’ll be lucky to be food for fish food,” Mattie declared indignantly.

Lyssa tore her gaze from the three men and stared in confusion at her sister. Mike was their flesh and blood; Lyssa wasn’t. “Mattie, I don’t want to make trouble for you.” She swallowed back the nausea burning in her throat.

“It’s not you making trouble, Lys,” Mattie assured her.

“You have to make them stop, Mat. Why should—” Her head swam. She clutched at the back of the sofa beside her. Across the room, she saw Mike’s concerned gaze as he moved toward her, ignoring his brother and father.

“Lys?” Mattie’s face grew concerned.

Mattie reached out to her as Lyssa felt herself sway. Her grip on the sofa tightened, and she drew a deep breath, hoping to clear the dizziness. “Why, Mattie? Why would they care about me? I’m nothing. Nothing to them,” Lyssa demanded. As much as she wished Mike would hold her, the expression on his face warned the punishment she’d earned last night was still in effect, despite the worry darkening his eyes.

Before her sister could respond, a tiny hand reached up and patted Lyssa’s belly. Bright green eyes gazed up at her

as Maggie smiled. "You belong to us, Aunt Lys. Halseys protect our own."

"Very well said, munchkin." Mike lifted Maggie into his arms and kissed his niece's cheek. He watched Lyssa but made no move to get closer to her.

Freeing one arm, he wrapped it around Tuma's waist and turned her to face his brother and father. In the area beside the coffee table, the blond-haired boys crawled around on the floor, pushing toy trucks and attempting engine sounds. Sean, the youngest of the children, was curled up asleep in a playpen set up at one end of the sofa.

Lyssa watched Mike smile at his daughter. When Lyssa glanced at Bryce, Jacob, and Mattie, she could practically smell the smoke as the three's patience went up in flames.

"Tuma, these are my nephews, Dylan and Duncan."

Tuma smiled at the boys as they hurried over and tried to use Mike's legs as a ladder. "Hello."

Dylan grinned, but Duncan held up his arms to her. "Want hold," he demanded. Tuma chuckled and obliged.

"That one let's his needs be known." Jacob moved forward, the smile on his lips looking forced.

"Like you, Dad?" Mike asked with a wry grin.

Jacob's gaze met Mike's. "Exactly. If you haven't the gumption to ask for it, you won't have the determination to keep it," Jacob informed him.

"Really? And what if the asking gains you nothing?" Mike queried.

Lyssa winced, knowing his disappointment still lingered after last night.

"Then a little subterfuge might need to be employed, son."

Tuma leaned toward Mike. "He knows you well, abani," she whispered.

"Indeed. Tuma, this is my father, Jacob Halsey."

Jacob smiled and lifted Tuma's hand to press a gentlemanly kiss to the back of it. "A pleasure, my dear." He lifted Duncan from her arms. "I'll take this rascal off your hands before he chews on any more of your hair."

One look at Bryce's expression and Mike finished the introductions. "The lovely lady with Lyssa is her sister and my sister-in-law, Mattie. Then there's my brother, Bryce. And this little angel is my niece, Maggie."

"I am very happy to finally meet you all." Tuma smiled at everyone.

"Finally?" Bryce asked. He moved in behind Mattie but brushed a reassuring hand along Lyssa's shoulder as he passed her.

“Yes, abani has spoken of you often.” Tuma nudge Mike in the side. “Abani, stop teasing.” Tuma gave him a look Lyssa interpreted to mean the girl’s patience was thinning.

“Very well, basha.” He nodded and pulled Tuma closer to his side. “Everyone, this is Tumaini Nagweni. My daughter.”

Chapter Fourteen

Just a few days later, Mike was finding it difficult to keep his attention on the light box he worked over. The negatives looked good. They simply weren't strong enough to keep his mind from straying. The old-fashioned methods of film and light helped soothe the irritation that stirred to life every time he glanced at a calendar. The thirty days was almost over, and Lyssa had yet to say the three words he wanted to hear. He was beginning to think she never would.

She'd been skittish since Thanksgiving Day, after he'd found her napping with Sean on a sofa in the

downstairs playroom. The care she'd taken to avoid touching him during the holiday dinner and after, when he drove her home and left Lyssa's car for Tuma, showed in her eyes. The dark circles underneath had only grown more pronounced in the last few days.

It was debatable if the feelings were because she was relieved to have the month at an end, or if she was still reeling over the intense reaction she'd had when he'd lifted her punishment and allowed her to touch him again. Mike had to admit, they'd both been surprised when her tears had begun to fall the moment he'd led her to her bedroom and started to undress her the evening of their holiday dinner.

In a moment, she went from holding him tight to shoving him away as she ran into the bathroom and vomited up the delicious meal she and her sister had spent hours preparing. The more he tried

to soothe her through the bout of sickness, the more anxious Lyssa grew. When her stomach finally settled and she'd brushed her teeth and rinsed her mouth, Mike had lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, holding her until, exhausted and worn-out, she fell asleep.

The next morning, the ice had begun to form around Lyssa, and Mike was scrambling for another plan.

The jangle of the bell over the studio's front door drew Mike from his thoughts.

"I know I'm early, but I thought we'd grab something to eat before the movie."

What the hell? The man's voice sounded familiar, but Mike couldn't quite place it.

The sound of Tuma's laughter and quick agreement came as Mike pulled open his office door and stepped into the reception and display area of his studio.

A young man braced his hands on the glass-and-chrome desk, his body leaning toward Tuma, seated behind it. "If you're very good, maybe I'll even give you dessert."

"And just what kind of dessert would that be?" Mike demanded, striding across the room toward the couple.

The man spun around and grimaced. The healed scratches from the shrubbery were still visible.

Mike recognized him immediately. "You didn't answer me, Lance Corporal. Just what kind of dessert are you promising?"

"*Abani!* Stop, you are embarrassing me," Tuma admonished.

"Father?" Lance Corporal Corvus squeezed his gray-green eyes shut for a moment, then opened them. A resigned sigh slipped from his lips as he straightened his shoulders and faced

Mike. "Nothing beyond what's on the menu at the restaurant, sir."

"And what time were you intending to return her home, Corvus?" He hadn't spent twelve years protecting Tuma from kidnappers, murderers, and white slavery rings only to have some marine waltz in and tempt her away from safety.

"No later than midnight, sir."

"Oh no." Tuma shook her head as she moved from behind the desk. "Last time we went to that club and didn't leave until closing, E.J. You said you didn't have to be back on base until tomorrow—"

Corvus groaned. The sound conveyed a combination of disappointment and fear.

Disappointment because Mike was sure the boy wanted to keep Tuma out until all hours of the morning. And fear because Mike knew the expression on his face reflected the dissatisfaction he felt at

learning Tuma had not only been out with this boy, but he'd not gotten her home until well after three in the morning. "And what club would that be, Tuma?"

"I don't remember, but the music was very loud and the dancing was stimulating."

Corvus winced. "Tuma, I'm not sure —"

Tuma waved him into silence and grabbed her coat from the chrome tree nearby. Corvus moved to help her put it on, his gaze shifting to find Mike every few seconds.

With her arm tucked through Corvus's, Tuma smiled. "I can just see what a dragon you're going to be when your own daughters begin to date, aba." She laughed, dragging Corvus to the door. "I'm a big girl. I'll be home when I get home."

Mike shook his head at Tuma's taunt. At the rate things were going with Lyssa, he was never likely to have children unless they were an accident. Considering they'd been with each other every night—

His thoughts ground to a halt. During their nearly thirty days, Lyssa hadn't had a period. What were the chances Lyssa's cycle would have accommodated their bargain so well? Thinking back over the last month, he had no recollection of nature interfering with their nightly lovemaking. Then there was the fact that Bryce and Mattie seemed to make a habit of conceiving easily.

Was it a coincidence that Lyssa's breasts seemed more sensitive in the last week? And what about the nausea she'd grumbled about for the last week or so. Not to mention the naps she'd begun taking and the dizzy spell at

Thanksgiving dinner and the episode when he'd lifted his punishment. When he added them up, Mike determined he'd rather err on the side of caution.

Locking the studio door, he flipped the sign to CLOSED, shut off the lights, and then headed to the garage. There was a drugstore two blocks away. He was sure they carried one of those pregnancy test kits. As much as he'd hate to force Lyssa into marriage, he'd already warned her there was no way he'd allow a child of his to be born without him.

* * *

The headache wouldn't go away, and the nausea only made things worse. The repeated ringing of the phone didn't make things any easier. Lyssa rolled her chair away from the drafting table and snatched the telephone off the charger. "Hello?"

"Lyssa?" Tuma sounded surprised at

her gruff greeting.

Sighing, Lyssa apologized, "Sorry about that, Tuma. The phone has been driving me crazy. What's up?"

Tuma made a soothing noise. "That's okay. I was calling to see if Mike was there. I tried the studio and his cell, but they're going directly to voice mail."

"No, hon, he's not here. Do you want me to take a message in case I see him before you talk to him?" Lyssa offered.

"If you could, please."

Lyssa tucked the phone between her chin and shoulder. "Hold on a sec; let me get a pen and something to write on." She reached for a paper and pen off the drafting table. "Okay, go ahead."

"Tell him he must stop calling Ben and Vance to play nursemaid." Tuma's tone was disgruntled and decidedly annoyed.

"So, he finally met your marine?"

Lyssa grinned. Tuma had told her about Eugene Corvus in the week before Thanksgiving. If she wasn't mistaken, Lyssa was almost positive that the girl had fallen head over heels for the soldier the first night they ran into each other.

"Yes, nina, he did, and now E.J. is terrified to touch me," Tuma complained.

"Tuma, don't do anything hasty. You barely know this guy." Lyssa scribbled a note next to Tuma's message, reminding herself to have a long discussion with Ben and Vance about Lance Corporal Corvus.

"Lyssa!" Tuma's voice held a distinct whine. "You are as bad as aba. I am twenty-three years old. I am a grown woman."

"But you are still Mike's little girl, honey. He's not going to stop protecting you even after you're old and gray and playing with your own grandbabies."

Her heavy sigh sounded in Lyssa's

ear. "I know. I know. He is a Halsey, and Halseys protect their own."

"Exactly." Lyssa chuckled.

"Then you must hurry and have many, many babies like Mattie does. Keep abani occupied running after your babies so I can play with my marine," Tuma commanded.

A tingle skittered down Lyssa's spine, stilling her breath as Tuma laughed over the phone. Hoping her voice didn't sound as shaky as she suddenly felt, Lyssa replied, "You go have fun with your marine, but nothing that might make babies, young lady. Your father is too young to be a grandpa."

"And you are too young to be a grandma? But not too old to be a mother, right?" Tuma teased.

"Hush, girl. Go have fun and behave." Lyssa waited for Tuma to disconnect before she set the phone down.

Her hands trembled at the thoughts darting through her head.

What would she do? What could she do? Their month was almost up, and she hadn't had to tell him about the miscarriage. Guilt prodded her. Actually, she might have another secret. She fought the urge to cry.

Another wave of lightheadedness struck, making Lyssa grimace and rub at her brow. Considering the way she felt—and the pregnancy test she'd taken that morning after Mike left—she hoped both the test and her suspicions were incorrect. If they weren't, it would complicate matters more than she wanted to contemplate.

Exhaustion tugged at her eyelids. Glancing at the design on the sheet, she determined spending any more time trying to work would be a waste. She settled her tools into their cases, put her pencils and rulers into the tray, and then

turned off the light over her drafting table. Getting from the bedroom she now used as her studio to the one she shared with Mike took only a few minutes, but it proved more tiring than she expected.

Crawling back into bed seemed the obvious solution to battle the tiredness plaguing her. She was familiar with the early signs of her cycle, having gone through them since she was thirteen. The disappointment was hard to swallow. She was two weeks late, and she'd begun stressing over hiding her possible condition from Mike. Lyssa should have known better, even with the positive result of the test. Her doctor and the literature she'd read had warned that delayed or skipped cycles were one of the early signs of menopause. Even the pregnancy test warned of possible false positive results.

Pain pulsed behind her forehead. She eased onto her side. Mike's pillow still

held his scent as she settled in. She dragged the green throw she kept on the foot of the bed up to her chin.

She had been weakening to Mike's constant persuasion. After Thanksgiving and the punishment she'd earned, Lyssa realized how much she depended on Mike's presence and approval. Every part of her balked at those emotions, but there was no turning away from the truth. It hadn't been the first time either. Soon after Mike had moved in, she'd grown aware that the pleasure in having him with her seemed to supersede her desire for a baby. She should have heeded the warning signs. She had been sure it wouldn't last. That he'd lose interest. But he hadn't. Which made her heart pound and her head swim at the possibility that he would be with her forever, just like he'd promised. Even the pesky voices from her childhood were silent. The doubts remained and surfaced occasionally, but

it was easier for her to ignore them because they weren't true.

And now she had another dilemma to face. If she gave in to the temptation to tell him her feelings, she would have to tell him about the baby she'd kept secret and lost. She wondered how soon she could expect him to leave once she revealed it. Her gaze moved to the drawer of the nightstand. If she confessed to the child she'd already lost, she'd have to tell him about the possibility she could be carrying his baby now.

Tired and not wanting to think about it any longer, Lyssa turned her face into the pillow, breathed in his scent, and tried to fall asleep.

She'd begun to drift off when she heard the rumble of Mike's truck in the drive. Not wanting him to find her abed, Lyssa threw off the blanket and padded down the hall to the living room. She was pulling her mussed hair into a loose

ponytail when he opened the door.

“We’ve got a problem.”

“What problem?” Unsure what he meant, Lyssa searched his expression. It was impossible to read, and his eyes seemed to pierce her, delving into the secret parts of her mind looking for something she was sure she needed to keep from him.

He held a box out to her. “Take it.”

She swallowed, her eyes going from him to the box. The distinctive blue and white packaging was familiar. Had he found the one she’d hidden beneath the bathroom sink? “I don’t—”

“I read the instructions. You can use it at any time.” Taking her by the arm, Mike led her down the hall to the master bathroom. “Take it.”

“What? Why?” Lyssa didn’t know if she should be relieved or afraid.

“Nothing is one hundred percent

effective, Lys. Ask your sister. Then there's the incident before Thanksgiving. I didn't use anything." He moved closer, his hand cupping her breast, his fingertips brushing over the firm crests. "Your breasts are more sensitive and swollen, hon. You haven't had your period the entire time we've been together." When she started to shake her head in denial, he pinched her aching nipple.

Lyssa gasped, first with pain, then pleasure. "That doesn't mean anything, Mike. I've been late before."

"You weren't sexually active then." Mike spotted the rumpled bedding. "Were you taking a nap?"

Lyssa could feel the heat in her cheeks. "Yes, but—"

"All the signs are there, Lyssa." He tapped the box she held gripped in her hands. "Take the test—"

Lyssa dropped the box onto the

nightstand. "I don't need to."

"It takes two minutes. Why won't you—"

"Because I already did."

"Did what?" Mike looked at her, his gaze suspicious.

Lyssa turned away and tugged open the drawer on the nightstand. The white stick with its distinctive red letters lay wrapped in a plastic bag. Exhausted, she sat on the bed and pulled the bag from the drawer. "It has to be wrong."

Mike took the bag from her. "You're pregnant?"

Lyssa avoided the angry expression on his face. "It has to be a false positive."

The fierce look softened. "Explain."

Lyssa pulled the blanket over her lap. "My doctor told me a few months ago that I'm premenopausal."

"And?" Mike settled onto the bed beside her, eliminating any distance

between them.

“She told me it’s unlikely I’d be able to conceive naturally. That’s all this is. Symptoms of menopause.”

He tossed the wrapped wand onto the nightstand beside the box. “Did she say there was no way you could get pregnant?”

“No, but—” With all the signals her body had been sending her all morning, she hated the disappointment slowly rising inside her. At the same time, she wished she cared less about wanting to carry Mike’s child than she did. It was simply one more sign of how important he’d become to her over these last four weeks.

Mike watched her, waiting for her to say more. The little bit of color in her cheeks bled away. The beat of his heart increased with anticipation. This was

something he could work with. He hated the idea of Lyssa being pushed into a corner, but however he could get her, Mike would take her. The baby she carried was his. Which meant by extension, she was his. He could work with that.

“It has to be wrong,” Lyssa whispered again.

His stomach knotted at the tone of disbelief in her voice. Did she not want his baby? Did she resent the idea of being tied to him through this child? Tamping down the unease and fighting the urge to shout with joy and wrap her in his arms, Mike lifted the phone from its base on the nightstand and held it out to her. “Call your doctor. Make an appointment for tomorrow.”

In what seemed like a daze, Lyssa made the appointment for the following afternoon. Once she hung up the phone, Mike slipped the wrapped stick off the

nightstand and dropped it into the wastebasket beside the bed.

“Breathe, Lyssa,” he coaxed.

“It can’t be right, Michael,” she croaked, even as a thread of excitement entered her voice.

“Why didn’t you tell me? When did you take the test?” He needed to know.

She plucked at the blanket over her lap. “I took it this morning.”

“Were you going to tell me?” A warning sounded in his head. Was she not as thrilled as he about their baby? He covered her belly with his hand. “If it isn’t your condition, if it is true and you are pregnant, do you want my baby?” He had to know.

Her eyes shiny with tears, she pressed her hands to his cheeks and pulled him close. “Yes. I want our baby so, so much.”

The kiss was frenzied, rocking Mike’s

balance, dropping him back onto the bed. Lips pressed, tongues tangled, each of them fought for supremacy, rolling across the sheets until he took control, pinning her to the bed beneath him.

“Whoa”—he panted breathlessly as her fingers pulled at the buttons on his shirt—“take it easy, babe.”

She shook her head. “No. I need you. Right now.”

“And you want to celebrate?” Mike leaned down, pressing his lips against hers, teasing her with a butterfly-soft touch.

“Yes.” The smile on her lips was broad as she bobbed her head on the rumpled bedding.

Holding her gaze, he ripped the T-shirt she wore down the center, baring the sexy body beneath. “Like this? You want to celebrate?”

The fingers abandoned his shirt and

moved to the waistband of his jeans. She slipped the button loose and lowered the zipper before sliding her hand beneath the stretchy cotton of his boxer briefs, teasing the sensitive head of his cock. Her eyes dropped to the thickening flesh under her fingertips before rising to meet his again. "I definitely want to celebrate."

"Shall I guess, or do you want to show me how?" Mike asked.

One hand rose to push at his shoulder while the other continued to stroke and caress the heavy length of his erection. The feel of her fingers sliding up and down his heated shaft sent shivers through his body. Following her lead, he moved off and relaxed onto the bed beside her.

Leaning over him, Lyssa tugged his shirt up, exposing the flat planes of his stomach before her head dipped. The muscles of his abdomen flexed with the wet flick of her tongue on his navel. Her

attentions drifted lower. The brush of her lips followed by the lick of her tongue traced the lines of the tattoo from his right hip to his left.

When she pulled at the waistband of his jeans, he lifted up, making it easier for her to skim the denim down to his knees. He helped her push the soft cotton of his underwear out of the way as well. His engorged shaft arched upward, curling toward his belly, a pearly drop of precum glistening against the fiery crimson and jet ink decorating the plum-shaped head.

The smile left Lyssa's face as her fingers traced the scales and lines etched in color along his cock. Her thumb rubbed over the drop, smearing the moisture over the tip. "The black dragon has the baby."

The words she muttered didn't make sense, but Mike ignored the need for explanation. His mind exploded when she lowered her head and rolled her tongue around the blunt crown of his erection.

Down the shaft, then back up, she licked and caressed him like a child savoring her favorite ice cream cone in the middle of summer. The moment her mouth opened and she took him inside, reason was replaced with passion.

He cupped her head in his hands and tangled his fingers in her hair as he whispered encouragements and suggestions while she pleased him. If she wanted to distract him from the questions he still had, she'd picked an excellent way to do it.

* * *

Heartbeat back to normal, the sheen of sweat and sex cleaned away during a shared shower, Lyssa relaxed with Mike beneath the covers. She still had a difficult time grasping the possibility that she carried Mike's baby. The temptation to pinch herself was overwhelming. Until her doctor confirmed the test, she couldn't

even think about making plans.

“Explain it to me,” Mike whispered. Spooned against her back, he stroked his hand over her breasts.

“Explain what?” Lyssa knew what he wanted; she just wasn’t sure how he’d react once she told him.

Strong fingers pinched her nipple while his other hand opened her thighs. Clamping her engorged clit between his fore- and middle fingers, he repeated, “Explain it to me.”

Whimpering at the arousal the pain stirred within her, Lyssa scrambled to find her thoughts. “I’m forty, Michael.” She stifled the urge to protest when his fingers released the pressure on her sensitive flesh.

Rough fingers cupped her cheeks and turned her to face him. “What does that have to do with getting pregnant? Women older than you are still having

kids.”

“I told you. My doctor believes I’m starting early menopause.” She moved her trembling fingers to cover his lips when she saw them part to make another comment.

Mike moved her fingers away and nipped at the tips with his teeth. “You already mentioned that. I’m a guy, hon. Give it to me in simple terms. What did your doctor tell you?”

“I did—”

“No, tell me exactly what she said. Did she say you cannot have children? Did she say if you got pregnant immediately, you’d be able to halt or slow the progression of your early menopause?” His attention seemed focused on gaining as much information as possible as he propped himself on an elbow and leaned over her. “What is her prognosis for your condition?”

“She told me she believed I was in the early stages of menopause. Which means, according to the literature, my getting pregnant could be difficult but not impossible. That’s why I think the test might be wrong.” She dropped her gaze from his and moved her fingertips to his throat. The steady pulse of his heartbeat vibrated in the triangle at the base. If she started to hope, started to plan, she’d be devastated if it wasn’t true. “Promise you won’t anticipate the results of this test tomorrow.”

“You worry too much, pet. We’re going to have to break you of that habit,” he teased before he wrapped his fingers around hers. He lifted her chin with his knuckle. “We’ll worry about the test tomorrow. Right now we’re discussing what your doctor told you. What are the risks to you?”

“Menopause isn’t life threatening, Mike. It’s a natural process.” Lyssa rolled

onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. She hadn't liked hearing the information from her doctor, and the literature she'd read since only frightened her more. "The chances of my getting pregnant dropped by fifty percent after I turned forty. It also increased the chances my baby could be premature, have a low birth weight, or be stillborn."

"Are there dangers to you?"

"It doesn't—"

Mike leaned up on an elbow and looked down at her. "Answer me, Lys. Is there any danger to you?" It wasn't a request for information but a command.

A command Lyssa dared not ignore. Besides, he'd probably go off and find the information himself. "There are a few problems that can develop, but nothing I can't handle," she rushed to assure him.

"Problems like what?" She must have stayed quiet too long for his liking

because he prompted a second time, “Problems like what, Lyssa?”

“Diabetes for one. There’s also a danger of developing high blood pressure, preeclampsia, and eclampsia.”

“E-what?”

Lyssa grimace, then explained, “Eclampsia. It can cause high blood pressure, swelling of the face and hands, and protein in the urine.”

Mike’s look grew concerned. “Okay. What results can follow eclampsia if you develop it?”

Lyssa hesitated, but Mike’s hand moved beneath the covers and settled over her stomach. “Hospitalization at the least,” she confessed.

“And at the worst?”

She swallowed, dropped her gaze to the pulse beating in his throat before she looked back at him. “At the worst, a severe stroke or death.”

Mike cursed. His fingers curled around the curve of her hip and pulled her closer. "And what does your doctor say? What are the chances you could develop any of these conditions?"

Lyssa turned her gaze away. There was no way she was going to go into all the particulars and worst case scenarios that came with conceiving a child after the age of thirty-five or forty. If Mike was this freaked out over a few of the risks, his knowing that she could be putting her life at risk would definitely send him over the edge. So she fudged the truth a bit. "It's a crap shoot. Every pregnancy is different and can pose a risk. I've discussed it with my doctor and have gone through all the prescreening tests. There are no indications that any baby I might conceive may develop genetic defects based on my family history."

"That wasn't what I asked, Lys. I wanted to know if *you* could develop any

of the conditions you told me about.” He held her gaze and asked, “If they have tests for the baby, do they have tests to confirm you won’t develop any of those conditions that would be dangerous to you?”

“There’s no way of knowing if I’ll develop any of the conditions.” Before he could protest, she added, “But based on Mattie’s history with her pregnancies and since my doctor will demand close supervision and excellent prenatal care the entire time, there should be no problems.”

“But there’s no guarantee?”

“No. There’s no guarantee.”

Mike shifted, settling over her, his thighs between hers, the warm length of his arousal stirring sensations he’d sated earlier. “How will you feel if you are pregnant?”

Lyssa was sure the smile lifting her

lips revealed the excitement she felt. With only a few days left of their agreement, she refused to acknowledge how comforting it would be to have Mike to rely on this time around. If she was pregnant, it was only a matter of time before she'd have to tell Mike about the baby she'd lost.

Keeping her tone cool, she informed Mike, "If I am, I want you to know I won't expect anything from you." She hurried on, her attention more focused on reassuring him than on his response. "My work allows me to stay home, to be able to care for the baby on my own. I make plenty of money, so there's no reason—"

His fingers halted the rest of her words as he stared down at her. The heat in his gaze communicated the error she'd made in trying to remove responsibility from him. "Wrong answer, love." Between them, he shifted, aligning his body with hers. Holding her gaze, he thrust forward,

sealing himself within the warm clasp of her flesh. "I'm not leaving."

"The thirty days is almost over. There's no reason to stick around."

Mike smiled, stroking his body deep within her. "Halsey's protect what's ours. You and our baby belong to me. Get used to it."

That's what thrilled and frightened her—belonging to Mike. Him belonging to her. Lyssa arched closer, enjoying the heat of his body within and around hers. The advance and retreat of his cock reinforced the feeling of connection she'd been reluctant to acknowledge growing between them. Any thoughts regarding her future or the child she might be carrying scattered as Mike nipped the skin beneath her ear, drawing her attention back to him. The grin on his lips was contagious. She smiled up at him and then dropped her head back, a moan slipping from her lips at the rough,

pounding pace Mike set between her thighs.

A soft gasp from her and he stopped, poised over her, waiting.

Lyssa wriggled beneath him, confused at the pleasure the brief jolt of pain stirred within her. She wrapped her legs around his hips, gripped the sleek muscles of his back with her hands, and she arched up toward him, silently urging him on.

Mike complied, his thrusts pushing her body deeper into the thick mattress and silk sheets cocooning them. Every touch drew her closer to the edge. Tugging her toward the danger of falling, tumbling into the trap of emotions she knew awaited her since assigning the role of lover to Mike.

It won't last. No one could love you. No one wanted you. The bitter voice of Aaron Lawrence slithered through her mind. Lyssa countermanded the

thoughts. *No, he loves me. I believe him. I do.*

A soft snicker sounded in her head. *How could he love a liar like you? How can anyone love a liar?*

The accusations were irrefutable. She had lied to Mike. Doubt circled, the whispers growing louder, but she slapped a gag on it. *Fuck off, I'm not listening.* And she wasn't, not any more. *He loves me and I love him and when the time is right, I'll tell Mike about our baby, but not yet.* The thoughts dissipated like early morning fog. She suspected they'd return, but she was ready, confident she'd be able to face them and win.

Her resolve must have increased the color in her cheeks. She could feel the power and strength trickle through her. It seemed to have communicated itself to Mike, because his body stilled over her.

Dark eyes gazed down at her, asking questions she was uncomfortable

answering right now. Frustration tightened his features, but only for an instant. Humor lifted his lips as he leaned close and pressed a kiss to her lips. When he drew back, Mike winked at her. “Wonder if you’re actually carrying triplets like Mattie did?”

Lyssa groaned, recalling the first pregnancy her sister had gone through within weeks of her marriage. “You better pray it doesn’t happen, kid.”

Mike nuzzled her throat. “Why’s that?”

She nipped his neck and waited until he looked down at her. “If it’s triplets, there’ll be no more playtime for your dragon. Ever.”

His laughter vibrated against her chest and he increased his pace. “Ah, you forget, pet. I still make the rules.”

When Lyssa opened her mouth to snap back at him, her words vanished on

a gasp of pleasure. Deft fingertips rubbed over and around her clit, making her body tremble at the tingles skating up and down her spine. This time, she assured herself as she curled tighter around him, soaking up the heat and passion his lovemaking evoked, she'd let him have the last word.

But only this time. Mike needed a strong woman. He deserved *her*, and Lyssa intended to keep her dom on his toes.

Chapter Fifteen

Throughout the examination the following afternoon, Mike stood beside her, holding her hand and whispering reassurances when her thoughts strayed. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't ignore the fear circling inside her mind about the baby she'd lost. It occupied her every thought. Weakening the determination she'd finally tapped into last night.

"Well," the doctor began as she eased Lyssa's feet from the stirrups, "I'm going to go check with the nurse about the tests. Why don't you get dressed and we'll talk when I get back."

Lyssa nodded. She'd mentioned to the doctor the spots of blood she'd discovered this morning as well as the light bout of cramps that had woken her. Both frightened her. She worried that her body was determined to thwart any efforts to get pregnant.

Listlessly she let Mike help her off the table and out of the paper gown. Getting dressed seemed to sap what little energy she had. Mike didn't try to reassure her as he carefully fastened the buttons of her blouse. The stockings she'd worn he left tucked in his pocket. When she moved to return to the cold table, he stopped her, tugging her into his lap as he settled onto the extra chair, uncaring of its lumpy cushions or the inflexible back that forced him into an upright position. Draping her legs over one of the arms, he held her close and eased her head down on his shoulder.

Out of his pocket, he pulled three

lengths of string. Taking her left hand in his, he carefully wound each piece around her ring finger, lining them up next to each other. The first was green, the second blue, and the last black.

Lyssa touched the strings with the fingers of her right hand. “What’re these for?”

“Trying to decide.”

“Decide what?” Lyssa rolled the threads up against one another as she recalled the gold thread he’d put on her finger weeks ago.

“Whether I should get you an emerald, sapphire, or opal ring to go with your wedding band.” Mike lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the string-wrapped finger. “I’m thinkin’ opal. Black fire opal to be exact. Halsey tradition, you know.”

“Mike, you don’t have to—”

His fingers covered her lips. “Even if the doc comes in and says you aren’t

pregnant, Lys, I'm taking you home and marrying you once you're feeling better." His hand smoothed her hair away from her cheek. She never raised her eyes from the tiny embroidered insignia on the left breast of his polo shirt.

Before he could get her to respond, the doctor tapped on the door, then entered. "Well, Lys, you'll no longer need that referral to the fertility clinic you requested last month. Looks like you're going to be a mom."

"But—" Lyssa shifted on his lap, swinging her legs off the arm of the chair to settle beside his.

"There was a minimal amount of spotting. It has been known to happen, but we'll keep an eye on it if it returns." The doctor glanced down at the chart.

Mike chuckled as he pulled Lyssa close. One hand strayed to the curve of her belly, stroking over the fabric of her blouse. She wondered if he was trying to

imagine what she'd look like in another month or two.

"The good news is you're healthy and aware of your condition early enough that we can keep a careful watch for any problems."

"Are you sure? About the spotting?" Lyssa asked. Desperate for reassurance, she pressed the doctor. "It started the same way last time. I don't think—I can't lose my baby... Not again."

The muscles in Mike's thighs tensed beneath her, and Lyssa realized what she'd said. She couldn't look at him, too afraid to see the expression on his face.

The woman leaned forward and squeezed Lyssa's hand. "Although there still could be complications, you'll have consistent prenatal care from the very start. We'll do everything we can to make sure you carry *this* baby to term, Lyssa."

When Lyssa hazarded a glimpse at

Mike's face, suspicion mingled with disbelief in his features as he released his hold on her. It remained in the lines bracketing his mouth as he listened to the instructions the doctor gave about diet and exercise while scribbling a prescription for prenatal vitamins.

"I'll expect to see you next month, Lyssa." The doctor reminded her as she left the room.

Mike remained quiet as he rose and helped her put her coat on. This time, each move was precise and distant. He'd already begun to slip away from her, and the only person to blame was herself.

* * *

Mike stayed quiet on the drive from Lyssa's doctor's office to her home. The sun had begun to set when he pulled into the drive. Everything began to fall into place. His mind replayed various incidents when he'd first come to Lyssa to

discuss Rite of First Claim. The way she'd hurriedly stuffed some papers in one of the kitchen drawers. The odd marks he'd spotted on the calendars throughout the house. The fact that she'd admitted to never having a lover after him, but she'd had a new box of condoms in her nightstand with only six missing. Possibly the same six she'd taken to the Club the night of the masquerade.

When he mentally reviewed the comments the doctor and Lyssa had made, his suspicions only deepened. Every time he came to the phrases "fertility clinic," "not again," and "*this* baby," he pushed down the anger that threatened to rise up. It was under control as he assisted Lyssa from his truck and followed her into the house.

While she deactivated the alarm, he crossed the hall, moved through the kitchen to the far cabinets, and yanked open a drawer. The image of a smiling

baby taunted him as he lifted the brochure. It wasn't the only one. Grabbing the pile, he pulled them out and slammed the drawer shut.

On the wall beside him, notes scribbled into the squares on a calendar drew his attention. Small red letters, *ov-x*, marked the Monday after Thanksgiving. He tugged the calendar from its hook and flipped back to October. The same small *r e d ov-x* marked the day before Halloween. Another was marked in the month of September, along with plus and minus signs before and after it.

Lyssa watched him from a seat at the kitchen table, her face paling as he carried the pamphlets and calendar over and dropped them in front of her.

"It was all a setup, wasn't it, Lyssa?" It took every ounce of strength he had to keep his voice level and calm. He didn't want to believe the evidence before him, but he hoped—prayed—she'd refute it.

“Yes.”

The quiet way she admitted what she'd done shattered something inside him. “You went to the Club looking for a goddamned stud, not a master, didn't you?”

She nodded. “Yes.” Her blue eyes stared back at him.

“Kringle?”

Another nod.

“The condoms?” He suspected, but he needed to hear her admit it.

“I poked holes in them.”

He thought back to the box he'd found in her nightstand. The one they'd quickly depleted and replaced the first week of her training. “All of them?”

She shook her head. “Only the ones I took to the Club.”

“To use with Kringle.”

It wasn't a question, but she

responded. "Yes."

"Why?" It was a moot question. Based on the evidence spread over the table, he knew what her answer was likely to be.

Her gaze dropped, and her hands moved to cover her belly. "I wanted a baby."

"And you got it." The words felt like acid as he spit them out. Mike braced his hands on the table and measured her responses carefully. "But you don't want the man who put that baby inside you, do you?"

The shake of her head was barely perceptible, but it was there. If she'd taken a knife to him, it would have hurt less, Mike reasoned. As it was, the soft words she uttered felt like they ripped the soul from his body.

"That wasn't part of my plan."

"If I hadn't brought home that test,

would you have told me about it?”

“I don’t know,” Lyssa confessed, holding his gaze.

Mike pulled back and took a step away from the table. “Would you have lied to me about this baby the way you lied to me the last time?”

She flinched. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.” It wasn’t a question, more a restatement of her response to make sure he’d heard her correctly.

“I can explain,” she offered, her hands returning to the tabletop, clasped together in front of her.

He gripped the ladder back of the kitchen chair. In the twenty-minute drive from the doctor’s downtown office back to Lyssa’s house, he’d controlled his reaction for as long as he could. With the evidence of how she’d manipulated him splayed out on the table between them—Mike could

feel the tether on his emotions slipping away. As much as he wanted to, and even though he'd been doing the questioning, he realized now definitely wasn't the time to start hashing things out between them. "I'm not sure I want to discuss this right now, Lys."

"I think we need to talk about this, Mike."

"No"—Mike slammed the chair against the table and moved back toward the kitchen—"you don't want me to talk about this." In his peripheral vision, he saw her jump, and a small part of him felt vindicated by her fear. Drawing a deep breath, he worked to refocus his energy and lessen the pain trying to gain a foothold in his chest.

"I do want—"

"No, you don't." Mike swung around, unsure just what he was feeling and how to put it into perspective. "I need a little more time to process this."

“I want—”

“Right now, hon, what you *want* isn’t sitting very high on my priority list.” He curled his fingers into fists, then relaxed them several times in an attempt to calm down. Verbally berating her wasn’t going to resolve the problem. It would only create a wall between them. He’d had enough of barriers these last weeks while he’d tried seducing her to his way of thinking.

Lyssa tugged at the hem of her blouse, then crossed her arms over her breasts. “I meant to tell you. All this month, I’ve tried screwing up the courage.”

“You do not want to start this. Not now.”

“But I need—”

He could see the shimmer of tears in her eyes, but it did nothing to stem the rage boiling up inside him. In two strides,

he'd returned to the table. He slammed his fist down on the surface, making several of the brochures slide off the edge onto the floor and the bowl of fruit in the center of the table jump. An orange tumbled off the pile and rolled toward Lyssa, tracking across a blurry black-and-white photo that lay among the brochures. Mike reached it before Lyssa and lifted the image for a better view.

He'd seen similar pictures in small frames on his brother's desk at home and work. "*Baby's first picture*," Bryce had called them and proudly displayed the ultrasounds for anyone to see.

Numbers in the corner proclaimed the date and time the image had been recorded. It was hard for him to focus on the picture, his hands were shaking so hard. Fire seared his throat, but he forced a question out. "Did you know when I cornered you at Mattie and Bryce's wedding?"

“I-I suspected.”

He traced his fingers over the tiny whitish blob in the center of the image, unable to look at Lyssa. “And when I came to your house after returning from Kabul? You lied again.”

“Yes, but I tried—”

“Boy or girl?” He barely recognized the croak he emitted. Tears burned his eyes and clogged his throat. When she stayed silent, he lifted his gaze to hers. He held the picture up. “Tell me, Lyssa. Was this my son or my daughter?”

Tears welled up, but she held his look as she whispered, “Our daughter.” A single tear trickled down her cheek and splashed onto the orange she gripped in her hands.

He didn’t know what to say, to do; he merely waited, watching her fingers pick at the fruit.

“I want—”

The anger responded, refusing to allow her an opportunity to use him again. “I could give a fuck about what you want right now, Lyssa.”

She faced his anger without flinching. “Ben said you’d be upset once —”

“Ben?” It felt like someone had sucked every last breath of air from the room. “He knew about—” It seemed useless to finish the thought. The guilt filling her eyes, the nervous way her fingers plucked at the bit of stem left on the orange—none of it appeased the heat filling his chest.

Turning away, he exited the kitchen and pulled his keys from his pocket. The scrape of her chair on the tile and the rapid footsteps signaled her following him, but it didn’t slow him on his way to the front door. The image of his daughter was still gently cupped in his hand.

“Mike, where are you going?”

He flexed his fingers around the doorknob, rattling his keys. "Away, Lyssa. I need to clear my head."

"Please, why can't you stay? Talk to me."

She looked so scared and alone when he glanced over his shoulder at her. "Because as deeply as I love you, Lys, right this second I don't like you very much."

Lyssa felt numb. Standing there, she watched the door close behind Mike, heard the warning beeps from the alarm, and fought the urge to vomit. Her fingers trembled as she punched the keypad to enter the code and still the noise.

The sound of Mike's truck driving away sapped what little energy she had left. The sobs she'd held in check broke free. Tears rolled down her cheeks, splashing onto her hands. Shaky, her

knees threatening to give way beneath her, Lyssa stumbled back to the kitchen and collapsed onto a chair.

This was the best thing for him. For both of us. I know it is. Mike could never be happy with me. If he'd stayed, it would have ended his career. He needs to find someone his own age. He doesn't need to be tied down by a baby and a woman he doesn't want.

All the excuses she'd used for the last twelve years swam through her head, spinning around like hyperactive Ping-Pong balls in a tornado, bouncing here and there, never staying put.

"I need him back." Her whisper was a bucket of ice water poured over fractious boys.

The excuses and rationalizations stopped, deflated, dwindling to nothing like balloons emptied of helium.

"I *need* him." Three words, but not

the right ones. She tried again, this time refusing to allow her fears and doubts to manifest reasons she should stay quiet. “I love him.”

A watery laugh slipped free as Lyssa stared at the brochures and calendar spread across the table before her. She’d finally achieved her goal. She’d driven Mike away. And this time he wasn’t coming back.

Pain set in, welling up to crush her heart. No amount of tears could fix this. Nothing she could say or do would be enough to ease the hurt she’d caused him. Gut-twisting, body-shaking sobs escaped her control. He’d put up with her denials and excuses for twelve years, and now that he’d finally given her what she’d thought she wanted, Lyssa realized it was all a lie.

All the things she’d used to keep him at arm’s length had really been shields to keep herself from admitting she’d always

needed him but she couldn't allow herself to have him. She'd kept herself protected, safe from harm, thinking she couldn't risk being vulnerable to him, couldn't trust him. Now, though, she knew that allowing herself to feel, allowing herself to trust Mike and the feelings he engendered was worth any risk. Unfortunately her realization had come too late.

* * *

He'd lost track of time after leaving Lyssa's house. Until he'd entered the city limits of Ayerstown and the low fuel warning lamp flashed on his dashboard, Mike hadn't realized how far he'd driven.

After filling the truck's tank and the prescription Lyssa's doctor had handed him earlier, the eighty-minute drive back to San Diablo was as much a blur as the drive away from Lyssa had been. Until he pulled into Lyssa's driveway and turned off the truck, he'd honestly believed he

could face her. Staring through the windshield at the light spilling through her living room curtains, he knew he was still to raw, too unsteady to see her.

The phone rang as Mike opened the door of his truck. Reaching beneath the seat, he pulled the secured cell from its pocket and flipped it open. "Hello."

"Scarecrow, we have a situation." The tension was palpable in Trent's voice. It would have to be a dire emergency for Trent to call him.

"What." His response was a request for information, not a question.

"LaTreace made contact ten days ago. Left a message about information she'd come across."

"The information?" Was it possible LaTreace had been able to gather the intelligence that had eluded him and the team for the last five years?

"I don't know. I set up a meet, and

she never showed.”

The buzz of alarm that had bothered him since he'd recommended his friend for the job began blaring. “This isn't good,” Mike muttered. “How long since she's been out of contact?”

“Six days.”

“Six—Damn it, Trent, I told you to keep an eye on her. To keep her in the loop.” Mike cursed and smacked the steering wheel in frustration.

“I know, Mike. Listen, we really need you here. You know her better than any of us. If she went to ground, you'll know where to look.” Trent paused, then added, “I hate to pull you off leave, but—”

“It's good, Trent. Where do I pick up transport?”

“We'll have a private jet to Dulles ready by six. From Dulles, you'll pick up a commercial flight to Rome, first-class.”

“That gives me time to swing by my

studio to grab my cameras and a change of clothes.”

“Thank you, Mike. We owe you.” Trent didn’t wait for a response before hanging up. Mike tucked the phone back in its spot.

He hesitated before his fingers twisted the key in the ignition.

On the seat next to him was the white paper bag with Lyssa’s prescription. Grabbing it, he left the motor running while he strode up to the house at the center of the cul-de-sac and pounded on the door. Not bothering with a greeting, he shoved the bag at Vance. “Tell her to take one every morning with her breakfast. Make sure she eats three times a day.”

“Where are you going, Mike? What about Lyssa?” Vance took the bag.

“I have to help a friend. She’s in trouble.”

The younger man's fists clenched. "You're leaving her again?"

Mike shook his head. "I've never left her. She's the one running. I have a plane to catch. Make sure she takes her vitamins." He could hear the curses Vance muttered as he jogged back to his truck and swung inside.

He backed down the drive, his mind torn between the woman he loved and the one he'd unwittingly put in danger. Danger he could handle. It was simple and straightforward—make a mistake and you're dead. Wrestling with the heartache Lyssa represented—that was more than he wanted to deal with right now. Ben and Vance would keep her safe for him.

LaTreace had only him to look for her, but something warned him the search wouldn't take long. Despite all his hopes, Mike's instincts told him no matter how fast or far they looked, the only thing

they'd recover was another body.

* * *

“Lyssa!”

Vance sounded concerned as the front door closed behind him. “In here, Vance,” Lyssa called out, unsure what she was going to do next. After realizing just how badly she'd screwed up, she'd taken the time to throw out every brochure and pamphlet for fertility clinics she'd had in the house, starting with the ones spread across the table. Too tired to move, let alone think, she'd resumed her seat and spent most of the evening at the kitchen table. Her eyes burned, and the back of her neck and shoulders ached from hunching over for so many hours.

Moving hadn't been an option. She needed to see Mike. He deserved to have her waiting when he returned. By not telling him about their baby when he'd first asked, she'd denied him an

opportunity to grieve. At a time when he'd felt proudest, she'd exposed him to a loss she found still affected her. And she'd finally figured out that as much as she'd plotted and planned, hoping to get pregnant, she wanted Mike more. She loved him. Deeply and passionately loved him, and he deserved to hear that from her.

“God, hon, you look as bad as Mike.” Vance eased onto the chair beside her.

Lyssa picked at the mess of pulp and peel that covered the plate in front of her. “Is he okay? I saw him drive off. I thought I heard him return a few minutes ago, but he never came inside.”

“About as all right as he's gonna be for now.” Vance eased the plate away from her.

That made Lyssa's heart pound faster against her ribs. “He's not hurt, is he?”

“No. He’s just upset,” he assured her. Rising, he carried the plate to the sink.

Lyssa kept her attention on scraping the bits of rind from beneath her fingernails while the water and garbage disposal ran in the sink. “I wanted to talk to him, but—”

Vance returned to her side to clean the sticky juice from her hands with the damp washcloth he carried. “Darlin’, you should have talked to him weeks ago. Hell, years ago.”

“I know, but I just couldn’t.” She raised her gaze to meet his. “Did he tell you about the baby?”

Vance shook his head, but he smiled. “Congratulations, sweetheart.”

“Did he say—”

“He didn’t have much to say.”

Lyssa grimaced. She laid her folded arms on the table and propped her chin on them. “He left, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, hon. He did.”

“I’m afraid,” Lyssa whispered.

“Afraid of what?”

“He won’t come back. He won’t want me anymore.”

Vance settled one of his arms around her and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “That’s foolish talk, Lys. Mike loves and adores you. He’ll be back.”

“Not after this, Vance.” Lyssa shook her head. “You didn’t see his face, didn’t hear his voice.” She rubbed trembling fingers against her aching eyes. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Do what, babe?”

“Be alone again. I don’t know if I even want to try.”

“You’ve been sitting here all night, haven’t you?”

Lyssa nodded.

“You should sleep. It’s not good for

you, and it's definitely not good for the baby." Vance stayed quiet a moment before settling his arm around her waist. "You'll feel better once you get some rest." His fingers traced the heavy circles under her eyes from her sleepless night. "Let's get you to bed."

There was no energy in her for argument as Vance maneuvered her out of the kitchen and down the hall to the master bedroom. He waited while she stumbled into the bathroom to change out of her clothes and into her pajamas, then helped her climb into the bed.

"You don't have to stay with me, Vance," she assured him. "I'll be fine on my own until—"

"He'll be home, Lys. Don't you worry about it."

"Thanks." She squeezed the hand holding hers before closing her eyes to try to rest.

Chapter Sixteen

The pounding on the front door pulled Lyssa away from the outfit she'd just begun to construct. She would have ignored it, but the sound of her sister's voice drew Lyssa out of the room and down the hall. A very irritated-looking Mattie glared at her when Lyssa opened the door, while her three-year-old niece Maggie grinned up at her.

"Lyssa Briann Lawrence, you better tell me what the"—Mattie clamped her hands over her daughter's ears—"hell is going on here."

Lyssa found it impossible to stifle her laughter when she looked down at

Maggie to see the child rolling her eyes at her mother's attempt to keep her from hearing the curse. "Would you like some juice or tea, Mat?" She motioned her sister and niece inside before shutting the door.

"I'd rather have some answers, sister dear," Mattie grumbled.

"Hi, Aunt Lys. I told Mama it was girls-only day." Maggie grinned as she moved to hug her aunt. Her arms wrapped around Lyssa's hips.

"Hello, Maggie." She squeezed her back. She forced herself not to hold the little girl too tight. Until Mike had left, she'd never realized how much she could crave simple human contact.

"Honey, Mama wants to talk to Aunt Lyssa. Can you go find your toys?"

The sigh was too grown-up a sound for a three-year-old to make, but that was one of the things about Maggie: she

always seemed years ahead of her age. “Okay, Mama.” Before releasing Lyssa, Maggie pressed a loud kiss to her stomach. “Bye, baby.” Looking up at her aunt, she added, “No gettin’ sick, Aunt Lys.”

Leaning down, Lyssa pressed a soft kiss to Maggie’s chocolate curls. “I promise, Maggie.”

Maggie grinned at her and whispered, “Told you the black dragon had the baby.”

The wisdom in the little girl’s gaze sent a ripple of apprehension through Lyssa. She stifled the urge to move her hand to the barely visible curve beneath her blouse as she watched Maggie head toward the living room.

“Don’t mind the baby comment, sis. Maggie has been doing that since before I started to show.” Mattie rubbed her hand over her own pregnant belly.

Lyssa stayed quiet. She hadn't announced her pregnancy to anyone beyond Mike, Ben, and Vance, mainly because she wanted Mike by her side when they told their family.

That is if he came back. Considering he'd been quiet—no e-mails, no text messages, and only one ninety-second phone call—in the last three weeks, what little hope she had in his forgiving her and returning was wearing thin.

"Tea?" she offered as she led her sister into the kitchen.

"Yes, please." Mattie eased into one of the chairs surrounding the kitchen table.

With the kettle on the stove, Lyssa leaned on the counter nearby, waiting for the signal to pour the steaming water into the prepared teapot.

"So spill," Mattie demanded, her elbows braced on the table, her dark

brown gaze focused on Lyssa.

“Spill what?”

Mattie pulled several gossip magazines from her bag and spread them over the table.

Lyssa cursed the gossip sheets that had plastered the images of Charlene hanging on Mike’s arm all over their front pages. Not to mention the TV shows with their “reports.”

“Didn’t you listen to the programs or read these?” Lyssa asked.

Mattie rolled her eyes and snorted. “After she and Frieda Makepeace locked me in the closet at the Club four years ago you know the less I hear and read about Charlene, the better I sleep at night. Bryce had this stuff tucked away in his office. I’m sure he’s about ready to kill Mike.”

“LaTreace Barrows died of a drug overdose three weeks ago.” The

coincidental nature of the situation hadn't been lost on Lyssa when she'd read the first article about the cover model's death. Mike would have been in Europe a week when the woman's body was found. According to Vance, Mike's hasty departure was because he needed to help a friend. Lyssa was pretty sure LaTreace was that friend.

"Oh my God, I hadn't heard that part, Lys. I know you've worked with her before." Mattie sat up straighter.

"Mike knew and worked with LaTreace for years. Just before her funeral, he called and told me he felt obligated to attend." Lyssa shrugged. In regards to Charlene, Lyssa didn't have an explanation to give since Mike hadn't mentioned the redhead during their too-brief call, but he had assured her he would return.

Lyssa switched off the burner and pulled the teakettle before it could begin

to whistle. After she poured the steaming water into the teapot, she returned the kettle to the stove and sat down across from Mattie.

“That woman doesn’t have a subtle bone in her body.” Mattie grimaced. “Has he told you when he’ll be home?”

“Other than that one phone conversation, I haven’t heard from Mike since he left, Mat.” Lyssa tried not to reveal how anxious and upset she was at Mike’s silence. She pulled one of the magazines toward her and leafed through it to the section with pictures of him and Charlene.

“You’re not thinking he won’t come back, are you, Lys?” It was clear that thought had crossed Mattie’s mind.

Lyssa ignored the voice inside that called her a fool as she shook her head. “Mike would tell me if he wasn’t coming back.” And she believed it, despite all the skepticism trying to undermine her

confidence.

“How can you be sure?” Mattie demanded. “I’ve been watching the TV gossip shows and seeing the articles same as you. He’s got women surrounding him. Charlene is hanging on his arm everywhere he goes.”

Lyssa dropped her gaze to the cup she held between her hands. “I can’t be sure, Mat. I can only trust that he loves me and comes home soon.” She moved her attention to the pictures, taking note of the stiff way Mike held himself beside Charlene. The tight expression on his face when he smiled. All those little clues, both in the paper and on the videos she couldn’t help but watch each night, bolstered her defenses against the doubts attempting to plague her.

Mike’s expression betrayed little interest in the woman on his arm. None of the women he’d been seen with over the last three weeks had brought the gleam to

his eye. She'd been watching. Dreading it and sighing with relief when it remained missing.

Satisfaction eased the concerned look on her sister's face before Mattie asked, "So you believe he loves you? What happed to 'the heart lies' belief?"

"Yes, I believe him." Lyssa stirred sugar and milk into her tea. "And I love him."

"It's about damn time," Mattie grumbled.

"Tell me you were this crazy when you finally figured out how much Bryce loved you."

"Certifiable." Mattie sipped her tea. "Mike has been nuts about you since the day he asked you out to celebrate selling his first article and pictures."

"I'm starting to believe that." She looked into her teacup and then up at her little sister. "It's kinda scary knowing how

much you can start to depend on someone to be there for you.”

“It’s a two-way street, Lys. It’ll be no different for Mike.”

“I’m still finding it difficult to think there can be a future for us.”

Mattie watched her from over the rim of her cup. “He’s the other half of your soul. What more do you need to know?”

Lyssa thought about that for a moment. “Yes, he is.”

“So why aren’t you a basket case?” Mattie asked.

“I am; you just caught me when my confidence is on an upswing,” Lyssa admitted, fighting the tears welling up.

“Oh, Lys.” Mattie dragged her chair next to her sister’s and wrapped her arms around her.

“All my lofty thoughts about him loving me are all well and good, but I need him to come home. I need him here.”

Lyssa grabbed a napkin from the table, blew her nose, and wiped at the tears streaking her cheeks. Glaring at her sister, Lyssa poked at the open magazine in front of her. "Every time I see the pictures or watch the video clips, I want to scream. He spends twelve damned years chasing me, and then, right when I'm ready to confess all, to tell him 'I love you,' he flits off to Europe! I have half a mind to go over there and shove one of his cameras where the sun don't shine."

Mattie laughed. "Okay, now that sounds more like it. Shall I call Bryce and tell him to get the company jet gassed up?"

Lyssa shook her head. The temper drained away slightly. "No, I'll give him a little more time." She glanced into the living room where the bushy green Christmas tree Mike had insisted on putting up the day after Thanksgiving twinkled with lights and ornaments. "But

I swear, if he isn't home before Christmas, that man'll be walkin' funny by New Year's."

They were both distracted by the sound of the front door opening, followed by a squeal of delight. The rush of hope that it was Mike deflated when she and Mattie reached the doorway to the living room to see Maggie demanding Vance pick her up.

"It's barely noon, Vance," Lyssa complained.

Vance bounced Maggie on his hip, grinning at the little girl as she tugged free the leather tie holding his hair back. "Sorry, babe. We marines take our duties seriously."

"Mike did not ask you and Ben to make sure I was eating every meal?"

Mattie laughed. "I wouldn't put it past him. He is a Halsey, after all."

"Halseys take care of their own,"

Maggie announced in a resolute tone that had all three adults chuckling.

Mattie shook her head. "She's been listening to her daddy again, I see." Holding her hands out to her daughter, she smiled. "Come on, sweetie; time to go home."

Maggie seemed to debate going to her mom for a moment before she gave Vance a serious look. "It's okay. I's still waitin'. Down, please."

Vance squatted and set her on the floor, his smile indulgent. "Waiting for what, kiddo?"

"My angel." Maggie reached over and grabbed Mattie's hand. Looking up at her mom, she smiled. "Him and Ben's bringin' me Aimee's angel."

Lyssa watched Vance drop to one knee, his face blanching as he stared at Maggie. "Are you okay?" She kept her question soft, not wanting to frighten her

sister or her niece.

“Maggie.” Vance cleared his throat and tried again. “Maggie, who told you I was bringing you Aim—an angel?”

The little girl stood very still, her pale green eyes holding Vance’s for the longest time before she shrugged and answered, “Just know. I wait.” She turned away and tugged Mattie toward the door. “Come on, Mama. Grandpa Jake’s makin’ ice cream.”

“I’m sorry, Vance. I don’t think Maggie knows what she’s saying most of the time,” Mattie apologized as she followed her daughter out the door.

Vance rose slowly to his feet as the door closed behind Mattie and Maggie. Lyssa felt compelled to explain a little more. “She doesn’t mean any harm. It’s just that Maggie sees things sometimes.”

He nodded, pushing his loosened hair away from his face. “It’s okay, Lys. I

just haven't heard—never mind.” Planting his hands on his hips, he looked down at her. “About your lunch.”

Lyssa groaned and headed into the kitchen, with him following. Even if she wanted to wallow in self-pity, she'd learned trying to avoid him and Ben when they decided to play mother hen simply wasn't worth the effort.

* * *

Mike ached in every joint and more. He couldn't blame the long flights from France and New York, since the seats in first class had been more than comfortable. The weariness plaguing him had been present since he'd left San Diablo three weeks earlier. It was not knowing what he'd come home to that made him feel decades older than he was.

A part of him argued he should ignore the urge to head to Lyssa's and just shower and crash at his apartment

over the studio, but he couldn't. Tuma was still in residence. And based on the last stilted phone call they'd shared, she was still plenty pissed that he'd left Lyssa. Twenty-five days without Lyssa left him craving the sight of her. At three in the morning, he wasn't expecting to see any lights on when he pulled into the drive.

Pain rose up, but he squashed it down. If he could replay the last twenty-six days of his life, he'd do it. No, make that the last forty-eight months. There would be so many things he'd change. The first being not taking no for an answer when he'd brought Lyssa home from the Club that first night.

Maybe if he'd stayed with her, taken care of her, she wouldn't have lost their baby. Despite Ben's explanation when they'd spoken on the phone that her miscarriage had been unavoidable, Mike wondered how preventable the event might have been.

God, how many times had he prayed she was pregnant when he was dragging his ass through filthy whorehouses in Bangkok, searching for information, any clue to help wrap up his assignment? But wishing for the ability to turn back the clock wouldn't get the job done. Not now.

He wasn't much different than his big brother in the respect that both he and Bryce knew a baby would bind their woman to them. But did he want to leave Lyssa without a choice? He knew she loved him; she'd simply never admit it. He cursed the weak moment when he'd answered his ringing cell phone, but at the same time, he had appreciated the opportunity to step away from the painful situation facing him.

He tried to be quiet as he entered the house, deactivated then reset the alarm, and put his camera case on the sofa. His duffel bag he carried through the kitchen to the laundry room before

shedding his overcoat and draping it over a kitchen chair. Moving down the hall into the master bedroom, he waited in the doorway. She looked peaceful curled in the bed, covers tucked beneath her chin. Exhausted but desperate for a shower after so many hours of travel, Mike eased off his shoes and left them next to the door. He made as little noise as possible as he moved into the bathroom. As soon as he turned on the hot water, steam began to fill the room. Stripping out of his clothes, he left them in a heap on the floor and moved beneath the spray.

Lather coated his shoulders and chest when the door opened behind him and Lyssa stepped inside.

“Are you okay?” She took the soap from him and reached for the colorful fluffy thing she used to bathe.

“Tired.” He watched her rub the soap against the puff and build a froth of bubbles.

“I heard the news about LaTreace.” Lyssa eased the soapy fluff along his chest and down his abdomen. “The reports are saying she overdosed and passed out. No one found her until the hotel maid entered the suite to clean.”

“That’s what they’re saying.” The anger was clear in his voice. It was useless to explain that there was nothing he could do to correct the stories. Frustration gnawed at his insides at the reminder of the lies spread about LaTreace. “I knew her. LaTreace would never have done that. She hated drugs. Even prescribed medications. She was a huge supporter of antidrug campaigns wherever she went.”

“I saw the articles about Charlene.”

Mike groaned. “Please tell me you didn’t believe any of that claptrap?”

“No, but Mattie and Tuma were both very vocal about how often the two of you were seen together.”

“She was already skating on the edge when I arrived. The minute she heard about LaTreace, it was a media circus.”

Lyssa pushed against his shoulder, urging him to shift so she could reach his back. “It was that bad?” He was sure she felt the tension radiating from his body, but her gentle hands smoothed over his back.

“I spent most of the time trying to keep her sober and away from the reporters.” Shaking his head, he braced his clenched fists against the tiled walls. “It’s such a fucking waste. It didn’t need to happen.”

“There’s no rhyme or reason for things, Mike.” She stroked the shower puff across his shoulders and down his spine. His body had no problem responding to her touch. In the weeks he’d been gone, being with Lyssa was at the top of things he’d missed.

He muttered, "I should never have recommended LaTreace."

"Recommended her?" The drift of the sponge halted at his lower back. "I thought she was in Europe as a representative with that guy—"

"Nigel Hargreaves," Mike supplied.

"Was that what you were talking about with that Trent person?" She moved closer and eased the cloth around to his stomach. He slid his hand over hers, halting the stroke of her hand as it neared the stiff cock rising between his legs.

"When did you hear—" Mike answered his own question as he recalled the night Trent had rung him. "You were awake?"

Her head moved up and down against his shoulder. "Yes."

"Why didn't you ask me about it?" Keeping hold of her hand, he eased the

puff from her hold and tossed it toward a corner of the shower. Turning to face her, he stepped beneath the spray and rinsed the soap off before tugging her forward to remove the few bubbles that had transferred themselves from his back to her breasts. One-handed, he twisted the knobs, shutting off the flow of water, and then opened the shower door. "Why..."

"I thought if you wanted me to know, you'd tell me." She blinked at the water that had splashed onto her face. "And part of me didn't. Especially if calls from him would mean you'd be leaving."

Stepping out of the shower, he pulled a towel from the rack and took his time carefully blotting the droplets of moisture from her skin. He allowed his hands to linger at her chin, neck, and breasts. When she tried to stop him, to use another towel on him, he shook his head. "No, I'm the master. It's my job to care for you." Lyssa held her breath as he

crouched on one knee in front of her. “I can’t tell you about Trent. Or LaTreace.” He watched her face for reaction. “Not yet at least.”

The smile on her lips was understanding. “That’s okay. When the time comes, I’ll be here.” Her hands rose to cup his cheeks, and her gaze held his. “I trust you.”

He smoothed the soft cotton over her stomach and down her legs before letting it drop to the tiled floor. Mike cupped her hips in his hands, pulling her close, while his lips whispered across the colorful tattoo decorating her lower abdomen. “You’re okay? I didn’t mean to be away so long, but—”

“Barely three weeks, Mike. And you left two excellent babysitters.”

Mike grinned up at her. “I figured you could handle Ben and Vance hovering over you.”

Lyssa stuck her tongue out at him, then chided, "I'd rather have handled you."

"I would have preferred that too." He turned his lips into the soft well of her palm after she smoothed his wet hair.

"Hand me the towel," she ordered, holding her hand out to him.

Eyes closed, lips intent on exploring the delicate, rounded flesh beneath her navel, Mike held the towel up to her.

"I was worried." Mike rubbed his stubbled cheek against her pale skin.

"Baby's fine," she assured him as she carefully dried his hair and combed through the dark curls with her fingertips.

"And mama?"

"Mama's fine too." The towel settled around his shoulders, and she rubbed both hands over his head to the nape of his neck. "Are you ready to talk?"

He didn't have to ask what about. Much as he wished to avoid reminders of what had driven him out of the house weeks ago, Mike rose and wrapped the towel around his waist. Lyssa led him out of the bathroom. From the back of the chair, he picked up her robe and held it while she slipped it on.

He didn't dance around the subject. Instead he went directly to the heart of his pain, needing to know the answer before he could decide where the relationship with his woman stood. "When I came here four years ago and asked you if you were pregnant, why did you lie?"

She avoided looking at him. "I was afraid."

"Of me?" He resisted the urge to touch her. Much as he craved the feel of her in his arms, the soft slide of her hair between his fingers, Mike knew they needed to clear the air before they could move forward.

Lyssa turned and looked up at him. She shook her head. "No, not of you."

"Then who?"

"Me." She took a seat on the bed, then patted the spot beside her. Mike sat. "I was afraid of what I'd become if I told you I was pregnant."

His confusion must have been evident on his face. There was no need for him to voice the questions spinning around in his head.

"If you knew I was pregnant, you would have demanded we get married."

"You're right; I would have. And we are."

"And it would have been wrong." Her fingers covered his lips before he could protest. "It's my fault my dad killed my mom."

"No, Lyssa—"

"Yes. It is." She cut him off and kept going. "I'm the reason they got married in

the first place. If my mom hadn't gotten pregnant with me, they would have broken up the first time he hit her." Her fingers dropped from his lips to twist together in her lap. "There were so many fights, Mike. I always remembered the yelling and screaming. It didn't take long for me to figure out what my dad meant when he said he blamed me for ruining his life. For destroying his chance for a college degree and the good life."

"Lyssa, you know better than that." Mike could hear how much she believed her words to be true.

She nodded. "A part of me recognizes that my parents made their choices and I'm not to blame. As a grown-up, I know it wasn't really my fault, Mike. I know he could have walked away at any time. There was no reason for him to go to the extreme he did, but in the split second after you asked me four years ago if I was pregnant, it was all there again. All the

anger and bitterness.” She lifted her hand as if she wanted to touch him, but pulled away before making contact. “You were just beginning to peak at your career four years ago, Mike. Marriage and a baby would have ended that.”

“So you lied to protect me?” Mike sighed and looked away from her.

“No, Mike, I lied to protect me. To save me from having to live with knowing how much of your life I ruined, how much you’d grow to resent me or possibly our baby because I couldn’t say no.” She actually gave a quiet little laugh. “I couldn’t have said no had you asked me to marry you, and I definitely couldn’t say no to you in the closet. I would have married you even though I was sure you’d been with another woman after you left me.”

“The phone call Tuma answered?”

“Yes.”

It was a lot to absorb, but he moved on to what bothered him most. “A baby—A secret like that isn’t one you keep from a man, Lys.” Mike waited as she adjusted the pillows beside her. “I should have heard it from you long before the visit to your doctor.”

“I was going to tell on our first date.”

“The one—” Anger at his own failure rolled through him, but Lyssa interrupted.

“Don’t blame yourself, Mike. I’ve had weeks to think it over. Years, really. If I’d had more faith in myself, I would have told you. Or left a message with Tuma for you to call me instead of simply hanging up.”

He watched Lyssa swallow heavily as if trying to keep the tears shimmering in her eyes at bay. She was right. Nothing could change the past or bring their baby back. “I called Ben to check on you. After he chewed me out for leaving, he told me

everything that happened.”

“I was going to. So many times I would start to say something, then lose the nerve.”

He smoothed the pale hair from around her face. “It was my baby too. I had a right to know.”

“I-I know,” she stammered, her voice croaky with tears. “I just couldn’t figure out how to tell you I was pregnant. I mean, I didn’t think there was supposed to be any other meaning to the hours we shared. Then when I finally worked up the nerve, was willing to face whatever you’d ask of me, it was over. There was nothing I could do.”

“I would have been there for you, Lys. I would have grieved right alongside you.” Mike gripped her hand, lifting it to press a kiss to her knuckles. It wasn’t anger that weighed him down. That was gone. What made it hard for him to breathe, to face her, was the

disappointment he felt with himself. That at a time when she'd needed him most, he hadn't been there. To him, that was unforgivable. "I love you. I've told you again and again I love you. And you wouldn't believe me."

"How could you be sure?" Lyssa responded, her uncertainty no longer keen. "How could *I* be sure that you wouldn't decide one day that I wasn't worth it?"

"Worth what?"

"Worth loving anymore." Lyssa hugged her arms around her waist. "When I'm fifty, you'll still be in your forties. You'll still be young and healthy."

"So will you, Lys."

She shook her head. "No, Mike, I'll be old. You take pictures of women every day. Young, beautiful women. How can I compete with that?"

"What's to compete with? I love you.

It hasn't changed in four years. Hell, it hasn't changed since the first day I met you. But you don't trust me."

"I trust you. And I love you very much."

Bright blue eyes looked over at him. Need coupled with a wariness he'd dealt with before shimmered in her gaze, along with something else. A glimmer behind the tears sent his heart thumping in his chest.

"God, baby, don't say it unless you mean it. Not now."

In that moment, she realized the power he'd placed in her hands weeks ago when he had claimed her. "Forever, Mike." Lyssa swallowed against the tears choking her. It grew harder to hold them back as the tension eased from his features. "Marry me, Mr. Halsey, and I'm yours."

“Will you pose for me?”

Lyssa couldn't help rolling her eyes. “You are a pervert.”

“Pose naked for me, and I'm your pervert alone.”

“Hmmm,” Lyssa hummed as his hands unwrapped her from her robe. It and the towel around his waist hit the carpet at the same time. “Sounds kinky.”

He settled her back on the bed and braced himself on his elbows. Her breasts brushed the light dusting of curls on his chest while his hips settled between her thighs. “I haven't even begun, babe.”

“I'll let you take all the pictures you like as long as you promise to come home any time you have to leave.” Lyssa could feel the heat fill her cheeks as moisture pooled between her thighs.

“I won't have to go away very often, babe,” he vowed. Mike lowered his lips to hers. Between their bodies, he eased her

hands from his hips and moved them so they rested above her head. One hand manacled her wrists, while the other drifted to the smooth mound at the apex of her thighs. "And I'll certainly be back if you promise to have this waiting for me when I return."

Lyssa moved against the fingers stroking the folds guarding her entrance. A mischievous grin lifted her lips. "Do you know what they call you at the Club?"

"No."

She laughed at the disinterested look on his face. "I think it's rather interesting."

Mike rolled his eyes and captured her lips in a wet, heated kiss. Her mind went blank for the longest moment as their tongues tangled and danced inside her mouth and the thick, hot length of his cock rubbed against her hip. "Is it important?" he asked when he finally released her and eased his hold on her

hands.

Lyssa shifted her arm so she could reach between their bodies and caress his erection. She traced the colorful barb and detailed scales decorating his skin with trembling fingertips. "I think so."

Mike lowered his mouth to her breasts, tracing the thin blue lines that looked so prominent against her pale skin. Even her nipples had darkened in the time he'd been away. Lyssa was sure he noticed. The man had an eye for details.

"So tell me quick so I can get back to showing you how much I've missed being away."

"Dragon."

His head came up, and he gazed down at her. "What? We aren't playing. You want me to stop?"

"No, don't stop. At the Club, they call you the Dragon," Lyssa informed him

with a wicked grin and a wink.

Mike laughed. Between her legs, he eased her hand from his erection and shifted the broad tip to the moist entrance of her body. "You realize what that makes you?"

Lyssa arched upward, moaning at the slow glide of his body into hers. "No, my love, I don't." Vibrations rippled through Mike's body at her words. Lyssa met his gaze, surprised at the gleam of moisture in the brown depths. "I love you, Mike. I'll keep saying it until you get tired of hearing it," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his chest, holding him close to her.

Another shudder went through him. "God, woman, I'll never get tired of hearing that."

She flexed internal muscles and lifted her legs to circle his hips. "So what does that make me, if you're the Dragon?"

Mike wagged his eyebrows and smirked. "My lair."

Lyssa chuckled. "Oh, and what brought you to that conclusion?"

"This is home." His body retreated from hers, then returned in a firm thrust. "Every dragon needs his lair." Mike dipped his head and nibbled at the exposed tendon on the side of her throat. "And you're mine."

Lyssa moaned at the flex and stroke of his body within hers. She shifted against him, enjoying the rub of his lightly furred chest over the increasingly sensitive tips of her breasts. "I'm sensing there's more to this lair business than a warm, snug place for a dragon to rest his head."

Mike snorted and choked at the sexy pun. "Oh yes, there is." He rose over her, propped his weight on his elbows, and held her head between his hands. "We dragons take our lairs very seriously." He

moved deep, retreated, and then returned. "They have to fit us like a glove." He slid inside, a hum of appreciation escaping his lips at the contraction of her inner muscles around him. "Just like you do."

His gaze enthralled her, and the emotions she could see in his expression and hear in his voice moved her. She'd always known Mike had an artist's talent, but she'd never suspected he had a poet's soul. No words came to mind, so she simply waited for him to continue. The slow rise of climax created a mellow glow in her center. Now was not the time for fiery passion. That would come later.

Mike seemed of the same mind as his body stilled and he watched her. "They are our havens and sanctuaries where we store our greatest treasures." One hand moved from her cheek to press against her belly, where their baby rested. "And we'll fight to the death to protect them.

Whether they like it or not.”

Tears welled in Lyssa’s eyes before slipping free. “I think I’m going to love being your lair, my dragon.”

“Not as much as I’ll love coming home to you for the rest of our lives, Lyssa.” His lips settled over hers.

She pulled back and grinned up at him. “Even when I’m old and gray and you’re still a kid?”

Mike wrapped his arms around her and rolled so she rested over him. “Especially then, love.”

“Why?”

“Because we dragons know that the older the lair, the more treasure there is to find inside.”

Lyssa laughed, rocking her hips over him. Leaning down, she pressed her lips to his and savored his homecoming. And maybe later they could play Catch the Dragon. Her bottom tingled at the

thought.

THE END

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Qwillia Rain

Qwillia Rain grew up loving books. From an early age she was creating stories to go with the pictures. By high school she was penning romances for her friends and shocking them with the graphic nature of the love scenes. After leaving her home in Las Vegas, Nevada for Anchorage, Alaska, Qwillia discovered there were other authors who enjoyed throwing open the bedroom doors and exploring the darker side of human nature. She left Alaska for Billings, Montana, but the travel bug struck again. Currently, Qwillia resides in Raleigh, North Carolina, drawing inspiration from the history, scenery, and rich diversity of

the South.