



TUCKER

IT'S STRICTLY A BUSINESS DEAL...RIGHT?

KATIEDOWE

Tucker

It's strictly a business deal....right?

A sexy marriage of convenience romance by Katie Dowe
of BWWM Club.

Tucker Davis has lived a hard life with a tragic past.
And even though he is extremely wealthy, he cares little
for wealth and its trappings.

But his father is pressuring him to marry and provide an
heir to the multi-billion fortune, so he decides to take
matters into his own hands and choose his own woman
to marry...

Meredith is nearly broke and drowning in debt and she
needed a way out and fast.

Her break comes when former actor and recklessly
handsome playboy Tucker Davis makes a proposition to
her:

Marry him and he will solve all her money problems!
What neither of them expected was to fall for each other
once they became husband and wife...

But Tucker does not believe in love, and Meredith is
holding a secret that will change both of their lives
forever...

Will the couple find a way to make their relationship
work?

Or were they always destined to be apart?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Katie
Dowe of **BWWM Club**.

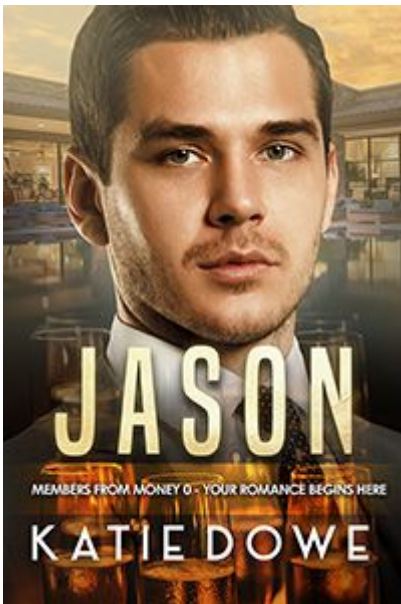
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scenes!

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Chapter 1

Both men glared at each other across the length of the table, neither of them willing to back down. Mariel fidgeted with the utensils and held her breath as she gazed from one to the other.

She knew her brother and knew from personal experience that the ominous expression on his handsome face did not bode well. The argument had started as soon as they sat down to dinner and has been going on for the past two years.

“If we could have a peaceful dinner?”

“I am not some damned puppet,” Tucker picked up his wineglass and yearned for something much stronger. He should not have agreed to come to dinner but had allowed his sister to persuade him.

“Darling, he was chomping at the bit and he specifically said you cannot avoid him any longer. I have never seen

him this determined, Tuck.”

Now he was here and was faced with an ultimatum that had backed him into a corner.

“You have a month,” Theodore Davis told him with freezing calm, “Lola Cameron is a suitable candidate. She is from a very good family and is quite lovely.”

“You just want me to marry someone you have picked out for me? Just like that? With no thought as to my feelings?”

“I have given you countless times to do the right thing!” The elder Davis thundered – green eyes flashing fire. “I have turned a blind eye to your shenanigans – the scandal surrounding your name, the drugs, the women
....”

“You dare to speak to me about women?” Tucker asked him scornfully, his hands trembling slightly. “Mother was not yet cold in her grave when you started seeing some bitch, a little bit older than I am.”

“Watch your tongue, boy!”

“I am not a boy. I am a man and I refuse to have you dictate to me. If I don't so this, what? You are going to take away my inheritance?” He jeered.

He watched as the man leaned back in the chair and picked up his wineglass. “Leave us!” He jerked his head at the maid hovering inside the doorway and sent the woman scurrying.

“You too, my dear. This is between your brother and me.”

“I don't think”

“Go on Mar. The old man is right. It's between us.”

They both waited until she had left the room before resuming the heated argument.

“I will not be defied,” his father warned him as he watched him shove back his chair and marched over to the liquor cabinet to splash some whiskey into a glass.

“I don’t care about the money,” Tucker reminded him as he turned around, the glass in his hand.

“But you care about your sister.”

Tucker’s eyes narrowed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Mariel and her husband are involved in the business. I am a producer and one of the best there is. They are comfortably ensconced in the running of the company, but that can change any time.”

Tucker sent him an incredulous look. “You are bluffing.”

“Am I?”

“You would go so far to ensure that I come to heel?”

“Precisely!” Theodore Davis gave him a mocking smile. “I have been after you to settle down over the past two years and the only interest you have shown is with that heavysset wife of Colin Nembhard. It makes me sick to see you panting after a woman who belongs to someone else.”

“Say something else about her and you will see how soon I forget that you are supposed to be my old man.”

“See?” Theodore pushed back his chair and walked over to pour himself some of the whiskey. “You jump to her defense every time.”

“She is my damned friend.”

“A married woman who has that amount of hold on you,” Theodore pointed out cynically, “no wonder people are saying you are sleeping with her.”

Tucker’s eyes glittered and it took all of his control not to fling the rest of the liquor in the old man’s face.

But he was right. As despicable as it sounded and how sordid the hints that had been dropped, his friendship with Heather Nembhard had come into question several times. He loved her and at first, it had been a romantic one, but over time it had become something that was far deeper than anything he had felt for anyone.

Their friendship saved him from the misery he had experienced since his mother had committed suicide. He was there for her and her children and was actually the children’s godparent. And it sickened him to realize that people were speculating on their relationship.

“You have to admit that you do go around her often.”

He shook his head and tried to focus on his father's words. "She is my friend and the children"

"You need a family of your own. If you care about this woman, the way you say you do, then get your own damn woman and family. I have invited Lola to dinner"

"You are going to uninvite her," Tucker told him tightly.

"Now see here"

"I do this my own way. I pick the woman and that is the only way I agree to this."

"What if she is unsuitable?"

Tucker's eyebrows rose mockingly. "You mean if she is an African-American?"

His father's eyes flared. "I am not prejudiced."

"That's not what the papers are saying. You see, father, I am not the only one who has been in the papers. The reports are hinting that there is a track record when it comes to choosing your leading ladies."

"I chose them on their talent and nothing else."

"Tell yourself that," Tucker's expression hardened as he tossed back his drink, "I will choose the woman to whom I am going to get hitched and that is not negotiable. I will do this – this thing you want me to do, but it will be on my own terms and with someone, I can stomach."

"You look done in."

Meredith scarcely managed not to roll her dark brown eyes as she wrapped her thick dark brown hair into an untidy chignon before rolling up her yoga mat.

“I know what will do the trick and give you some pep in your step.”

“No thanks. I thought everyone had already left for the day,” shoving her yoga mat into her oversized pocketbook, she realized that she was going to have to dispense with the shower she was going to take.

“I saw you heading down here to the work gym and figured I could wait around to find out if you would like to go on a date with me?” Glen March, gave her a leering look, his watery blue eyes wandering over the curves shown to advantage in the rose-pink joggers and cropped top she had donned for the workout.

“I already warned you about sexual harassment and you are still doing it. Please get out of my way.”

“I was just saying to George that you have a definite talent to sell properties but it’s a shame nothing is going your way.” He started to reach out a hand, snatching it back when he was met with the fire in her eyes. “I am simply making a suggestion....”

“That if I want to get ahead, all I have to do is to lower my very lofty standards and sleep with you?” She asked him sweetly. Taking her water bottle out, she uncapped it and took a healthy swig. “I would rather crawl into a hole and die. Now get the hell out of my way, before I do some damage to that area, you think is such a prize.”

A bitter look came and went on the man’s pasty face and he pulled himself up to his full four feet nine inches of height, his lips pursed.

“You are such a bitch.”

“And really proud of it. Now move.”

He glared at her for a few minutes before stepping aside to let her pass. "You are not supposed to use the gym after hours."

She glanced at her watch. "It's barely six. And you are just bitching because I will not allow you to get into my panties."

As if, man, – I am way out of your league." With that parting shot, she hurried out of the room and made her way to the parking lot. She had promised her best friend Jasmine to stop by their favorite bar for a drink, but she was sweaty and not in the mood to socialize.

She had a problem - pressing the key fob, she opened the door and slid in and pressed the start button. She just needed to get the hell out of the parking lot before douche bag Glen came out. She had pissed him off and it was not the first time and certainly would not be the last.

She worked with a group of men and a couple of women who were like vipers and snakes ready to strike whenever the opportunity strikes. Jasmine had told her that the women were jealous because of her looks and the men wanted to get into her panties.

“Maybe you should screw one and get it over and done with. What about that Daniel fellow?”

“He is married and even if he was not, I would rather slit my wrists than have him on top of me.”

“It’s just sex, honey.” Her friend had said with a grin.

“Not to me.”

Her place was not far from the workplace and in ten minutes she was driving into the apartment building and parking in her slot. Taking out her pocketbook as well as the carton of milk she had picked up at the corner store, she hurried to get out of the drops of rain which had started to come down.

Kicking off her shoes just inside the doorway, she made her way into the tiny kitchen to put away the milk. She

was going to have to find a way out of her situation. Her commission was only stretching so far and no more.

She was drowning in credit card debts and could barely afford to keep herself afloat. Prime Real Estate Agency was an all-boys club and she should have left a long time ago, but kept thinking that she was going to make her big score so that she could land on her own two feet.

It was not happening. There were two other women working in the office besides her and one – a definite bleached blonde by the name of Elena was obviously sleeping her way to the top and was getting the best listings.

The other, a mousy type who handled the calls at the front desk had been recruited by the bitch Elena and was now her lapdog.

Plunking the kettle onto the stove top, she turned on the flames and took the pins out of her hair, letting it slide easily down past her shoulders. Her brother had offered to help her, but he had his own problems.

He meant well, but Jerome was barely eking out a living at that mechanic shop and the idiot had pissed off his child's mother and had stopped giving her child support for their daughter. Now his salary was docked and he was crashing upstairs at the mechanic shop.

Getting off the couch, she opened the fridge to survey the dismal quantity. She was not very domesticated and was not one to be eager to prepare a meal, but right now she would do with something home cooked. And she had skipped out on lunch when she had rushed to show a client a house which had turned out to be a dead end.

"Chicken breasts," she murmured aloud, "and maybe some sweet potato. What the hell? Might as well add on the carbs while I am at it." Taking the parcel of chicken out, she set to work slicing it up.

* * * * *

"You are going to give yourself a coronary," Heather told the man loping at the side of the pool mildly as she put

her daughter back into her mobile. "Will you please sit?"

"How can you be so damned calm?" He growled, coming to a stop in front of the cot, his expression softening as he gazed down at the three-month-old baby. "There have been whispers about us"

"And Colin is not the least bit perturbed. Neither am I."

"The old man is a bastard at times, but he is right," Tucker dragged restless fingers through his untidy blonde curls, "I am going to have to find myself a damned wife."

"Do you have anyone in mind?"

"No. But I told him that it is going to be on my terms," his blue eyes wandered over her face and a smile touched his lips, "someone like you, perhaps."

“There is no one like me,” she told him loftily, pausing as the nanny came to take the baby away, “she is fed and ready for a nap. Thank you.”

“You are right,” he sat down next to her and could not resist putting his arm around her shoulder, “are you certain you won’t divorce Nembhard and run away with me?”

“Think of the scandal,” she leaned against his shoulder, a smile on her lips, “we would have to take the children.”

“Naturally,” he agreed, running a hand up and down her arm.

“And Colin would come after us.”

“I can take him and there is this Island in the Maldives
....”

“I am familiar with it and happen to have a private jet. Should I be worried that you are here again?” Colin’s deep voice interrupted their musings.

Tucker threw him an irrepressible grin and kept his arm firmly around Heather’s shoulders. “I thought that was you making your way from the garage. would you be so kind as to give up your wife and children?”

“You would have to kill me first,” hunkering down, in front of her, he took her hands in his. “Hi, darling.”

“Hi, yourself. Tucker is seeking a wife.”

“He cannot have mine,” he got to his feet lithely and pulled her in for a kiss, “I suppose you will be staying for supper?”

“And dessert. Camden and I have a date with some video games.”

“Not the violent ones you brought over the other day,”
Colin warned.

“These are quite innocent and placid.”

“Placid my ass,” Colin snorted as he twined his fingers
through his wife’s, “let’s go on in, shall we?”

“We are quite a pair, aren’t we?” Meredith passed the
plate of food to Jerome and sat down across from him at
the dining table. She had no sooner started cooking the
meal when he had called and said he wanted to come
over. “Where did we go wrong?” She wondered aloud as
she swirled her fork around the strip of chicken.

“Dad’s illness left us in a world of debt.” Jerome reached
for the can of beer and took a healthy swig.

“It did and I don’t regret borrowing money to pay for his care,” she sighed heavily, “I wish he was still alive.”

Jerome shook his head at that. “He was suffering too much. Even though he would never say it, there were times when he could not hide the pain he was feeling.”

“He was a brave soul.”

“Who did right by us when mom died when we were so young! It could not have been easy on him.”

“It was not,” she eyed him curiously, “are you okay Jer? You could always come and crash with me.”

“In your one-bedroom apartment?” He shook his head. “I have to learn to stand on my own two feet Mer. And the place where I am, is not that bad. It is clean and I do not have to pay rent. It’s good enough for now. Until I am back on my feet. How are things at your place?”

Getting up, she went to grab the bottle of cheap wine she had bought at the liquor store and brought it back to the table. “The men there are still assholes, but I am coping.”

“Sis, you are way too talented to be stuck at that place. Why don’t you find another job?”

“I am not leaving until I get what is due to me. I am stubborn like that. And I certainly refuse to allow some lecherous assholes to drive me away. Besides, you know I have that loan to pay off - the one I borrowed from the company when dad took sick again that last time.”

“Which was a waste of money,” Jerome said bitterly, “he died shortly after.”

“We could not have known that.” With a bright smile on her lips, she lifted her glass in a toast. “But I refuse to give up. There is a patch of a rainbow just around the corner. Things are going to start happening for us, you’ll see.”

Lifting his beer bottle and getting into the spirit, he grinned at her. "Very soon, we will be sipping expensive champagne and looking back at this pathetic time of our lives and shaking out heads in wonder."

"I will be wearing Romano's originals and people will be staring at me in amazement and saying - is that Meredith Livermore? Where did she get her good fortune from?"

"And I will be driving a brand-new Porsche or a Lamborghini instead of working on one," he tossed back his beer and settled back against the chair, "it's a wonderful dream."

"Isn't it?" She agreed. "Nothing is wrong with dreaming. It does not cost anything."

"It's just that when it is a pipe dream and impossible to attain - we are back to reality."

"One day, honey," she promised solemnly.

Later that night, after she had persuaded her brother to crash on her couch, Meredith could not fall asleep. She had taken a shower and brought the rest of the wine with her into the bedroom. She had always been positive and upbeat but the past year or so had managed to put a damper on things.

They had lost their house when their dad had been diagnosed with prostate cancer and they had decided to fight the disease. He had been placed in a hospice where he would be able to get the care he needed.

But that had not worked out much. The more they fought the more he started to decline. He had told them not to bother spending any more money on him - had told them to let him go, but they had persisted until they were facing an enormous amount of medical expenses, that had left them drowning.

Sitting there in the darkness with just the light from the moon filtering through the curtains, she allowed the memories to wash over her. She was worried, but she did not want to add to her brother's problems. He looked beaten down enough without her adding to it.

And he looked thin like he was barely eating. He was two years younger than her own twenty-eight years and looked a lot older. And she wanted to save him and herself.

She loved selling properties and when she received her license, she had been so positive. A friend of hers had introduced her to the idea and she had been interested from the get-go.

"Trust me, Meredith, with your looks and your winning smile, you will be making a lot of commission by the end of the year." But that had not happened. She had left her job as administrative assistant to a jerk who thought he could lay her out on his desk and have sex with her whenever he felt like it and never looked back.

But the real estate business was not going well and each time she showed up to do her thing, it was always the same. She would get excited at the prospect of selling the house, only to be told that the price was too high or that particular property was not what they were looking for.

Not to mention the several men who had thought that showing the houses meant that copping a feel was thrown into the mix. She had kneed a particularly handsy client in the balls and he had run complaining to her bosses. She had received a fine dressing down and warned that such behavior would not be tolerated.

She was sick of it - sick of fighting for a few dollars and never managing to make two ends meet. She had received offers from so-called gentlemen who told her that they wanted to make her financial woes disappear. but the price she would have to pay was too hefty.

Besides, it was not her thing to get involved with married men. Downing the wine, she decided against drinking any more. As much as she was not looking forward to it, she had work tomorrow and it might just be the break she was looking for.

Chapter 2

The first thing he knew he had to do was to get somewhere livable. His apartment was a dump and that had been a deliberate act on his part to piss the old man off. The place was a little shabby but had grown on him since he had been back the last two years.

But it had to go - he was going to be seeking a wife - he grimaced at the prospect of that and deliberately turned his attention to the place he had called home since he had been back. The furniture had been picked up at some local furniture stores - so he was going to have to leave everything.

A headache was brewing and with an impatient sound beneath his breath, he strode into the kitchen, which he had never used, to make himself some coffee. He did not have a job - well not really. He had been an actor since he was a child and was quite good at it. But his mother's suicide changed things for him.

He poured the whiskey into the glass and figured that coffee would be a better option. He was a cliché and was aware of it. A child actor unable to handle fame and notoriety, but that was not it. The fame had come naturally because he was the son of a famous producer and a well-known actress.

The press had gone wild when he had followed in their footsteps. Mariel had tried acting a few times, but clearly did not have the talent and their father had bluntly told her to try something else.

They had gone to college - that had not been negotiable and Tucker had enjoyed the normalcy of hanging with 'regular' people. He had also picked up some friends along the way, ones who liked him for himself.

A kidnapping episode had forced the old man to put a security detail on him for a few years and several fan letters - not so very friendly had found their way to his mail. Then everything had come crashing down when he was fifteen. His heart stuttered and picked up the pace as he went to put the coffee pot on.

One of the very high-priced therapists had told him that he was suppressing his memories and he had caustically told the man that he deserved every penny he was being paid. Grabbing the cup from the cupboard, he stood by the counter to watch as the Keurig started to do its thing.

Monica Davis had been one of those classical beauties - wheat blonde hair and dark blue eyes which had graced too many covers to count. The magazines had called her a modern-day Marilyn Munroe and the cameras had loved her.

She had a grace and beauty that was classical and seemed to have everything going for her. Not only was she beautiful, but she could act as well and create magic on both the big screen and the small one. But her favorite was the Broadway and off-Broadway shows.

“I love interacting with the audience darling,” she had told him one night when he had asked her about it, “there is nothing as powerful as that.”

She had been vivacious. Whenever she stepped into a room, all eyes would be on her. But to Tucker and

Mariel, she had simply been 'mom'. And she had been a good one whenever the depression was not overcoming her.

It had been kept out of the press for as long as they could manage it. Staff members had been asked to sign an NDA as soon as they were employed and the therapist had been paid exorbitant amounts of money to treat her at home.

The situation had gotten worse over the years and within the last year of her life, she had stayed away from the public to become a recluse who would not come out of her bedroom. In a short period of time, the stunning vivacious beauty had become a shadow who refused to get out of bed.

Tucker had heard the constant arguments between his parents and had seen how his dad would disappear right after dinner and would be gone the entire night. The press had speculated about his many and varied affairs, but Tucker had known for a fact that he was cheating on his wife and had left her in her time of need.

He and his sister had tried to be there for her, Tucker would read stories to her and sometimes when she was in moments of clarity, they would watch some of her movies together. And she would tell him in that cultured and melodious voice of hers

“Choose someone who is not from this occupation darling. This world that we are part of will not make you happy. People thought I had it all - the handsome husband, the wonderful career, but all I wanted was to be a wife and mother. It’s not worth it.”

A couple of weeks later, she was discovered by one of the maids in her bed. She had swallowed an entire bottle of pills and left a note saying that she needed to rest and this was the only way she could think of to do so.

She had apologized to him and Mariel and told them that she would always love them, but Tucker had never forgiven her for choosing the easy way out and leaving them to deal with the backlash of her suicide.

He had quietly unraveled then and had decided to go off to boarding school, just to get out of the house. After

boarding school, he had gone off to college where he had done it all so that he would be able to forget. And he had stopped acting because it had been her thing and he wanted no reminders of her.

With his unlimited resources, he had traveled the world, trying to forget that he was Tucker Davis, going to places where he would not be recognized and it had worked to a point. He had come back in support of his sister, determined to stay away from the old man. But now he could no longer run away from who he was.

Now it was time to put on some form of respectability and face the fact that he was indeed Tucker Matthew Davis who was going to have to find a wife who would agree to his unusual terms.

Meredith found herself humming. She had woken up this morning with a slight headache and ignoring that, she had gone into the kitchen to prepare breakfast for herself and her brother and offered some words of encouragement in the process. The pep talk had revved

her as well and she had arrived at the office with hope in her heart.

She was going to sell a property today and things would turn away and she was going to make certain of it. She just needed an edge and she knew exactly what she had to do. It would involve doing something underhanded, but the time was now.

She had come in extra early to do some adjustments. Making certain she was not being observed, she switched the extensions and set about preparing the coffee – something she never usually did, but she was on a mission.

This morning after throwing herself one hell of a pity party, she had awoken with zeal and determination-determined to set things right. It was up to her to rescue herself and her brother and she could not afford to give up.

“You are here early,” she was pouring some coffee into her go cup when the sound of the CEO, George Patterson was heard behind her. Forcing herself not to

react, she turned to give him a pleasant smile, inwardly grimacing at the tight red jacket he was wearing over a wrinkled blue shirt.

His thinning light brown hair was combed back over a balding patch in the middle and he fancied himself quite the ladies' man – something she was not able to fathom.

“I wanted to get an early start.”

“Pour me one of those, will you? And take it into my office.”

“I will pour the coffee and even walk the few feet to hand you the cup, but that's as far as my generosity goes.”

His light green eyes blazed as he stared at her. “You are not so indispensable that you cannot be fired for insubordination.”

“I would love to take this place to court – so why don’t you go ahead and try?”

He glared at her before turning on his heels and walking away. “No coffee then?” She called out sweetly, grinning as the door slammed shut in his office. Taking her coffee cup, she went over to her cubicle. She hated even the term – a space that was designed to keep people tethered and give no allowances for dreams to expand.

She wanted an office - a rather large one with a view of harbor downtown and a desk – a proper desk and a comfortable sofa where she could take her coffee and view the view while doing paperwork. And an assistant so that she did not have to do any damn paperwork at all.

Shaking her head at the dream which was starting to come along more frequently, she dragged her folder towards her and leafed through it.

There was a list of prime properties in a particular section of town that was newly renovated and if she

could get a couple of sales in that area, she would be on her way. She had hope and was going to work on that.

Tucker saw her when he was leafing through the real estate agencies located in the area. He had told Heather that he had a type in mind.

“You are well and truly taken,” he had told her with a wry smile, “and no amount of persuasion is making you change your mind.”

He was definitely going to choose someone his father was going to frown on. And he had selected the perfect candidate. Meredith Livermore. Twenty-eight years old and she had a certain beauty that caught the eye.

Glancing at his watch, he hesitated before reaching for his phone. It had stated in the information they were responsible for showing the houses on Lafayette Boulevard, an up-and-coming neighborhood that Colin

Nembhard's company had built. It would be a perfect opportunity to meet with her and find out what she needed.

"Ms. Livermore, please," he spoke as soon as the phone was answered. "Just tell her it is a potential client."

"Hey!"

"Hey! What's up?"

Meredith turned the left turn signal and waited at the light. "Remember the break I was telling you about?" She could not keep the excitement out of her voice.

"You won the lottery?" Her brother asked teasingly.

“Not quite,” adjusting her mirror, she examined her hair and makeup. Not that she was looking to score or anything like that, but she was determined to make a good first impression.

The lofts on Lafayette Boulevard were pricey for a reason. All that long stretches of land spaces as well as the posh interior and that view from the back balcony made it perfect for people who had money to spend.

“I am heading to Lafayette. Someone asked for me by name.”

“Your ship is finally coming in.”

“I really hope so. Okay, I will give you an update as soon as I am through with him.”

“it’s a guy.”

“Yep. I much prefer to deal with the males rather than the females. Anyway, honey, talk to you later.” She hung up and concentrated on her driving. She had relished seeing the look on Elena’s face when she heard that she was going to show a place in Lafayette.

“Are you sure the call is for you?” The woman had asked sulkily.

“Is my name, Meredith Livermore? I think it is – the last time I checked.”

“It’s probably someone playing a prank.”

“You would like that very much, wouldn’t you?” She had asked sarcastically before marching for the door.

But the woman had managed to put a dampener on her spirit. What if she was right and someone was playing a trick on her? Damn her spiteful nature! Taking a deep breath, she turned off the highway and drove along the newly paved roadway that led to the secluded area. It

was a breathtaking view, the lofts painted in individual colors.

And they were a mile or so apart with lavish lawns and towering trees – the leaves blowing gently in the fall breeze. There was a security house at the front of the cul-de-sac and she had to stop and show her identity and state her business.

“He is waiting for you in apartment six.” The man told her with a respectful doffing of his cap.

“Thank you.”

Meredith felt her heart hammering inside her chest as she drove nearer and saw that a vehicle was already parked at the entrance.

Parking a few feet behind it, she got out and smooth her hands down over her cranberry-colored jacket before making her way toward the building. She had been in the

area before and always admired the lovely landscape and the blaze of flowers dotting the area.

Pushing the door open, she stepped down into a sunken living room to see the man standing with his back to her and gazing out the window.

A slight gasp escaped her as soon he turned to face her – the unruly tangle of blonde hair unmistakable. He was Tucker Davis.

“Please don’t tell me you are a fan,” his deep masculine voice was cultured - deep blue eyes inscrutable.

“Not really. I see you have already made your choice.”

He shrugged and shoved his hands into the pockets of his faded denims. “I want to know what you think?” He shook his head as she reached for the folder with the details of the loft inside.

“No. I need your honest opinion Ms. Livermore. Shall we?” He jerked his head towards the stairs. “Downstairs or upstairs first?”

“Upstairs and we work our way back down.”

“Good plan. After you.”

They ascended the stairs in silence and he objectively admired the long and seductive sway of her hips and the way she was trailing her hand along the spiral staircase.

“We have the master bedroom suite right here.” Pushing the large redwood doors open, she stepped down into the powder blue carpet that swallowed her ankle-length boots.

“Oh crap! Look at all that glass and the view!” She rhapsodized- rushing towards the window to stare out at the balcony. “Do you fish?” She asked, turning her head to look at the man behind her.

“Not particularly.”

“There is a stream....“

“I prefer to eat my fish from a package,” he had come to stand next to her.

“We should go and look at the rest of the place”

“In time. There is something I would like to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” She turned away from the view to look at him. She had seen photos of him splashed across the papers when he came back in town, but she did not make it a habit to peruse celebrity news. She had too much on her plate to indulge in idle musings and speculations of the press where celebrities were concerned.

“This is going to sound like something out of a bad novel,” there was a hint of amusement in his voice as he leaned against the window pane.

“I am intrigued.”

“You have been at the real estate place for how many years?”

“Six!” She told him briefly, wondering what that has to do with anything. “I assure you that I am quite experienced”

“I am sure you are,” he gestured to the plush sofas that were placed at strategic points in the large room, “please....”

She hesitated slightly before going over to take a seat.

“I am in a bind and from what I have read about you, there are some issues you are facing as well.”

“I don’t understand. You looked into me?”

“I did!” He sat forward and dragged his fingers through his wind-tousled hair. “I need a wife.” He told her baldly, smiling grimly at the shocked look on her exquisite face.

She really was a beautiful woman, he thought with a touch of cynicism and under normal circumstances, he would be applying the charms and trying to get her into bed, but this was not a normal situation. It was business.

“I am sorry, I must not have heard you right.”

“You did. Look, I am sure you heard my story....”

“I do not read celebrity trash magazines,” she told him scornfully.

A smile touched his lips at her disdainful expression.

“May I ask why not?”

“Most of it is purely speculation and I really think people should be left alone to go through their crap.”

He chuckled at that. “Profoundly put.” His expression sobered. “You are in debt to the tune of several thousand dollars and I can make that disappear just like that.” He snapped his fingers and caused her to jump in a little in reaction.

“And in return?”

“I would like you to marry me. This is not a love match and you would have the freedom to do whatever you desire and I will do the same. We will be living in the same home of course to quiet some vicious speculations that involve someone I care about deeply.”

“A woman!”

“Yes. And to get my old man off my back. he has been at me to get married for the past two years now and I am afraid time is catching up on me.”

“You want us to get married?” Meredith could not quite wrap her head around the unusual request.

“A marriage of convenience.”

“And you are comfortable with that.”

He nodded. “I am pretty messed up here,” He touched his left temple briefly, “you said you do not read celebrity magazines, but our story made national headlines because of who we are. My mother committed suicide.

She had been battling depression for a number of years and suddenly decided to do something about it.” He

lunged to his feet and gave her a start as he strode towards the window with his back to her.

She waited for him to continue, still stunned that she had come here expecting to sell a property and was receiving an unusual marriage proposal instead. Not that she was going to accept of course. She could not – no matter how much the offer was tempting.

“I think I read something about it some years ago,” she told him quietly, “but that does not explain why you would want to marry a complete stranger. You know nothing about me.”

He turned to her then, his smile touching what was a very sensuous pair of lips that had her tingling. She had glimpsed pictures of him and vaguely recalled some scandal surrounding a billionaire’s real estate developer’s wife - the very same one who was responsible for these luxury lofts.

“I know you are twenty-eight and you sell houses.”

“Or try to,” she muttered.

“And you have a lot of debts.”

Her dark brown eyes narrowed as she stared at him. “I see you have done your homework.”

“I have. And you are single.”

“I am not desperate.”

“Are you not?” His eyebrows lifted as he stared at her.
“We would be doing each other a favor.”

“I have no intention of living with a perfect stranger.”

“I am sure you could see yourself living here. I noticed the way your eyes lit up when we came upstairs.”

“Still”

“You would have financial freedom, lots of it.”

“I am not materialistic,” she told him firmly but could feel herself wavering.

“Neither am I, but even though I tell myself that I do not want the blasted money, I enjoy the comforts it brings. I can go wherever I want and do whatever I want to do.”

“Speaking of which, what exactly do you do?”

He grinned at that. “Whatever the hell I want,” he shrugged. “I was an actor and a very good one if I do say so myself. But after the suicide, I lost my stomach for it. I traveled to remote areas and try to forget who I am and work odd jobs here and there.”

“So basically, you are what is called the idle rich.”

“Precisely,” he smiled at her look of surprise, “you expected me to deny it?”

“I expect that you would try and come up with some sort of plan with what you are going to be doing with your life.”

“I am interested in several children’s homes and I have a friend who happens to run a home geared towards people with mental issues.”

“You are thinking of becoming a humanitarian.”

“Why the hell not?”

Getting to her feet she wandered over to the opposite window to look out. the view was spectacular and a smile touched her lips wistfully as she noticed squirrels scampering up a rather large oak tree. It was peaceful

here and offered a feeling of serenity that she longed for.
But wasn't the price too high?

Chapter 3

“Are you happy at your job?” He asked her quietly after a few ponderous minutes of silence.

Meredith thought about lying and saying that she was super, but decided against it. “I work for some bigoted assholes who think that women are supposed to fetch coffee and sleep with them.”

“So, not happy then? Why don’t you just leave?”

She turned to look at him then, a bitter smile touching her lips. “You checked into me and know that I am indeed drowning in debt. I took out a loan from the company when my dad was going through his treatment and am years away from paying it off. So, in essence, I am stuck.”

“Would you like to own the place?”

Her heart hammered inside her chest as she stared at him. That was exactly what she wanted to do and he was tempting her greatly by putting all these sweet deals in front of her.

Living here in this wonderfully elegant loft with the spectacular view, the freedom to be financially independent and actually buying out the company from those assholes was the icing on the cake. But she would be giving up her freedom and surrendering her name to him. She would be his wife for how long?

“This arrangement...,” he had been watching her as she stood there in silence and could almost tell what she was thinking. Her lovely face was very expressive.

“Yes?”

“It will be an arrangement?”

“Yes.”

“We would be living together, but not really together.”

A smile touched his lips, amused by the way she termed it. “Precisely.”

“And you would be free to do whatever you want.”

“So would you,” he pointed out.

“Does that include having affairs?” She asked him bluntly.

His eyebrows lifted. “Is that what you intend to do?”

“I was talking about you,” she waved a hand at him. “You are Tucker Davis and as much as I do not keep up with celebrity news, I have eyes in my head and you are not

an ugly guy. Most women would find you attractive, I would imagine.”

He was completely taken aback by that. “But not you?”

“I know better,” she told him with a shrug.

“I see!” Turning his head, he looked out at the sunshine peeking through the leaves. Fall was his favorite time of the year and the lushness of the grounds - with the woods behind it was quite enchanting.

Nembhard had done very well with the place and the designs of the lofts, each done with individual specifications were going to be wildly successful, and worth the exorbitant asking price. “I am not interested in having an affair.”

“And why is that?”

He turned then to look at her and felt the pull of something. She had a flawless cocoa brown complexion mixed with light cream and there was a certain vulnerability about the large dark brown eyes and the rather sexy lips. Ms. Meredith Livermore was quite the package and for the first time in two years, he was not thinking about Heather.

He had fancied himself in love with her - despising the fact that he was yearning after another man's wife, but that had changed quickly to something more profound.

She was now like a sister to him and had managed to fill the awful void inside his chest. With her, he had become steady and had actually started to live again.

"I have no idea, " he told her honestly, "I have not been with anyone in a couple of years."

"This woman- is she the cause of it?"

His eyes twinkled in mirth. "You are going to have to say the two words in order to get me to confide in you that much."

"What two words?"

"I do."

She stared at him for a few minutes before turning to look out the window, giving him a chance to study her profile. Her nose was straight and her cheekbones were pronounced. He wondered idly why she never went into modeling - she would have done very well.

Or perhaps acting - no - he shook his head mentally. He would never have chosen that for her - it was a profession designed to eat people alive. It had done that to his mother - or was it a combination of things?

His father for one and the pressure of appearing perfect in the eyes of Joe public. It was a killer in one's personal life and he did not regret getting out. People had asked

him if he intended to start acting again, and he had given them some vague comments, careful to keep his decision to himself.

“I will have to think about it,” she offered quietly.

“It’s a big decision,” he agreed.

“How long are we supposed to stay married?”

“As long as we are comfortable with the arrangement,” he told her carelessly.

“Is it that easy for you?”

“What is?”

“Getting married to a complete stranger. Making that sort of commitment.”

“Not at all,” he acknowledged. “I love my own space and do not like answering to anyone. But like I said before, we would be living separate lives.”

“Will we be going out together in public?”

“Occasionally. The press is going to have a field about this and we are going to have to keep up appearances.”

“And pretend that we adore each other?”

He threw her a rakish grin. “Which celebrity couple does that?”

“You are right....” She pressed her palms against the cold glass- her mind spinning. The idea was appealing to her more and more. And in her mind’s eyes, she was seeing herself in the role. She could do this and certainly, it would benefit not only her but her brother as well.

“You need time,” he surmised.

“You think?” She snorted. “I am not especially a romantic, but I figured that when the time comes, I would be married to a man I have feelings for.”

“You are talking about love.”

She turned her head to look at him. “You cannot tell me you do not believe in it.”

He inclined his head briefly. “I do. I have seen evidence of such.”

“What happens if you find someone down the road that you are in love with?”

“Been there, done that,” he told her with a twist of his lips, “she belongs to another.”

“You are still in love with her.”

“It’s complicated,” he told her briefly, “how much time do you need?”

“A couple of days.”

He nodded. “I am interested in this place. And I can see that you like it. I know nothing about interior design, so when you decide that marrying me is the best course of action, you get to pick the furnishings.”

“You are that confident that I am going to say yes.”

He gave her an amused look. “Unless you have a better offer, I think you are intelligent enough to realize that this is an excellent offer. I will be paying off all of your debts

including those of your brother's," he grinned at her startled look.

"Yes, Meredith – I know of the sibling who is in debt as well and is behind in his child support payment. I also know he lives above the mechanic shop he works at. Is that what he wants to do or does he have a desire to do something else? I can buy that mechanic shop for him if that is his heart's desire."

Meredith could feel her heart hammering inside her chest at the possibilities. She would happily make the sacrifice for her brother – he was all the family she has except his daughter whom he did not get to see as he should.

That could all change – he would not have to worry about making payments again – he could buy a house so that the courts could revisit the terms of the custody. She was tempted to say yes right now, but she did not want to appear to be too desperate, even though she was.

“Why me though? Surely you could find someone who has a lot less baggage?”

His chuckle reverberated around the almost empty room. “It’s the challenge and the fact that I am determined to go against my father’s choice.”

She gave him a glowering look. “I do not want to be drawn into any family drama.”

“You won’t be,” he promised, “Theodore Davis might enjoy pissing me off and tugging at my chains, but he will respect my choice. Besides, you are a beautiful woman and he has a weakness.” There was a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

“I see!” She studied his face curiously. She knew there was a lot more to this man than met the eye. He gave off the vibes that he did not care about anything and put on a façade of recklessness as well as an uncaring attitude that was not entirely true.

“I will give you my answer in the morning,” she glanced at her watch. “I am afraid I have been away from the office longer than I expected.”

“I am hoping that the extra time is well worth it.” Holding out a hand, he waited for her to place hers there and shook her hand solemnly. “I am looking forward to a pleasant and harmonious union.”

“What a way to put it,” she murmured, withdrawing her hand from his, “I will be in touch.”

Tucker returned his contemplation outside the window, a frown touching his brow as his gaze was caught by a couple of squirrels as if in a race up the thick trunk of the oak tree. He knew she was going to say yes. It was too tempting for her not to accept his unusual offer.

He would give her the financial freedom to do whatever she pleased. She would share his name and he had enough money to alleviate her problems. He had money of his own and he has not been using it much.

His current apartment was a little more than a dump, but he had not minded it in the least. But now it was going to be different. He would be married – would have to think about someone else other than himself. But first, he wanted someone's approval to go ahead with it.

“You have been gone for hours,” Elena was waiting for her at her cubicle when she returned, an inquisitive look on her face.

“I was not aware that I answer to you,” Meredith pushed past her and dumped her pocketbook onto the desk. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Was the trip successful?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?” A smile touched her lips as she recalled the conversation between her and Tucker Davis and had spent the entire journey thinking about the man she had left at the loft.

“I had a peek at the call list and realized that it was Tucker Davis. It was really him?” There was a note of skepticism in her voice.

“The one and only.”

“Did he buy the property?”

“All these questions,” she tsked as she reached for her notebook and the messages that had been left there by the receptionist. “I do not plan on answering any of them. Now get your bony ass off of my desk and allow me to get some work done.”

“George will want to hear about this.”

“There is nothing to tell. Now please leave me alone.” She waited until the annoying woman had left and started to reach for the phone to call her brother, but decided against it.

The partitions were too thin and there was always a tendency to listen to others' conversations. She was guilty of that as well. In a place like this – the competition was vicious. She was about to go through her emails when her extension rang.

“Yes?”

“Could you get in here?”

“I was just “

“Now, Meredith.”

Poking her tongue out at the phone, she slid her chair out and got to her feet, ignoring the gloating look cast her way as she made her way to George's office. The summons could only mean one thing. He had been informed of their VIP client and was pissed that she was keeping it close to her chest.

“You hollered?” She asked as soon as she pushed open the door to the office.

“Sit, please.”

“Is this going to take long? I have emails and phone calls
....”

“And you work for me,” he told her coldly, “we have put up with your insubordination for quite some time, considering that you have not been selling as many properties as the rest of the agents....”

He swept a veined hand across the general area she was standing- a pained expression on his face. “But in our generosity, we have managed to look past that.”

“Kindly get to the point,” Meredith told him coolly, itching to slap the silly look on his wrinkled face.

He bristled at her tone, eyes flashing. “We have been very generous and sympathetic to your circumstances, even going so far as to extend to you a loan....”

“Is there a point to all this? Am I the first person to acquire a loan from the company?” She demanded.

“You have been to see a very important client”

“Tucker Davis, former actor and son and heir of the very successful and very rich producer Theodore Davis.” She was actually enjoying the conversation.

She had told Tucker that she would think on the matter and get back to him, but this conversation cemented the fact that she was definitely going to accept his offer. “And he wants the place. It so happens that he is getting married pretty soon.”

“The commission”

“Will be completely mine,” she told him with a steely look on her face.

“And you will not be denied the very hefty commission. All I am saying is that you will have to come up with more than the standard amount that is usually paid on the loan.’

Meredith stared at him for a moment and then burst out laughing. She felt free and unencumbered. And it felt wonderful.

“I will be paying everything off.”

“The commission will be that big?” He asked her with a frown.

“You have no idea,” she told him cheerfully. “Is that all? If it is, I have a very important phone call to make which cannot wait.”

“That will be all.”

With a nod, she left the office and felt lighter than she had ever felt in years.

“Give me a minute, Jedd.”

“The guy is coming for his vehicle in under an hour.” The man warned him.

“It will be ready. Hey, what’s up?” Jerome jogged out to meet her where she was leaning on her car. “Is everything okay?”

“I think we should go for a spin. What do you say?”

“I would say you have been drinking. It’s the middle of the afternoon and aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I am at lunch and instead of sitting at my little cubicle, I decided to go out to lunch and was hoping my brother would join me.”

He looked pointedly down at his soiled overall and gave her a wry smile. “As you can see, I am not appropriately dressed and you heard the man, I have a job to do.”

“Do you like being a mechanic?”

“What?” He gave her a frowning look.

“Do you like being a mechanic?” She repeated the question, enjoying the befuddled look on his face. “Or is it something you think you have to do?”

“I like fixing cars and have been fascinated by the workings of it ever since I was little - you know that.”

“Is this place for sale?”

His frown deepened. Mer, this is a very fascinating and useless conversation, but you are wasting my time. I have to”

“I am getting married.”

He turned back to her, a look of shock on his face.

“What?”

She grinned at him and dragging him over to where they could have some privacy and prying ears, she told him of her visit to the loft.

“And you said, yes?”

She shook her head. "I told him I would be in touch in the morning, but I will be accepting the proposal."

"You are getting married to a complete stranger. You don't know this guy."

"It's just an arrangement."

"One that will have you living with him. Honey, you are a beautiful woman and I have seen photos of this guy. There is simply no way you can remain detached."

"He is offering to buy this place for you and pay off all your child support." She grabbed his hand, uncaring that it was greasy from the oil he had been changing. "It would mean getting your license back."

"I am not going to allow you to sacrifice your life to bail me out." He told her firmly, a trace of bitterness in his

voice. "I am older than you are and should be the one doing so."

"Says who?" She demanded. "I was just reamed out at the job about the loan I took out for dad. I have been at that blasted place for years and all I ever gets is disrespect and lack of recognition. I am damned sick of it and I am pretty sure that you are tired of kissing Jedd's ass."

"He took me in"

"I would have taken you in, but you refused," she reminded him. "I will be getting the chance to own my own damned company and I am taking it. Whatever happens, after – will be handled." She pressed his hand. "Think of the possibilities honey. You get to see Jenny again – actually have your daughter coming over to stay in an actual home."

"I cannot accept"

“There is a time and a place for your damned pride Jer and the time is not now. This man has tons of money and we need his help. He was the one who offered and he is offering marriage – offering us a way out. I am doing this for both of us.”

“Are you certain?” He looked at her anxiously. “I really do not want you to do anything you might regret.”

“I would only regret it if I turn him down,” her dark brown eyes danced.

“Hey Jerome, get your ass in here and start working!”

“What do you say?”

“I think I am going to enjoy buying the place from him.”

“That’s the spirit. Now go and suck it up for now.”

“You don’t need my approval,” Heather told him as she reached for her glass of water. It was the same place she had been to lunch with him that very first time and he always thought of it as theirs.

“I do, actually,” he fiddled with his silverware, a thoughtful expression on his face, “she is lovely.”

“And?”

“And I like her spirit.”

“But it is just an arrangement.”

“Yes.”

She gave him a curious look and felt a certain something she could not readily identify. She loved him, not just like a brother, but ever since their first meeting, there was this definite bond between them. “Do you have a photo?”

He brought it up on his phone and turned it around to her. Heather felt a jolt as she stared at the classical beautiful woman with the head of flowing dark brown hair and flawless complexion.

“She is beautiful.”

“That does not matter,” he told her in an offhanded manner as he dug into his platter.

“And you would be lying. You like her.”

“She is a means to an end.”

“You do not have to pretend with me, Tuck, you know that.”

“Perhaps I do not want you to be jealous,” his tone was light but his expression was sincere and sober.

“We are past that and you know it. Are you sure about this?”

“I have run out of options and I do think this arrangement is suitable for both of us. She has not said yes yet, but she will.”

“And this woman is just willing to marry a perfect stranger.”

“She has run out of options herself.”

“She is doing it for the money?” He watched as her lips curled in disgust.

“She is not materialistic, darling,” he told her in amusement, “she is merely having a hard time of it.”

“And you are her knight in shining armor.”

“Something like that. Give me some credit and trust that I know what I am doing.”

Chapter 4

Tucker rolled over in bed, the lethargy slowly drifting out of his system. His head felt as if he had knocked it several times against a particularly stubborn and unyielding wall. His eyes were heavy - his mouth feeling as if he had eaten a handful of sawdust. What the hell had he done?

He wondered as he lifted himself and groped for the bedside lamp to illuminate the room. It was then that it came crashing back. He had returned home from lunch with Heather and had gone to the gallery to visit Jackson. They had started talking and drinking and reminiscing about old times.

Then he had come back home to continue drinking, his mind and thoughts refusing to quit thinking about his mother. He had thought that he had laid that to bed - that awful time in his life, but it had come rearing its ugly head again and when it did, he usually tried to chase the ghosts away with alcohol.

Hence the awful hangover. And he had told Heather that he was confident about Meredith's positive response, but truth be told, he had no idea what she was going to tell him.

He had been cavalier about it at first but ever since he had decided on her, he realized how much he wanted it to happen. It would not be a love match, of that he was certain - and who knows, perhaps down the road, they would end up in bed, but he was going to stick to the agreement.

He had offered her compensation if she accepted his proposal and he was going to be very generous.

It would get his old man off his back and free him to pursue his dreams. He had never told anyone of his passion - ever since the suicide and the devastating effect it had on him, he had been floundering, trying to find his footing.

Michael Bigsby was a personal friend of his and had been an actor at one point until it got too much for him, and after almost losing his life to drugs, he had turned it

around and used his money to open a shelter for people suffering from mental illnesses.

“I have been there, Tuck, and know what it’s like to be crazy out of your mind. I know you have questions when it comes to your mother, but mental illness can strike at anyone, no matter your station in life. And it is not an easy illness to get rid of.”

So, he had decided that in order to find some form of peace, he was going to work with people who were going through the same thing his mother had gone through.

Pushing the covers off, he swung his legs off and had to stay still for a minute before making his way slowly towards the bathroom. He was going to hear from her today and when that happened, he would start the ball rolling.

There were formalities to take care of course, and his father was going to insist on her going over for dinner. Stripping off his clothes, he stepped into the shower stall

and turned the water on, letting it beat all over him in an effort to try and get rid of the pounding in his temple.

“So, how are we going to do this?” Meredith had called and suggested that they meet to talk things on her way from the office and he had suggested a place where they could do so in private.

“I thought you would want to eat. I ordered some shrimp.”

“Shrimp is fine.” She looked around at the rustic setting and found it quite charming. “I am guessing that there is no chance of reporters lurking around?”

“Too out of the way. Heather loves the food here and I think you will too.”

She eyed him for a moment before reaching for her glass of water - “do I have her approval?”

He almost laughed at how intuitive she was and found his opinion of her raising several notches higher. “She is going to have to meet you first.”

“I am surprised that was not the first plan of action.”

“I have spoken to her about you.”

“Do I want to know her opinion?”

He shrugged at that. “She wants me to be happy.”

“And will you be?” She paused as the bowl of shrimp was placed in front of them.

“I will be content. What about you?”

“My debts will be paid off and I get to tell those assholes that I work for that I no longer need their lousy paycheck. Then there is the fact that my brother will finally have a life, I am brimming over with happiness on the inside.”

“Will I need his approval?” He asked her quietly, picking up a fat shrimp. His headache was almost gone and he was enjoying her company. Today she was wearing a thin lime green sweater over tan trousers and her hair was in its usual neat chignon.

She was not wearing a lot of makeup and her earrings were discreet gold knobs. Emeralds and diamonds would suit her - fire and ice, he thought whimsically.

“He thinks I am certifiable,” she admitted with a slight smile, “but the benefits are far too tempting and when I highlighted all that we stand to gain, he quickly saw the light.”

He gave her a quizzical look. “So, you are marrying me for my money.”

“Of course,” she gave him an impish look, “what else is there?”

“My looks, charms, intellect? I am not just a pretty face with a deep pocket.”

“I am well aware of that. A child prodigy.” She laughed at his surprised look and had him jolting at the transformation of the white teeth against the very seductive lips. “I read some articles and trolled the internet.

You have two degrees - one in theater and the other in business. Curious combination, but I get the point. You are fluent in Spanish, French, Italian and Russian and speak conversational Chinese. Why Russian?”

“I have a penchant for languages and I thought why the hell not? Besides. I lived in Moscow for a year.”

“You also lived in China, Italy and France. A regular rolling stone.”

He shrugged at that. “I was trying to run away from things.”

Her eyes became sympathetic.

“Don’t do that!” He warned her abruptly.

“Do what?”

“Feel sorry for me.”

Her tapered eyebrows lifted. “You are worth billions. When you were acting you managed to amass millions and by the way, you are not such a bad actor except in the movie: ‘Thrill of the chase.’ You were such an asshole in that movie that I was definitely turned off from the pretty boy image you portrayed before.”

He grinned at that, finding her candor extremely refreshing. “It’s called acting and I did win an award for the best male lead in that category.”

“No doubt it was due to all the swear words and the blood and gore,” she said scornfully. “I much preferred - ‘A deal with the devil’. You saved your girlfriend from certain death by making a deal with the drug lord who held her captive.”

She avoided his eyes by looking down at her plate. What he would never know was how shaken she had been, that the role he had played and the way he had played it had brought tears streaming down her cheeks. And it had hit her like a thunderbolt that this was the man she was going to marry.

The love scenes had been torrid and emotional and she was wondering if he had been completely naked in the scenes. It looked like that. And his body was magnificent. Lean and wiry with no extra fat anywhere. “You were also involved with the actress.”

He toyed with his glass and studied her for a moment before responding. “Briefly.”

“What happened?”

“She wanted more.”

“As in marriage?”

“Something like that.”

“And you were not ready or were not in love with her enough to make that kind of commitment.”

“I was twenty-one,” he pointed out mildly, “and did not know what the hell I was doing.”

“Where is she now?”

“Living in Italy.”

“Were you living with her?”

“I stayed with her for a few months.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “After having left her when she wanted more, she still let you live with her.”

He grinned at that. “We had a certain spark and we reconnected.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” He bit back a smile at the look on her face.
“You do realize that you have a very expressive face.”

“I have been told. You could marry her now.”

“She is already married. To some rich Italian geezer who owns several museums and galleries. He is keeping her in the style she is accustomed to.”

‘How do you feel?’ She asked him curiously.

“I am happy for her,” he said with a shrug.

“No regrets that you did not place a ring on her finger?”

“None at all. She is into profiling and posturing and I am not,” he gave her a sober look.

“Something you should know about me Meredith - I am not into the whole society deal. I attend parties and am a member of a very exclusive club and they lean towards a

lot of entertainment, mostly for charity and every so often, I do participate, but I live a simple life. I hope that's okay with you."

"By simple you mean"

"That I do not follow the latest fashion trends. I have an account at Romano's and several other brands, but I do not have a closet filled with designer labels. My sister is the one who does my shopping for me when she despairs that I have been wearing the same thing too long. And Heather has bought me several outfits. I don't do shopping."

"What does her husband have to say about that?"

"He is getting used to me being in their lives," he told her with a grin, "he once punched me in the face - over his wife, but he is learning that he has nothing to fear from me again."

"There was something to fear before?"

“I was in love with her,” he said simply, “she is the most beautiful and kind-hearted woman I have ever met and made me forget my sorrows. Whenever I talk to her, I feel as if I am at peace with myself.”

“Sounds to me that she is the one you should be marrying,” Meredith said lightly, ignoring the knot inside her chest at the way he spoke about her.

“I would have, but it was too late. Tell me about you.”

“What about me?”

“You are very independent and outspoken and not involved with anyone.”

“The takings are slim out there and dating has become a disaster,” she took a sip of her water before continuing.

“I was involved with a guy who turned out to have a couple of baby mamas - something he did not tell me,” she shook her head, “believe me when I say that my track record with men is not so stellar. I dated a guy in college for a couple of years. He was my first and I fancied myself in love with him.

But it turns out he was into me mostly for the benefits I offered. I helped him with his course work. After he was through, he dumped me for someone else. I was devastated for a while and then I said to hell with him and moved on.”

“He was a fool,” Tucker said softly, feeling the need to find the guy and give him a thrashing. “Where is he now?”

“I gave into the urge to look him up on Facebook and to my absolute delight, he looks like hell and has been divorced two times.”

“So, you got your revenge.”

“Absolutely. I opened a bottle of wine and toasted his failure and almost called him up to gloat and jeer at him.”

“What stopped you?”

“I found out from a friend that he has cancer and felt like a bitch afterwards.”

He had to bite back a laugh at her wry expression. She really was a delightful creature and it was going to be fun to marry her. “You did get your revenge,” he pointed out.

“I don’t know about that. Cancer is not something I would wish on my worst enemy. My dad had cancer.”

“I forgot and I am sorry.”

She nodded and resumed her meal. “When is this dinner thing?”

“I was thinking Sunday.”

“And then?”

“We go out on a couple of dates and get married in December.”

“A society wedding?”

“No!” He told her firmly. “I hate those and it’s mostly for show. You are going to have to be prepared for the press as soon as this comes out,” he gave her a quizzical look, “what are you going to tell them at work?”

“As soon as you put an expensive yet tasteful ring on my finger, I will be flaunting it in front of their faces.”

“I like that plan.”

She was decidedly nervous. Ever since she had agreed to the proposal, she was feeling this queer feeling inside her stomach. She had not gone into details with her best friend but had simply told her that she had met someone and was thinking of marriage.

She loved Jasmine, but the woman was a notorious gossip and she and Tucker had both agreed to keep the people in the inner circle to a minimum.

Now it was time for her to face his father, sister and her husband and she felt as if she was facing the guillotine. She knew of Theodore only by reputation and the way his son spoke of him. The fact that they did not have a close relationship was something that was bothering her.

“You look lovely,” he told her quietly as he came to meet her. He had given her the address and she had told him she preferred to meet him here.

“Thanks....” She had debated at length on what to wear to a multi-billionaire’s mansion and had come up with an emerald green wool dress that she had bought on clearance at the mall. It was not couture, but it suited her immensely.

She was also wearing her mother’s thin gold necklace with the lovely locket attached and discreet diamond knobs she had picked up a few years ago. And she was wearing knee-high boots.

She was not certain boots were appropriate for dinner, but she happen to like them and she was not here to impress his family with her fashion sense. If they judged her on the clothes, she was wearing then that’s their problem. Besides, they knew why she was marrying Tucker anyway.

“And you cleaned up well,” he was wearing a dark blue sports jacket over a powder blue sweater and his faded denims.

“Are you saying I will do?” He asked her teasingly.

“It’s your family, so you should know,” she turned to look up at the impressive façade and could feel her heart quivering inside her chest, “it’s quite something.”

“Isn’t it?” He seemed unimpressed, but she supposed that it was natural for someone who had grown up in luxury all his life. But his next words belied her assumptions.

“A masterpiece that was bought and gutted out – the best contractor put on the job and of course, the best interior designer money could buy and still inside those walls are the worst memories I ever had.” He took her hand automatically as they made their way up the few steps where a uniformed maid was waiting for their arrival.

“It never did my mother any good anyway....” He nodded to the maid who greeted them with a polite yet impersonal smile and stepped back so that they could enter.

“The family are in the green salon, Mr. Tucker.”

“Thank you,” he turned to Meredith, “would you like the tour?”

“No!” She told him decisively, “let’s get this over with.”

With a nod, he led them through a series of passages where she caught glimpses of pale blue silk wallpapers, recessed lights and expensive artworks on the walls.

A large set of deep red double doors were thrown open revealing elegant furnishings and walls painted in the most delicate of lime green. An impressively tall and very attractive man rose to his feet gracefully, light green eyes giving her a quick and assessing stare.

“Welcome to our home, my dear,” his voice was smooth and deep, a faint smile touching his lips, “your photo does not do you a bit of credit.” He held out both hands

to her, forcing Tucker to release her. "You are exquisite."
He glanced over at his son.

"Great choice."

Tucker inclined his head curtly without saying anything.

"This is my daughter Mariel and her husband Jason. We were just about to have a pre-dinner drink before going in."

She greeted the sister and her husband with a polite smile, noticing the wary look on the woman's face.

"Thanks," she murmured in acceptance of the drink and stated her preference. He went to pour the white wine himself and brought it over to her.

"I think we should discuss the legal aspects "

“No,” Tucker told him tightly, going over to the well-stocked cabinet to pour his scotch, “not now. We are here to have a pleasant dinner and for my future wife to get to meet my family and that’s it.”

“You have to admit that this is not a regular arrangement, darling,” Mariel reminded him, her dark blue eyes flickering to Meredith.

“We are quite aware of the details of it. The lawyers will do their thing, I will iron out the details of the settlement with them and Meredith has no problem signing a pre-nup.”

Bringing his drink with him, he automatically took his place next to her as if he was showing his family that he was already aligned with her.

“And might I ask why you have agreed to such an unusual proposal, my dear?” Meredith was not fooled by the man’s congenial tone one bit.

“Since you are all aware of the terms of the engagement – I will not play the hypocrite by saying that I am in this because Tucker is a looker. I am in debt and he is offering me a way out.”

“It does not bother you that you are marrying him for his money?” Mariel asked, her eyes flashing.

“Does it bother you?” Tilting her head, she looked up at the man who was seated on the arm of her chair.

“Not one bit,” he told her with a grin, an admiring look glinting in his eyes, “We are entering into a relationship that is not fraught with expectations and riddled with life. I would say we have the perfect thing going.”

“So do I,” she turned to look at the woman, “I hope that clears things up for you?”

“Ah, there goes the dinner bell,” Jason said smoothly as he got to his feet and stretched a hand to his wife. He

had flashed Meredith a discreet smile of admiration that was still hovering on his lips.

“Shall we?” Tucker uncoiled his length from the arm of the chair and took her hand. “Let’s go and enjoy the sumptuous fare.”

“What do you think?” Tucker asked, leaning against the door of the driver’s side of her vehicle. Dinner had been a mostly silent affair with Jason and Theodore carrying on most of the conversation.

Marisol had made her disapproval very apparent throughout the meal, but Meredith had ignored her. She could relate to the woman’s concern because she loved her brother and would hate the fact that a woman was into him for what he could do for her.

“Your sister hates me.”

Tucker grinned carelessly. "I will talk to her."

"She is in her right to do so Tucker, I am marrying you for your money," she pointed out.

"That's true," he mused, "but I am okay with it, so she needs to be as well."

"It's not that easy," she shook her head with a sigh, "if anyone had told me I would be doing something like this, I would have stared at them as if they had gone and lost their mind."

"Like I said before, we know what we are getting into and there is transparency between us. Something I am thankful for."

Chapter 5

“Mr. Davis!” George and Glen were all smiles and Meredith had to hide the smile as she arose from her chair to watch the drama unfold. He had called and told her he was coming by and that he wanted to be the one to break the news to them. He had also told her that he wanted to do so when they were all present.

“I hope you are prepared for what happens next?” He had told her with his irrepressible grin. Plans were now in place for the wedding and they just needed to be seen at a function or two in order for the press and everyone else to realize that they were in fact a couple.

“No one told us you were coming by,” Glen shot an accusing look at Meredith as she came towards them. It was almost ten in the morning and every activity in the office had come to a halt.

“Mr. Davis,” Elena preened, brushing back her hair in a seductive move as she glided forward. “I am such a fan.”

“Thank you,” he told her politely before turning to Meredith, a warm smile touching his lips, “I am actually here to see Ms. Livermore.”

“Oh?” George sent her a cold look a frown touching his brow as Tucker moved forward to take her hands.

“I wanted to do this in private,” he turned to look at George, “mind if I borrow your office?”

Meredith had to bite back the laugh that was threatening to erupt. George looked like he was about to have a stroke and looked undecided on how to answer Tucker.

“There is a conference room”

“That will do of course,” he smiled at Meredith, his hands still holding hers tightly, “shall we?”

“Excuse us, please.” She threw a smile over her shoulder as she allowed herself to be led away.

“What do you think?”

“I think that as soon as we enter that room, they will follow at a discreet distance. Did you bring the ring?”

He patted his jacket pocket. “Right here.”

“Good,” she stepped in when he pushed open the door.
“I am really going to enjoy this.”

“So am I. How do you want us to do this?”

“You could go on one knee.”

“Not going to happen.”

Her pout caused his eyes to dance.

“We need to put on a show.”

“Okay, fine.” He gave a beleaguered sigh and gestured for her to stand in the middle of the room.

“You are supposed to look at me as if I am the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“You are certainly the most beautiful woman in the building. That bleached blonde has nothing on you.”

“You have made my week. How should I look when you propose?”

“As if you have won the lottery – a sort of dazed expression of happiness. I am quite a catch after all.”

“Indeed, you are!” Her smile widened as he went down on one knee, the smile disappearing as he opened the box and the sunlight shining through the glass shot darts of fire through the dazzling stones.

“Holy crap!” She whispered in awe and was so taken aback that she did not even notice the faces pressed up against the glass as the entire office stared at the unfolding scene in shock.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes, yes! Slide it on.”

“Not the most romantic response.” He told her wryly as he put the ringer on her finger. “And bear in mind that we have an audience. You are supposed to be irrevocably and head over heels in love.” His heart jolted when she dropped to her knees in front of him.

“How is this?” She asked him blithely.

“Much better,” he told her, clearing his throat, “we are going to have to kiss – for the audience’s benefit.”

“Of course.”

His hand came around the back of her neck to secure her head as he lowered his. His heart was beating unnaturally and the intoxicating scent of her subtle perfume was making his senses spin and that was before he brushed his lips against hers.

He had intended for it to be just a light and impersonal kiss but her parted lips and sweet and very seductive breath got rid of that. His tongue touched hers tentatively and finding no resistance, drove in, the kiss taking on a searing passion that took them both by complete surprise.

It was Meredith who broke the kiss, her fingers which were clenched into his sweater, slowly uncurling as her

eyes flickered open.

“Well...?” The single word had a wealth of meaning, “I supposed that showed them.”

“Yes!” Tucker felt as if he was drowning in her dark brown eyes and he could feel his hands trembling. What was even worse was the fact that he was aroused.

“Let me ..., before he could help her up, she had gotten to her feet gracefully and moved away.

“We should go out....”

“Are you interested in this place?” He asked her gruffly, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“No. I am going to open my own.”

“Good. Do you have to finish some sort of contract?”

“I have a loan”

“How much?” He asked abruptly.

“What?”

“I need the amount.”

“Tucker”

Without waiting for her to say anything more, he strode away from her to open the door. “Who is in charge here?”

George held up a hand, tentatively, his light blue eyes still dazed at what he had just witnessed. “We need to go into your office to conduct some business. Shall we?”

“Of course, Mr. Davis. Will Ms. Livermore be in on this meeting?”

“My fiancée is an integral part of this meeting.” There was no mistaking the stress on the word and the status of their relationship.

“Of course. Please get back to work all of you. This is not a break.” He called out firmly as he led the way to his office.

Her life exploded after that! She quit her job right then and there with the very shocked and obviously disturbed partners trying to get her to stay on by making her very lucrative promises.

She had to admire Tucker’s ability to mow down everything in his way in order to clear a path for her. The

kiss they had exchanged in the conference room had not been mentioned and they were operating as if it was business as usual. He had insisted on buying her clothes from Romano's for their first date as an engaged couple.

He had chosen a very high profile and very public restaurant in order to ensure that they were seen and it worked. By the next morning, their photos were splashed across the celebrity rags and a close-up was taken of her engagement ring.

He expertly fielded the questions that came at them when the reporters bombarded them about the details of where they had met.

Now she was caught in the backlash and her brother as well.

They were having dinner with Jerome at the seafood shack where they could discuss the terms of what was being offered to him.

“You must know that I do not like this one bit,” her brother muttered as he stared at the thick documents before him.

“And yet here you are,” Tucker told him sardonically, “I want Meredith to be happy and clearing off your debts will make her happy.”

“I don’t like charity.”

“Jer”

Tucker held up a hand and leaned forward- forcing the other man to look at him. “Only a fool would turn away a helping hand and I have a feeling you are not one. You will not be indebted to me – the papers clearly state that.

You will be getting a house in a very nice neighborhood and the garage you work at is yours if you want it. Your back child support will be cleared away and you will be in fact getting a new start.”

“And you are doing this because you want to marry my sister whom you are not in love with.”

Tucker’s lips twisted into a parody of a smile. “That’s between your sister and I. I am here as a courtesy because the wedding will be several months from now and as my fiancée’s only living relative, I would welcome your blessing.”

He watched as the man looked from him to the woman seated next to him.

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“No regrets?” He persisted.

“None.”

With a deep sigh, he studied the documents again before signing the papers and handing them back to Tucker. “Thank you,” he said quietly, “it is not that I am being ungrateful, because Lord knows we needed the help and welcome it. But I happen to love my sister and do not want her making any sacrifices for me.”

“I would have done the same for mine. And I do not think marrying me counts as a sacrifice. Does it darling?” He asked, turning his head to give her one of his devastating smiles.

“A little bit, but I will bear the cross with a smile on my lips,” she told him solemnly.

Laughing at that, he chucked her under the chin in a friendly and impersonal manner before turning back to Jerome. “We are going to be fine.”

“The internet is blowing up with the story about former wild boy Tucker Davis and Meredith Livermore.” Her friend handed her the glass of wine and took a seat across from her. “How on earth did your luck change from bad to wonderful?” Jasmine demanded. “And please do not tell me any crock about love at first sight.”

“I was not about to tell you any such thing,” Meredith told her with a laugh as she sipped her wine. Her head was spinning. In the last couple of weeks, so much had happened. She had been contacted by Monique Romano herself and sent some designs to choose from.

Although the wedding was going to be a small intimate affair, it would still be a society event because of who the groom was. She had given up her apartment and was crashing with her brother for the time being.

Things had started to move forward rapidly and he was now living in a four-bedroom, three-bathroom home that had been handed to him by Tucker. The sale for the property on Lafayette was going through and very soon,

she would be moving her stuff to the place she was going to be calling home.

“It’s not a love match, Jas,” she told her friend quietly, “and I am depending on you to keep that bit of information to yourself.”

“I am not a blabber mouth ...,” she shook her head and laughed ruefully at the skeptical look on her friend’s face. “Not usually. But honey, Tucker Davis? That guy is scrumptious and could get any woman he wants. Why you, and I am not saying you are not hot yourself, but he belongs to a society that breeds beautiful and classy women.”

“I guess he wanted someone local,” Meredith said loftily. She told her friend about the incident at work, just before she left. “He did that for me and for that I am in his debt in more ways than one.”

“I am so happy you got to sock it to those assholes. So, what now? Are you going to be an idle society wife?”

“Tucker is not even enamored with all that.” She shook her head. “I am going to be opening up my own real estate agency.”

“Giving your former place a heck of a competition. I love it.”

“I cannot believe that I have the financial freedom to do whatever I want. And you should see Jerome! I have never seen him so contented and at peace. Do you know that Michelle is now allowing him to see his little girl without them having to go to court?”

“Of course,” Jasmine said dryly. “You are marrying a multi-billionaire and he is your brother, so she is going to want to worm her way back into his life.”

“She is seeing someone.”

Jasmine snorted. “And that makes a difference, how? I hope he has the good sense to tell her to get lost.”

“She really was not a bad sort, Jas.”

She took your brother to court and refused to allow him to see his daughter. He lost everything and ended up sleeping in that dump apartment at the mechanic shop. Is he buying the place?”

“He will be opening his own.”

“Good for him. Jed was a complete asshole who gave Jerome the charity with one hand and kicked him in the nuts with the other. I am very happy for both of you, honey.”

“Just to see the look on Jerome’s face makes all of it worthwhile.”

Jasmine eyed her as she sipped her wine. “You are aware of his reputation.”

Meredith nodded.

“He has been around the block a couple of times, honey and there was talk about drugs and all that.”

“His past is none of my business.”

“What if it is his present?”

“You mean what if he is still doing drugs you mean?”

“Yes.”

Meredith had done a lot of soul searching and spinning certain scenarios inside her mind. He was Tucker Davis and she knew absolutely nothing about him.

They would be sharing a home, even though they would not be sharing a bedroom, but the fact remains that they would be in close proximity to each other and that kiss was still lingering in her mind. “I have seen no evidence that he is and I am not going to think about it. Whatever problems we face, we will face them together.”

“Relax,” he murmured against her ear.

“I am.”

“You are as stiff as a board,” he told her in amusement.

“I am just not accustomed to so many rich people crowded into one room. And both your sister and your girlfriend has been watching me like hawks.”

“She is not my girlfriend,” he refuted mildly.

Lifting her head, she gave him a skeptical look. “She questioned me at length and gave me the distinct impression that I was not good enough for you. And her approval has weight with you.”

“I am marrying you in a month, am I not?”

“She knows why I am marrying you.”

“I told her.”

“It seems to me that you tell her everything.”

“I do. Is that a problem?”

“Not to me. If I was actually into this thing for love, then it would definitely be one. No woman wants to think of her

man as being best friends with another woman. But we just simply have an arrangement.”

“That we do,” he said lightly. The party had been thrown in their honor as a sort of engagement deal by Colin and Heather and was being held at the Plaza hotel.

He had introduced her to several of the ‘wives’ and she found them to be a very interesting group of women and ones she could learn to care about. But ever since that kiss in that conference room, he had not been able to get her out of his mind.

He had meant what he said to her about this being an arrangement and he has no intention of going back on his word, but the feel of her slender curves in his arms was making him acutely aware of her. The scent of her perfume, the shape of her lips coated in nude was making him restless and jumpy.

Heather had told him that he was fooling himself if he thought it could just be an arrangement between them. “She is a beautiful woman, Tuck.”

“And so are you and I have managed not to embarrass myself by jumping all over you,” he had reminded her.

“That’s because I am married.”

“As if that would stop me,” he had said teasingly.

“You have been with married women before.”

“I have been with divorced and separated women and it is entirely your fault that I am going this route. If only you would leave your husband ...,” he had ended it with a laugh at the look she gave him.

“Why are you still single?” He asked her suddenly, earning a surprised look from her.

“I am not - we are engaged.”

“I meant before. Why are you still single?”

“I told you about my history with men.”

“You are beautiful and witty and smart. Are you telling me that you have only been with two guys in your entire life?”

“So?”

“I am not criticizing you, Meredith; I am just trying to understand the why of it,” he told her quietly. Very soon, the song would end and he would have to let her go. He had noticed the looks guys were giving her and it made him feel a little possessive. She was not his to possess - at least not really. They had an arrangement and that was it.

“I don’t stand for nonsense and the men I have been around wanted a woman who they can bend to their will

or support them. I am not that woman.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” She flashed him an amused smile that had him staring at her lips for several uncomfortable seconds, at least for him.

“I do.” The song ended and he released her, keeping his hand around her waist lightly. “I think Brian likes you,” he told her lightly.

“He just wants to talk about houses. I mentioned the fact that I was opening up my own agency and he immediately started a discussion.” She turned her head to look at him as they made their way off the dancefloor. “I know it is not the thing to do - discuss business at a function, but he was one who started the discussion.”

“I am the last person to dictate what is wrong or right where society is concerned. I do not abide by their rules.”

“One of the things that I like about you.”

“So, you do like me.”

“Why else would I be marrying you?”

“I thought it was for my vast wealth.”

“That too.”

“Save another dance for me?”

“Of course. You are after all the fiancé.” With a wave of one hand, she had gone to join the group of wives who were in one corner of the room.

“You like her.”

He jumped at the sound of Jackson's voice to his left.
"Sneaking up on a guy is not a very good idea," he said mildly as he turned and headed for the bar.

"It would not be sneaking if you were not so intent on the woman you are going to marry."

"It's nothing and you really need to mind your own business." He signaled the waiter for his drink. His father and the rest of his family were present, but apart from his sister, he had avoided the rest of them.

The lawyers had handed them papers to sign and everything was arranged. They were three weeks away from tying the knot and he could feel a certain funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was telling himself that it was due to nerves.

"It's interesting to see how you look at her whenever you think no one is noticing and on that dance floor, it was obvious that you wanted to do more than dance...."

Jackson accepted his glass of scotch and gave the younger man an amused look.

“It’s nothing. We are marrying for convenience and that’s all there is to it.”

“Oh, come now, my friend. That woman right there is exquisite. You cannot tell me you are going to be in the same home with her and not want anything other than polite conversation.”

“That’s not part of the agreement,” he muttered as he sipped his scotch. Turning around on the stool, he zeroed in on her. She stood out - among a room filled with exceptionally beautiful women, Meredith stood out and it was not just physical beauty either, there was something about her he could not put his fingers on.

“Agreement,” Jackson made a hissing sound with his mouth, “you know very well that it has progressed to more than that.”

“She just wants to get her life on track and I am happy to help her with that. She is not interested in anything else.”

“Certain about that?”

“Positive,” he muttered, “she sees me as a little boy in a grown man’s body.”

“You can change that.”

“Why the hell would I be interested in doing so?”

“Because you are interested in her. It’s pretty obvious, Tuck. And I am sure that Colin is very happy to know that you are off his wife.”

“I am not off her,” he grumbled.

“You have not looked at her once since the start of the function and she is the one hosting it.”

“I spoke to her when we just came in.”

“Once. Usually, you would be all over her.”

“Perhaps I am realizing that she is completely in love with her husband,” he said airily, his attention on the corner of the room where his fiancée had burst out laughing.

“Or your interest lies elsewhere?”

Tucker did not respond, but was starting to wonder if that was the case.

Chapter 6

The wedding day dawned bright and clear – the weather just falling short of cold – a perfect day to tie the knot. Meredith pressed a shaky hand against her stomach as she stared into the mirror. She had spent last night at Jasmine's place where they had both drunk wine and reminisced about past mistakes and how their lives had turned out.

They had also imbibed too much – as evidenced by the headache brewing at her temples. Someone had come in to do both their hair and makeup and she was alone for a few minutes as Jasmine was in her room getting ready.

Her brother was going to be giving her away and Jasmine, as well as Mariel, were her attendants. The woman had not warmed up to her, but at least she had agreed to be an attendant as a show of unity.

The dress was spectacular, of course. It was a Romano's original and it had taken a huge chunk out of

her savings, but she did not have credit cards or any other debts to think about.

A generous sum had been settled on her and she would be getting an allowance every month. She had signed the pre-nup of course, instantly disliking the team of lawyers who had looked down their noses at her. They were expensive sharks as Tucker had told her wryly and she agreed with him.

The thought of him sent a shiver right through her body and she had to force herself not to panic or wonder what she was feeling. He was aloof with her and treated her with detached courtesy.

And she had been very jealous when she saw him talking to Heather and the tender indulgent look, he always has for her. It did not matter how much he denied it, he loved her and it was pretty obvious.

Shaking her head to dispel the disturbing images, she concentrated on her appearance. The dress was made of delicate gossamer champagne-colored lace over the most wonderful wool she had ever felt against her skin.

It was deceptively simple, molding to her curves and flaring gently at the ankles. Tucker had given her a matching emerald and diamond necklace and earrings.

One hand drifted to the dazzling stones around her neck. Her hair was coiled and twisted into an intricate style on top of her head, with a few tendrils at either side of her face. The very gay Jonas had told her that it made her neck look longer and highlighted her rather spectacular cheekbones.

“I am telling you darling – you make an exquisite bride,” he had gushed.

Her something borrowed and blue was a sapphire brooch from Jasmine and something new were the sets of jewelry from Tucker. It was a business marriage or one of convenience, but she wanted it to feel like a real one.

She had no idea what was going to happen between them further down the road or if they were even going to

be together for more than a year. He was Tucker Davis and his track record was not great, but she was not going to worry about that aspect of it.

“Ready?”

She turned to face her friend and took a deep breath.
“As ready as I will ever be.”

“Having second thoughts?”

“He is Tucker Davis and I know absolutely nothing about him.”

“You are smart, beautiful and the strongest and most resilient person I know,” Jasmine drifted into the room – the cloud of teal blue swirling around her lanky frame.
“You are going to do great, honey, and if you cannot make that man fall in love with you then I don’t know what is possible.”

“I don’t want him to fall ...,” Meredith threw her hands up as her friend gave her a knowing look. “Okay fine. He is hot – wonderfully so and I have been watching his movies – crap honey, the sex scenes had me crawling the walls and sending shivers along my spine.

But he is in love with that Heather person and he denies it, but I can see it. I keep telling myself that this is just an arrangement, and it is. But...?” Picking up her bouquet of freesias, white roses and oleanders, she took one last look in the mirror before turning back to her friend.

“You are finding out that you want more.”

“Which is crazy. I am levelheaded and should know better.”

“The guy is definitely hot and it’s natural for you to feel that way. Come on, Jerome is waiting.”

Standing at the altar of the large Catholic chapel, Tucker felt as if the bow tie he had opted to wear with his dark blue tux was cutting off his air. His arm pits were sweating and he felt badly in need of a tall glass of brandy right about now.

He had spent last night at his apartment; the last one he would be spending there. Movers were taking his personal stuff over to the loft that had been furnished by an interior designer that had been recommended by Leesa.

He had no plans for a honeymoon right after and figured it would make things very uncomfortable for them if they went on one. But now he was beginning to regret that decision. He had asked her if she wanted to go somewhere, but she had shrugged and told him it did not matter to her.

“It’s not like we are a couple in love.”

He had found that remark offensive and hurtful for some reason. Now he was standing in front of family and friends to pledge his life to a woman he did not know. It was scary as hell!

Over the past three months, since she had accepted his proposal, something had changed during that time and he did not – would not admit it to himself, let alone to anyone else. He wanted her - damn it to hell.

He desired her and wanted nothing more than to leave here today after the ceremony and make love to her. But he did not want to complicate things.

She did not appear to be interested and had told him several times that she was doing this for the money. Even though he had been the one to dangle that particular carrot in front of her, it still stung to know that was the only or the most important reason she was marrying him.

“Heads up....,” he stirred as Jackson whispered to him and realized that he had been so deep in thought that he

had not noticed the music had changed indicating that his bride was arriving.

He had to stifle the sharp intake of breath that threatened to escape his lips as he stared at her. Crap, he was definitely in trouble and could no longer deny that he was definitely into her. She appeared to be gliding toward him and for the time it took her to walk towards him, he could feel his heart hammering inside his chest.

He had to forcibly stop himself not to walk forward to meet her and it took a supreme effort for him to control the naked desire he was feeling. Christ Almighty! But she was exquisite and he had chosen right. The emeralds and diamonds suited her. His hands clenched into fists as he took several deep breaths as she came nearer.

“She is stunning,” Jackson murmured in an undertone which was ignored.

Their eyes met and held and neither of them could look away. Stepping forward, he gave her brother a cursory nod and took her hand in his. “In case I forget to mention

it during the course of the day, you are one beautiful bride.”

“And you are wearing a tux,” she said teasingly, her smile tugging at his heart strings.

“See the sacrifices I make for you? Shall we?”

“Let’s do this,” her hand tightened in his as he guided her towards the priest.

The ceremony was short- the hush evident in the packed chapel as the couple exchanged their vows. Within minutes, they were exchanging rings and declared husband and wife.

“You may kiss your bride, Tucker.”

“We have to make this look good. Prying eyes,” he added.

“I understand,” she murmured as she stepped into his arms and lifted her head to him.

Taking a deep fortifying breath, Tucker framed her face with his large hand, taking a moment to admire the flawless complexion before bending his head.

The kiss was deliberately chaste, his lips lighting and brushing against hers. Stepping back, he forced himself to rein in his desire and planted a smile on his lips as they were announced as husband and wife.

“This is yours,” he gestured to the double doors that led to her suite of rooms. She had chosen a soft pearl color that complemented the pale gold color furnishings of the rooms. It consisted of a sitting room, a rather large bedroom with a bathroom and a space she had decided to use as her home office.

Her clothes had been packed away inside the large closet - the barn doors thrown wide open to reveal the

stack of shelves. Pale blue carpet swallowed their feet as they stepped in. "You must be tired."

"A little," she admitted. The reception had been held at the Plaza Hotel and she had finally taken off the leather pumps as the dancing commenced. The frothy pink champagne cake had been so sinfully delicious that she had had more than a slice.

The sumptuous food had been consumed and there had been various speeches, with Tucker thanking everyone for their attendance and the many gifts.

"My wife and I will be opening packages for weeks." His comment had sent the guests into gales of laughter. And then it had been time for their first dance as husband and wife and he had been coolly detached and a little aloof.

"I guess I will be going to my suite."

“Could you help me with these?” She turned her back and gestured to the tiny pearl buttons that started at her neck and ended halfway down to meet the hidden zipper.

“Of course,” clearing his throat, he stepped behind her and gazed at the tiny buttons for a minute before reaching up to unhook the first one. “These things are impossible for one person to handle.”

“I guess it was designed for the husband to take it off - you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” his breath was backing up inside his throat. He had gotten one button loose and set about releasing the other one.

“It was a very nice ceremony,” he figured that mundane conversation would help to ease the awful tension in the room - certainly it would serve to let him stop thinking how much he wanted to taste her skin, to just touch the space where her neck meets her shoulder.

“It was. And you made a nice speech.”

“There are mountains of gifts.”

“I will start digging through them tomorrow.”

“There is no rush,” he had gotten most of the buttons open and was fighting the yearning to touch the bare skin. Holding his breath, he eased the zipper down and realized that he should have just done the buttons and left the rest to her.

She was wearing some kind of nude-colored teddy made of the most delicate lace he had ever seen. And her skin was flawless all over.

“This is nice. Romano’s, I take it?” His voice was hoarse and clearing his throat was not helping one bit.

“Yes.” Her voice sounded husky and he was hoping that she was feeling the incredible sexual tension the way he

was. "I got several more. Worth every penny or dollar, several hundred... What are you doing?"

"Satisfying my curiosity. You have such soft skin." he was trailing his hands over her arms and then down her back. Stepping closer, he satisfied another curiosity by touching his lips to her neck. "You smell so good."

"Champagne silk."

"Pardon?"

"The name of the body wash," Her head drifted back as he continued to kiss her neck and down her back. "And the perfume."

"Sounds rich."

"It is - was - Oh." She bit her lip as he nibbled on the side of her neck. "We should"

“Get to the bed. I hope you are not asking me to stop. I could not...., it would be criminal to do so.”

“I was saying Oh!” She whispered. He was now cupping her breasts and she could feel the nipples turning into hard pebbles.

“You were saying?” He had pulled the cups down and her skin was exposed to his touch and how wonderful and magical it felt!

“What?” Good Lord, the man was gifted! He was playing with her nipples, doing some sort of twirling movement that was shooting white darts of fire into the core of her.

“You were saying something.” He turned her to face him, blue eyes darkened, his face harsh with passion.

“I don’t recall.”

“It’s not important. We should ...,” she gasped as he bent to lift her into his arms and marched over to the bed. The sheets had been turned down by the maid who would be coming in three or four times a week.

Her wedding dress was left in a crumpled heap in the middle of the room and he had to just take a long and satisfying look at the alluring woman spread out against the pillows.

“Your hair,” he murmured.

“What about it?”

“I want to see it loose.”

He watched as she reached up to pull out pins, his eyes drifting down to the pert breasts and the nipples he had every intention of feasting on. His head lifted and he

stared in fascination as she tugged her fingers through the thick dark strands.

A sliver of moonlight was peeping through the thick burgundy curtains and highlighting the glossy strands that fell into curls and waves onto the pillows.

“Just like that,” he hurriedly shed his clothes, remembering at the last minute that he did not have protection.

“What is it?”

“I don’t ...,” dragging his fingers through his hair, he closed his eyes tight. “I have not been with anyone in a while and I - dammit!” He gazed at her, his hungry eyes on her nipples. “I don’t have rubbers.”

“Oh.” She tortured him even more by worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. “I am safe, my periods - it was just recently.”

“Are you certain?” He could not believe he was having a debate about this when his cock was raging out of control.

“Yes,” she wriggled out of a scrap of lace and allowed him a full view of her wonderful body.

“Dear God,” he whispered reverently as he came closer, “you are so beautiful,” one hand wandered over her ribcage to her flat stomach where the quivering had started, “so tempting. I saw you walking towards me and I was speechless.”

“Good to hear,” she was moving restlessly beneath his hand. “Could you”

“Get on with it?” He chuckled and bent his head to her - his lips teasing hers. “When I kissed you in the chapel, I wanted to do so much more.”

“Why didn’t you?” Her fingers were wandering over the corded muscles of his shoulders in wonder. His body was whipcord strong and magnificent.

“I was afraid I would not have been able to control myself...” His tongue traced the outline of her lip and felt his body harden even more.

“I wanted you too.”

“You should have said,” his breath was mingling with hers and sending his blood pumping hotly throughout his body, “I would have obliged both of us.”

“Noted.” Her lips parted as his tongue delved slowly at first, tangling with hers. The kiss deepened and the sparks flew causing the kiss to take a wild turn, which sent the heat raging.

He shifted so that he was lying on top of her, his body pressed against hers, his arousal evidence of how much he needed her. Her fingers dug into his unruly blonde

hair, body heaving towards his. Her nipples were aching with the need to feel his mouth on them.

A cry of protest escaped her when he abruptly ended the kiss, but he was merely venturing down to take the nipple into his mouth. Her body arched, her fingers clenching into the sheets when his lips closed over the tight bud and he started suckling.

She felt it clear down to the center of her stomach and it was unbelievable! The man has a mouth on him that was designed to dry her crazy with need.

“Tucker ...,” her voice was a thready whisper, her body jumping in anticipation, “please.”

But he was finding so much pleasure in the tight bud that he did not want to stop. She was sweet and addictive and he was starving. He had told her that he had not been with anyone in a couple of years and that was true.

For those years he had had several complicated issues and had not felt the need or desire to be with anyone. Now he was ravenous and feared that he would not last for much longer.

Releasing the nipple, he lowered himself, using trembling fingers to guide his cock into her, his blazing eyes meeting hers.

“I promise that the second time will be a lot more satisfying.” His teeth gritted as he eased into her and felt the tightness wrapping around him and pulling him in. “Sweet Christ!” He swore reverently. “How the hell can you be so tight?”

“Are you complaining?” She asked him huskily, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

“No...,” he grunted, his body shuddering when her legs lifted to wrap around his trim waist. “Don’t...,” he started to say when she moved, but he was too late.

“Don’t what?” She was gripping his shoulders, her nails digging into the flesh.

“Don’t move.”

“Why not?”

“I - holy crap!” He felt as if he was drowning in a sea of desire and passion that was threatening to engulf him. “It feels so damn good.” His voice was a harsh whisper against her mouth.

His heart was hammering inside his chest and he knew he was on the verge of exploding. “Forgive me my sweet ...,” he was almost incoherent with emotions and barely noticed the endearment that had slipped from him.

“For what?”

“I cannot stop it...,” he took her lips with his as he drove into her roughly, the tightening at the base of his cock

signaling what was coming. The climax was so vicious that it took him completely by surprise. He poured his seed into her and felt as if he was on the absolute brink of madness!

The insanity continued until all he could feel was a vulnerability that he had never felt before and left him wide open and weak, his entire body shuddering. Dragging his lips from hers, he mashed his forehead against her as he tried to control his breathing.

He started to get off her, but her slender legs wrapped around his waist trapped him and kept him there.

“I have to ...,” removing her legs - he slid off her. Meredith’s eyes snapped wide open when he reached between her thighs, his fingers plunging into the center of her, his eyes on her face as he worked his fingers into her moistness brought about by his climax.

He wanted to give her even a fraction of the pleasure he had derived from just being inside her.

“I want you to come,” he whispered harshly. “I was like an eager schoolboy and I assure you that is not usually the case. I want you to come, Meredith. Come for me.” He watched as her teeth worried her bottom and to his complete and utter shock, he found himself hardening again.

Using his thumb, he rubbed it against the swollen flesh and she erupted immediately. His body jerked when her lips parted and a cry of absolute surrender escaped her. Her body lifted, moving towards his fingers.

He stifled a groan when her fingers dug into his wrist as the climax claimed her. But he wanted more- removing his fingers, he climbed on top of her and in the throes of her own pleasure, he drove into her, his breath escaping his open lips.

This time around he was going to make it last even if it killed him. This time he was intent on giving her the ultimate pleasure. Bending his head, he took her lips in a searing kiss as he drove into her, his long lean body moving in sync with the slender beauty beneath him.

She was his wife - the woman who bore his name and even though it had started out as just an agreement between them - it had gone way past that now.

Chapter 7

He woke before her and easing himself away from the loose way she had wrapped her body around him, he slid off the bed, careful not to wake her. He had been voracious and starving and had made love to her three times until they had both tumbled into exhausted slumber sometime in the early morning.

His blue eyes flickered over the curve of her breast that was revealed. The covers were pulled halfway over her and her hair was tangled, covering most of her face.

She was lovely even in repose, her lips slightly parted. He had the time and the opportunity to study her now that she was sleeping. He had spent a long time on her nipples and had enjoyed every minute of it. Even now, he could recall the texture of the tight bud and the taste inside his mouth.

He had not been with anyone for two years, the longest he had been without a woman. Ever since he had met Heather Nembhard, it had been difficult for him to lie with

a woman and even when his feelings had changed to that of friendship, he had not been interested.

He had always used sex as a means of getting out of his head and it would work for a period of time and then the demons would come rushing back. He was damaged and the therapists - very expensive ones had not really solved the problem.

He could not blame them entirely, he had to admit. He had never really wanted to be helped - had never put out the effort to even try. But ever since he had met Heather, he had found some form of peace that had never existed in his life.

Now he was faced with something else altogether. He was married and he had confusing thoughts. He desired her, that was a given. And he had given into that desire last night - it had not been planned, or he would have stocked up on condoms.

But it had been a spur of the moment. Rubbing his palms over the bristles on his jaws, he continued looking at her.

He had no idea where they would go from here. Should he continue to avail himself of her delectable body?

Would she be amenable to having a physical relationship? Because that was the only one, he could offer her. The closest he had come to loving someone was Heather and he did not think he could do it with the woman lying in that bed.

Theirs was not a love match and he could not get it out of his mind that she had married him for his money. That right there would always stand in the way of them ever having anything of significance. He was Tucker Davis and all his life, women - especially up-and-coming actresses had used him to get to his father.

He had run from his life at home - going to places where people would not recognize him, had done so because he had been fed up with his life. He had no idea who to trust. Every time he took a woman to bed he would be wondering if they were seeing him or what he could do for her.

One woman had slept both with him and then his dad. She had used him to get to Theodore because she had been so eager to get the part in a movie he was producing. Over the years, he had learned to guard his heart and had coated his feelings with a cynicism that had served him well.

Drawing in a sharp breath, he left the room and went into his own suite to find some clothes to put on. It was almost 10.00 am and the weather was sunny - the trees stark and bare of leaves.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he frowned at the squirrels scrambling up the trees. The lake or stream was an icy mirror that could be seen from his bedroom. A bedroom that had been done up in blues and greens.

He had not bothered to give input in the designs and had left everything to her. He supposed he should get the coffee started at least. The maid would not be coming in today, so they would be finding for themselves. Not that he had a problem doing so. He had grown up privileged but had learned to depend on himself over the years.

He had learned the art of cooking and could scrounge up several meals. He would order takeout most of the time, but now he had someone else living with him. His frown deepened and he had no idea how to feel about that. Hissing out a breath, he turned and left the room.

It was the scent of the coffee drifting upstairs and filtering into the room, tantalizing her senses that woke her up a few minutes later. Her eyes drifted open slowly to look about the unfamiliar room with the elegant design and furnishings.

And she was completely naked! Jumping up against the pillows as she was now wide awake and aching - between her legs and her nipples - they were sore and very sensitive to the touch.

Her head drifted back against the pillows as she recalled what had happened between her and the man she had married just yesterday. It had been unbelievable and he was not next to her. He was downstairs making coffee from what she could tell.

Easing out a breath, she scrambled off the bed and noticed the clothes - their wedding attire was strewn all over the carpeted floor.

Picking them up automatically, she went to hang them inside the closet, pressing her face into his suit jacket and inhaling his expensive cologne, her body trembling. He had wrung cries from her and she had lost the number of times the climax had claimed her.

It did not mean anything, she told herself as she let go of his jacket and stepped from the closet. They were just two people who had acted in the moment. He was Tucker Davis and she was - well she was married to him.

Last night meant what exactly? She wondered as she stepped into the beautiful champagne silk bathroom with its claw-footed bath and large shower stall.

He had not even taken a shower in it - the place was as dry as dust and the towels were still neatly stocked on the shelves. He had obviously gone back to his suite this

morning, which told her everything she wanted to know. Besides, it was just an arrangement and nothing more.

“I made coffee,” he jumped to his feet the minute she stepped into the large gold and cream room bringing with her the scent of the exotic, no doubt from her body wash. Her face had been scrubbed clean from her shower and her hair secured into a ponytail that made her look like an adorable teenager.

“I could smell it from all the upstairs. Just coffee?” She stepped further into the kitchen and towards the steel gray fridge.

“I was not certain what you felt like. I could make us something.”

“I will do it.” She surveyed the contents of the well-stocked fridge and decided on a Spanish omelet. “Could you pour me a cup?” She started taking out the

ingredients needed and went to find bowls and a chopping board.

“Here,” he handed her the cup, careful not to make contact at all. “How did you sleep?”

The minute the words were out of his mouth, he realized how foolish they sounded. “I meant how was the rest of the night – morning...?”

“It was very good. I slept like I was in a coma. You?” She took a sip of the excellent coffee and closed her eyes in appreciation.

“The same.”

“Good.” She did not know what else to say and for a minute there was awkwardness between them. They were two people caught up in an unusual circumstance and they had compounded it by sleeping with each other.

They were strangers who had become intimate without knowing each other. He had explored every inch of her body and had been deep inside her several times. Two people did not get closer than that. "I did not ask if you like omelets."

"I do," he told her briefly, vastly relieved that she had introduced a topic to dispel the awkwardness, "need any help?"

She shook her head. "I never asked if you could cook."

He grinned at that, dispelling the last of the discomfort. "I can."

His grin widened as she looked at him in surprise. He loved the sight of her in the kitchen, chopping tomatoes and peppers and could almost pretend that they were a normal couple playing house. "I had to learn. Remember me telling you about my sojourns?"

“The one where you went to various third-world countries?”

“The Philippines, Sierra Leon, Madagascar, Haiti and Jamaica. I even spent two weeks in Mexico.”

She gave him an oblique look as she dumped the ingredients into a frying pan. “What did you find when you went to all those places?”

“Pardon?” He gave her a quizzical glance.

“I was wondering if you found absolution.”

He almost smiled at her observation. “You assume that was what I was looking for.”

“Wasn’t it?” Turning down the fire, she sat on the stool across from him and cradled her cup.

He responded with a shrug. "Perhaps. I have been to some of the poorest countries in the world and seen things that made me realize how good I have it despite what I have been through – and still going through," his expression sobered, "I have seen women struggling to put food on their tables - unable to feed their children but still with smiles on their faces.

I spent money everywhere I went, but it was not enough. I found pleasure building houses for people who formerly lived in thatch houses with the roofs sagging and the water pouring in whenever it rains." He stared at her for a moment, almost smiling at her rapt attention.

"We do not realize how good we have it here or we end up taking it all for granted. But I have been outside of the country but not to exotic locations like parts of Europe or tourist destinations - places where people do not have indoor plumbing or luxuries like clean water and food to eat.

I have been to places where people eat with their hands and smile while they do so," he shook his head and went

to pour some more coffee into his cup. “I was born with money and accumulated more along the way and it makes me sad to know that there is so much more we could be doing and not doing it.”

There was silence for a few minutes before she spoke. “You surprise me.”

“Why?” He challenged.

“I thought you were just a pretty face with a shallow perspective on life,” she told him bluntly.

“That’s because you believe everything you read.” He watched as she flipped the eggs expertly and pressed down to form a neat oval.

“I don’t usually read about what celebrities are doing or who they are doing, but when I decided to marry you, I did some digging.” She popped the bread into the toaster and went to get the butter. The room was warm and cozy with the scent of eggs and toast, with the coffee

combined. “You have been paired with so many different women.”

Flipping the omelet onto a plate, she wrinkled her small nose. “Genna Silverstone is an actress with pink hair and tattoos all over her body and she has been rumored to sleep with both men and women.”

He grinned at that. “We are just friends.”

“You never slept with her.” She gave him a skeptical look as she retrieved the toast and buttered them, passing him his plate.

“We might have fooled around a little but that was it. Genna is a confused soul who was abused by her stepdad since she was ten.”

“Oh shit. Now I feel like a colossal bitch.”

He shrugged. "Not a lot of people know her story. She told me one night when we were drinking each other under the table. And threatened to cut my balls off if I ever told a soul," he angled his brows at her, "you are sworn to secrecy."

She mimed zipping her lips. "And Tessa Wilks?"

"What about her?"

"She was rumored to be your lover when you were only seventeen. That woman was ten years older."

"And was like a mother to me," he told her tightly, an ominous expression on his handsome face, "you really should not believe everything you read."

"I am sorry...."

"It's fine," he dug into his meal and remained silent.

Meredith felt like crap and realized that she did not really know this moody and unpredictable man at all. His mood could swing from light to heavy in the space of a minute and she figured it was the creativity in him among other things. "Tell me about Jamaica." She said suddenly, hoping to divert his mood.

He gave her a knowing look, telling her that he had seen right through her ploy, but she did not care. She only wanted to see him in a better frame of mind.

"It is a lovely country; you should try and go one day."

Ignoring the fact that he had not included himself and the strange hurt that his words had caused, she forced a smile to her lips. "I should. How was it and how long did you stay?"

"I stayed for a couple of months and it was wonderful. Hot like the son of a bitch but the beaches were spectacular and warm. I spent a lot of time surfing and going out on boats with the natives. I could not

understand their patois - that's their local vernacular, but I got the gist of what they were saying," he grinned in remembrance.

I went to a part of the island, somewhere in Westmoreland where I smoked weed with some Rastafarians that almost blew the top of my head off - it was that strong. I woke up in the middle of the night naked and sleeping on the porch of the small house."

"Didn't they know who you were?" She asked curiously, fascinated by the story.

"No," he told her with a laugh. "And that was what was so wonderful about being there. I was just a pretty white 'bwoy' who was crazy as hell. And my poor attempt to try and talk their language was a source of amusement to them.

They are very friendly people and I was accepted without questions or judgement. I spent a couple of nights sleeping outdoors and the mosquitoes had a feast. Suffice it to say that I had to run to civilization by booking myself into a hotel and cooling out for a couple of days."

“You have lived a very fascinating life.”

“I like to think so.”

“Will you be traveling now?” She asked casually as she crunched on her toast.

“Perhaps we could go to Hawaii. Have you ever been?”

“No. But I was thinking Jamaica - particularly where you had that out-of-body experience with those natives.”

He eyed her for a moment, his expression inscrutable.

“They would eat you alive and I am not talking about mosquitoes.”

“I am tougher than I look. More coffee?”

“Thanks,” he handed her the cup, “still...”

“You do not think I can handle some Jamaican weed-smoking natives?”

“No!” He told her with a wicked smile. He was finding her very fascinating and picturing her sitting on a roughly hewn bench with a big tin cup of Overproof rum and a rolled up spliff and could not picture it.

Also, he did not want the image of those men with their overlong dreadlocks eyeballing her and admiring her flawless skin and those lush lips and he felt the tightness inside his chest. “You are telling me that you have smoked marijuana before.”

“I did once, in college,” she gave him an unconsciously seductive smile as she took a sip of her coffee.

“Did you end up naked in the dorm?” He asked her teasingly.

“I ended up naked with my roommate sprawled on top of me.”

His eyebrows winged up and she saw his eyes darken as he gazed at her intently.

“Nothing happened.”

“How disappointing. I was hoping to get the entire titillating story. How did you know that nothing happened?”

“She told me that I was behaving erratic and singing at the top of my voice. Before she could stop me, I had stripped off all my clothes and when she woke up, I was on top of her.”

“Nothing really happened?” There was a hint of doubt in his voice that had her laughing.

“Nothing.”

“Was it just the one time?”

“My head was pounding when I woke up and I felt as if I was floating above the ground.”

“My case in point. You would not be able to handle the marijuana they grow on the island. Incredible potent stuff.”

“Maybe not the weed but the rum.”

“Overproof rum is the real deal and it burns like hell going down. I am a drinker and could not handle it.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That you should stay away from that part of the island. They have some really lovely resorts that would be more to your taste.”

“I am going to prove you wrong one of these days.”

“We will see,” he got up then and she realized he had cleaned his plate, “thanks for breakfast.”

“You are completely welcome. I will wash”

“Rule of the kitchen, if you cook then I wash. I was thinking we could tackle the gifts when we are through here.”

“I would love that. Mind if I start without you?”

One thick eyebrow lifted as he put the plates into the sink. "I thought we are supposed to do it together."

"If you stay longer than ten minutes, I cannot promise you that I will wait."

"I will be quick," he told her with a grin, watching as she left the room. She had a certain grace about her and even in the baggy sweater and black leggings with her hair in a ponytail, she still managed to portray class. And here he was playing house with her and looking forward to unwrapping wedding gifts. He barely knew himself.

Shaking his head, he set about doing the dishes and found himself hurrying to meet the agreed-on timeline.

* * * * *

"What the hell is this?" She held up the strange-looking object.

“I think it is some sort of waffle maker. Doesn’t it say so on the box?”

“I would never know what to do with this. And this?”

“The latest smoothie mixer.”

“You are kidding me.”

“I kid you not,” he told her with a grin as he leaned back against the cushions. he was really enjoying the show.

She was sitting Indian-style in the middle of the carpeted floor in their brand-new living room surrounded by wrapping papers and the gifts she had unearthed. Sounds of delight and more often than not, questions and the occasional awed look were fascinating to him.

“There are several envelopes with checks in them.” She opened the first one, her eyes widening. “This cannot be real.”

“I assure you it is. Open the rest.”

She tore through the seal with renewed vigor and was stunned into shocked silence at the combined amount.
“What are we supposed to do with them?”

“What do people do with the money?”

“This is a lot.”

“My friends figured they would gift us with the cash or check so that we could buy whatever we want.”

“But you have money,” she pointed out.

“It does not matter. It’s the way of life for the rich and entitled.” There was a tinge of bitterness to his tone.

“What do you want to do with it?” She asked him quietly.

“Whatever you want. Give it away or buy yourself something fancy, like a cashmere jacket.”

She was stung that he thought that she was so shallow that she would want to spend the money on herself. But she had married him for his money, after all.

“I will think of something.” She murmured lightly, putting the checks back into the envelopes. The joy of unwrapping the gifts had disappeared and she was reminded that they were not really a couple. The ceremony had been real, but they were not. It was just a charade. “I will clean up a little later on. I am going up.”

He did not try and stop her, but sat there and watched her leave.

Chapter 8

He sat there for a few minutes staring at the piles of gifts and the colorful wrapping papers. Should he go after her? He wondered wearily. He had seen the hurt look on her face and realized that it had been caused by what he had said. Dragging his fingers through his tangled hair, he got to his feet and left the room, heading upstairs.

He found her on the sofa facing the balcony, her expression pensive.

“Should I apologize?” He saw when she stiffened but did not turn to face him.

“Have you done anything to apologize for?”

“I don’t know,” with a sigh, he came forward and hunkered down in front of her, “this is weird to me, Meredith.”

“And it is not the same way for me?” She challenged. “I know you think that it is all about the money....”

“Isn’t it?” He cursed beneath his breath at the look on her face and rushed to apologize again.

“I am behaving like a jerk when all I want to do is ...,” he went on his knees and crawled until he was between her thighs.

“I want to make love to you again Meredith. All the time I have been downstairs, right before you came down, I wanted to come back up here and make love to you. I do not know what is going to happen between us, but I want to be with you.”

She reached out a hand to cup his jaw and felt the anger and despair draining away. She had stood inside that kitchen and it had felt real. And she realized how much she wanted it to be.

She was not supposed to fall in love with this man, she knew better but was unable to help herself. He was more than his devastating good looks and the lazy smile, but talking to him reveals another layer, possibly one that he did not allow most people to see and she desperately wanted to get to know him better.

“What are you waiting for?” She asked him huskily.

His eyes flared at that and turning his head, he kissed her palm, blue eyes closing. He moved then, scooping her into his arms and taking her to bed.

They spent most of the day in bed, only going downstairs a few times to grab something to eat. He refused to allow her to cook and ordered takeout instead.

“I could have easily made us a meal and I do not feel comfortable eating in bed. These sheets are horribly expensive.”

“Then try not to get the curry on it,” he told her with a grin.

“We are having curried chicken. And it’s spicy.”

“I was introduced to it when I was in Jamaica and I am hooked. I thought about opening up a Jamaican restaurant but dismissed the idea,” he dabbed her mouth with the napkin automatically, sending jolts of awareness trembling throughout her body.

He had made love to her twice after which she had fallen into an exhausted sleep on his chest, only to wake up a few hours later with his mouth on her nipple. She did not want to think about tomorrow or the day after and she was going to try and stay away from the heavy conversation - only for now.

“You know how to cook Jamaican food?” She gave him a skeptical look.

“I told you that I was there for a little bit and I am a fast learner. How do you like it?”

“It’s very spicy.”

“It’s supposed to be,” his blue eyes twinkled as she wrinkled her small nose. He could learn to care about her a lot. he was already crazy with lust for her and found that he wanted her every minute.

It still bothers him that the arrangement between them involved money and he could not forget that women had used him for their advancement in the past, but he found her fascinating and he was going to concentrate on that right now. ‘You could learn - I could teach you.’

“I will get back to you on that,” she played around with the meat that was swimming in gravy.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.’

“Please tell me.”

“I would like us to work.”

He studied her for a minute before reaching for his can of beer and taking a sip.

“Why?”

Her eyes flew to his face. “We are married.”

“I am aware. But why do you want us to work?”

“Don’t you?” She countered.

He shrugged and leaned back against the pillows.
“Marriage takes a lot and our foundation is not exactly solid.”

“Because of the way we started?”

“Yes.”

“We are good together. Not just in bed, but we can carry on a conversation.”

“I agree,” he took another sip of his beer. “I know you are aware of my past and how much it has affected my state of mind. You know what?”

“What?”

“Let’s not talk about that now. Want to go for a drive?”

“Why not?”

“Good. Finish up and I would like to show you something.”

“What is this place?”

“A little slice of heaven,” he told her with a grin. He had advised her to put on layers and saw when she wrapped her scarf securely around her neck. “It belongs to me.”

“This place?” She asked in amazement as she looked around the rather large space where the trees grew in

abundance. There was a gazebo smack in the middle of the grounds.

“Yes.” Taking her gloved hand, he led her further in, along the winding path. It had a certain wild beauty about it that took her breath away.

“What do you mean it belongs to you?”

“It was Mother’s and she left it to me. She had planned on building an escape hatch here eventually, but...,” he left the sentence hanging and she did not press him for the rest, because she knew it.

“What do you plan on doing with it?”

He shrugged, letting go of her hand as he wandered over to a clump of bushes. “Poison ivy,” he gestured towards it, “I was thinking of building an escape hatch myself.”

“Will you still do so?”

“Maybe. What do you think of it?”

“Other than freezing?” She asked with a laugh. “It’s lovely.”

“In the past when I wanted to get away from people, from the harsh reality of life, I would come here. Would just jump in my vehicle and come here with a bottle of scotch for company. And when I was studying my lines, I would come here to chill.”

“There is a certain serenity about it and it is so quiet.”

“It is,” he saw her shiver again, “you are freezing.”

“A little.”

“A lot...,” he said wryly. “I don’t know what I was thinking, bringing you here. Want to pop on into the cafe for a cup of latte?”

“There is one near here?”

“Several blocks away. But I am in the mood for caffeine.”

“Won’t we - you be recognized?”

“Perhaps. What do you say? Shall we live dangerously?”

“Absolutely.”

They were stared at as soon as they stepped into the light and airy building, but was left alone as soon as they were shown to their corner booth.

“We serve the best pecan pie this side of town,” the gum-smacking waitress told them proudly, “and may I say that you look better in person than you do in the magazine or on the internet,” she added, giving Tucker an admiring look, “you are indeed a lucky gal.”

“I am, indeed.”

“I think I am the fortunate one. Sheila, is it?” Tucker asked, looking at her name tag.

“Yes darlin’, and for you, a double slice of pecan smothered with cinnamon with whip cream and cinnamon.”

“Appreciate it.”

“I would appreciate an autograph before you leave.”

“Not a problem,” he assured her with a grin.

With a grateful smile, she wandered away to take care of their orders.

“I think she is crushing.”

“I think so too.”

“How does that make you feel?” She asked with interest.

He shrugged as he drew the glass of water towards him.
“I try not to think about it. There was an instance with a stalker.”

“I recalled reading about the incident. You had all these letters which got progressively more aggressive and leaned towards violence. The woman showed up at a restaurant you were at with several others and started making a scene.”

“She had mental health issues and I decided against pressing charges,” he smiled at the waitress as she brought back their orders.

“You felt sorry for her.”

“She had a family and would not have been helped if she was thrown into prison.”

“You paid for her treatment.”

“Yeah. This is very good.”

“It is,” she agreed, realizing that he did not want to dwell on the matter.

They ate in silence and talked about mundane things until they had finished eating. He was true to his word

and wrote a detailed message on the pages of Sheila's notebook before they left.

"Where to now?" She asked as they went out to the vehicle.

"Home," he told her briefly, taking her hand in his, " I want to lose myself in your delectable beauty."

She woke up the next morning filled with hope and love which was threatening to brim over. He had made love to her throughout the night until she had fallen asleep in his arms. The scent of coffee filtering up, brought a smile to her lips and an eagerness to be with him.

Stretching languidly, she laughed giddily as the sheets drifted down over her naked flesh to settle somewhere on her thighs. She was getting used to not wearing clothing to bed.

He had slept in her suite again and she was hoping that would be changing today. She had not wanted to be the one to make the first move and suggest that she moved into his suite, but she was feeling confident that he would not mind her doing so.

She was completely confident that things were progressing nicely. They had been on the road for most of the day and he had not stopped at a pharmacy to pick up protection.

He had not even said anything to her about it - but had entered her bare back, something she had loved. Her skin felt warm all over and closing her eyes, she brought up the image of last night and the frantic lovemaking.

“Shit! forgive me.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I bit you. And I broke the skin,” his finger had wandered over the spot above her breast where he had feasted hungrily, “it won’t happen again.”

“I really do not mind,” she had trailed her fingers over the abrasions on his smooth chest, “look what I did.”

“That’s different,” he had muttered.

“How is it different? Don’t worry about it,” she had succeeded in distracting him by lifting her hips against his.

“I am hard again,” he had told her in wonder.

“I can feel that.”

“You make me crazy with need.”

“I am woman enough to adore that.”

“Is that so?”

“Hmm...,” she had started nibbling along his neck and had felt when he shuddered.

Her eyes snapped open and she moaned at the tightness of her nipples. “Okay girl, down.” She whispered with a shaky laugh as she climbed out of bed. First a hurried shower - she did not want to keep him waiting!

And then perhaps they could make plans to go out to dinner. It felt strange that she did not have to worry about rushing out to work. She had plans to start looking for a place to start her own agency, but she was waiting for the holidays to finish before she did.

Humming beneath her breath, she glided into the bathroom to take a shower.

“Put me to work,” Tucker muttered as soon as he stepped into his friend’s office.

“What the hell are you doing here, man? You just tied the knot with that beautiful and sexy woman. You should be in bed.” Michael Bigsby looked up from the mountain of paperwork on his desk to eye his friend with a frown on his face.

Michael was a recovering drug addict as well as a former alcoholic and had been through more tragedy than anyone Tucker had ever met. After a near brush with death, he had decided to turn his life around, only to be confronted with a cancer diagnosis.

He had accepted his fate with a fatalistic shrug and declared that when life hands one lemons, one should try and squeeze the lemon for all it is worth. He was pale and looked sickly and wan against the robustness and crackling vitality of his friend.

“We were in bed for the past day and a half. I decided I needed some air.”

Michael eyed him shrewdly as he came further into the room. “I thought we decided that we were going to stay put this time around?”

“Don’t speak to me as if I am a blasted ten-year-old or one of your residents.”

“As soon as you stop behaving like one,” Michael told him mildly, leaning back in the chair. They had both been there for each other when they were going through their hell and had remained friends through it all.

Tucker had pitched in his lot with this place and had always made his way back to help out. He had told Michael that he wanted to do more and he meant it. “You look like hell.”

“You look worse,” he pointed out.

“I have cancer. What’s your excuse?” He countered without a hint of self-pity in his tone.

‘I should not have slept with her!’ Tucker patted his pocket and took out the cigar he had brought with him. “Have a light?”

“There is a bright red sign that says no smoking and do I have to remind you that I have cancer?”

“You smoke like a chimney.”

“I am the one with the illness, so I get to do whatever the hell I want.”

“You are in remission and playing the cancer card is not going to work with me. I am onto you.” Shoving back the cigar into his pocket, he slumped down onto a chair. “I

left her sleeping in bed and told the maid to let her know I was out.”

Michael’s thin black brows lifted. “Not even a note?”

“I did not know what to say.”

“How about: ‘Hey honey, I am popping in to see my friend for a couple of hours and will be back before you know it.’”

Tucker glared at him and felt the overwhelming urge to drink something cold and alcoholic. He had stood there at the edge of the bed eyeing her seductive curves and felt his cock hardening. He had hightailed it out of there as soon as possible.

“We are not like that.”

“You slept with the female who happens to be your wife and I have never seen you so confused, not even when

you thought you were in love with Heather.”

“I was in love with her.”

“Dude, you had a gigantic crush on her and I could not blame you. This time I do believe it is way more than that. And you do not want to face the facts of it.”

“She married me for my money.”

“She married you for a way out of her situation. You were the one who told me that you were certain she was not a gold digger.”

“She is not - at least I don't think she is.”

“Then what's the big deal? You are married to her and you have slept with her. Was the sex good? Or should I bother asking?”

Tucker closed his eyes as the memories clamored at him. He had marked her with his teeth, had used his fingers to claw at her back and buttocks as the powerful climax swept through him. He had lost control too many times to count.

“I see that it was very good.”

“More than.”

“There you go.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“And you tend to complicate things, my friend.”

“I have trust issues.”

“Who doesn’t?” Michael asked him wryly, ignoring the phone ringing on his desk. “Especially in the profession we were in. I am not as pretty as you are or well-connected and women wanted to sleep with me to get ahead. Granted they did that to get to you, but still...”

“I cannot risk putting myself out there,” Tucker sprang to his feet and went to grab a bottle of water from the fridge.

“I think you have already done so,” his friend pointed out wisely.

Guzzling the water, he finished it and tossed the bottle into the recycle bin. “What have you got for me?”

“You are determined to do this?”

“I am.”

With a sigh, Michael pointed to the thick folder in front of him. “This is right up your alley. Twenty-year-old - a former child actor who has done it all and is ready to give up on life.”

Meredith could not believe it. He was gone and had left a message with the maid - one that said he would be out for most of the day. He had not even had the decency to tell her himself - to leave a note - and after what they had shared the past two days.

With a fixed smile on her face and ignoring the curious look the woman was giving her, she had her coffee and a bagel and escaped as soon as she could upstairs to her suite.

Damn him! She thought in despair. Was he with her? Had he gone crying to her about his life and the fact that he had made the mistake of sleeping with her - his own

wife that he had bought and paid for? Because he had - and that was the glaring truth of it.

And she was not going to cry. She was a grown-ass woman who had made a decision and was going to live with it and him. He can do whatever the hell he wants to and she would not moan or bitch about it. With that in mind, she called up Jasmine.

“Hey, how goes the married life?”

“How about lunch? My treat. Meet me at Luce’s”

“Fancy. Of course, I will. Give me an hour at the most and I want to hear all about the last two days.”

Putting away her phone, she went to take a bath this time, giving herself time to soak in the fragrant water.

Afterwards, she went into the vast closet, her steps militant as she waded through the mountain of new

clothing that had been sent from Romano's and picked out a snug fitting black sweater and burgundy dress pants, pairing the outfit with the softest black leather boots she had ever had the opportunity to wear.

Chunky gold accessories were added and she applied more makeup than she had ever done before, deciding to leave her hair loose, she brushed the thick strands until it shone and shook it back until it was flowing past her shoulders in healthy waves and curls. Grabbing a black cashmere jacket, she was ready to leave.

"Wow!" Jasmine's eyes widened as her friend marched in, the obsequious manager showing her to the table. "You look - bitch, you look like a billion dollars. I hate you."

"Thanks. What are you having?"

“The most expensive thing on the menu. You are the one paying for it and you are married to a freaking billionaire. I will have the lobster bisque with the caviar and some of those garlic shrimp.”

“A salad and grilled lobster for me.”

The man bowed and stepped back.

“We should order champagne.”

“It’s noon and you have to go to work.”

“Bitch, please do not remind me,” Jasmine moaned as she gulped her water, “now tell me everything.”

“He is an asshole.”

Jasmine blinked and almost choked on her water.

“Excuse me?”

“He left me in bed this morning after a beautiful night of sex and did not say a word to me.”

“You had sex.”

“Yes.”

“How many times and are the rumors true?”

“What rumors?”

“About his endowment. How big is he?”

Meredith sent her a wry look. “Did you hear the part about him leaving me in bed without a word?”

“I did hear that part, but I want to know - okay fine!”
Jasmine threw up her hands. “Maybe he has a very good explanation. His father took sick and he had to go to the hospital-”

“His dad is fine.”

“His sister then.”

“She is fine too.”

“How do you know?”

“I called the manor and an uppity housekeeper told me that they were both out at some luncheon or the other and that was after I identified myself.” She sighed woefully. “And I have done something foolish.”

“Like what?”

“I have fallen in love with him.”

Chapter 9

He did not call her the entire day and into the evening. She had finished having lunch with Jasmine and had decided to drive to the place where he had taken her the day before and just sat there inside her vehicle thinking about their conversation.

Her phone was on the seat next to her and she had spent an inordinate amount of time staring at it longingly until she had decided to stop torturing herself and had gone to look for her brother.

Jerome greeted her with a wide smile and a warm embrace as she stepped into the shop, he had set up just a week ago. Her wounded heart was a little comforted to see how well he looked and how content. Her unhappiness was well worth it to see the smile on his face.

“You did not tell me you were stopping by.”

“It was a spur of the moment.”

“Look at you!” He held her at arm’s length and studied her from her face downwards. “You look like a movie star.”

“You are exaggerating,” she was not going to tell him that inside she felt like she was dying. It was not his concern. “And this place!”

“You like?” He asked her proudly, turning to look at the wide space with the office around the back. “I have hired a couple of guys and we are already getting businesses. I am even going to be sourcing and selling parts. And I have you to thank sis and that husband of yours,” he stared at her anxiously, “is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” she gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, “don’t worry about me.”

“I would hate to think that you did this for me and you are unhappy.”

“I did this for us,” she corrected him, “are you going to show me the rest of the place?”

“Of course!” His eagerness was heartrending and forcing herself to appear as if everything was normal, she went with him and listened as he detailed his plans. “My daughter is spending a lot of time with me.”

“And the mother?”

“I am being cautious, sis. I know what she put me through and I am not going to go back there.”

“Good,” tucking her hand through his arm, she continued. “Now show me the office.”

Tucker stayed away deliberately. Mark Williams was a mess but just needed a good talking to and the assurance that someone cared. Tucker knew the perils of showbiz and a combination of his mother taking her own life and a cold and heartless father had been combustible, so he could relate.

The younger man had refused to open up at first, but after a few minutes of prodding, he had finally haltingly told them his story. Tucker had promised to come back and see him tomorrow and he had agreed to see a therapist.

“If you were wondering when it is time for you to head home, it was two hours ago man. Unless you plan on crashing here for the night, I suggest you head on home to that lovely wife of yours. Did you call her?”

“I had my hands full.”

“Tucker”

“Stay out of it!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Michael snapped at him. “You are here trying to fix someone else’s life when yours is a goddamned mess.”

“Mine has always been a mess.”

“And you have the opportunity to turn it around and here you are pissing about and avoiding the woman. Go home, It’s almost nine.”

“You are kicking me out.”

“Metaphorically speaking because we both know that you can beat me with one hand tied behind your back. Go home Tuck and talk to her.”

But he lingered before going home by going to the apartment he had given up when they tied the knot. Some of his stuff was still there and the bottles of scotch he had left behind were a welcome sight so without hesitation, he grabbed the bottle and took it with him into the almost empty bedroom.

He could spend the night. It was not like he answered to her or owed her any explanation, he thought as he poured the liquor into a dubious-looking glass.

The place was cold because the heat had been turned off, but there were blankets that he could use. But his friend was right- he was running away - he downed the liquor and took out his phone to see if by chance she had called him. She had not and he did not blame her.

He poured some more liquor into the glass and sipped it this time, a contemplative look on his face as he sat there in the dark. He wanted her so much that it was a joke. It was ridiculous how much he desired her. The taste and feel of her were still on his tongue and he could feel her wrapped tight around his cock.

He was hungry for her soft lips - a groan escaped him as he closed his eyes and imagined his tongue buried deep inside her mouth. He had kissed her as if he was starving and he had been. She had made him hungry for her. But he did not trust her and could not afford to give himself to her.

He drank some more to try and wash away the taste of her on his tongue. He had gone down on her - just this morning before they had tumbled into sleep. And he could still taste the muskiness of her on his tongue. She had climaxed, her body arching towards him as he sipped from her.

“Oh, good Christ!” He whispered, taking too much of the liquor in and choking in the process. Putting the glass away, he drank from the bottle and had no idea when his eyes drifted shut.

Meredith had told herself that she was not going to cry. She had come home and eaten her solitary meal in her bedroom, incredibly grateful that the woman had left for the day so that she would not notice anything amiss.

Then she had waited for him to come home with some sort of explanation even though he did not owe her any. As the minutes ticked on into hours, her concern turned to anger and then bitterness. He was not coming home and was deliberately staying away from her.

She had married a monster - a damned child and she had known that from the very beginning. What was even worse was that she had fallen in love with him. She had known from the start what she was getting into and it should come as no surprise to her.

But oh, how it hurt! He had given her a taste of something so exquisite and had taken it away from her. She hated him and she was through crying for that heartless bastard. But she could not sleep.

She kept thinking about all sorts of scenarios - all of the awful things that could have happened to him. He had

left early this morning and she had not heard a peep out of him. She knew the last place he would go was the manor because he hated it there and the memories were too many and not the best. So, where the hell was, he?

Turning her head to look at the bedside clock, she saw that it was almost midnight. “Okay girl, this is crazy. You are not going to lie here and worry yourself to death over a man who obviously does not know the meaning of the word decency or courtesy. He is not worth it and you need to get some sleep.”

But the stern pep talk did not work and she found herself lying there and staring up into the intricate pattern of the pale gold ceiling, the tears blurring her vision. The obvious solution was to ignore him and get to work.

She had planned on waiting until after the holidays, but that was before she thought there was something between them. She would set up a meeting with Colin Nembhard and pitch a plan she had come up with and then find a location for her office.

She was going to get something out of this! She thought firmly. Her sacrifice and unhappiness were not going to go to waste. With that firm resolve in her mind, she turned onto her side and closed her eyes.

But sleep was a long time coming and the tears went unchecked down her cheeks as the misery enfolded her. She had grown accustomed to his arms wrapped around her and her face pressed against his chest.

And now she was finding it very difficult to fall asleep without him. Damn him to hell!

He stumbled in at some minutes to two - his head pounding and his rumbling stomach reminding him that he had not eaten anything since the soup and sandwich for lunch. He had been jarred awake by the biting cold that had filtered through his thick jacket and the blanket he had thrown over himself.

Stopping inside the kitchen, he warmed himself by the stove and poured himself a glass of scotch, drinking it straight down in order to stop the chills. He would be damned fortunate if he did not come down with a cold and fever or worse pneumonia.

Putting the glass away, he made his careful way upstairs, hand gripping the banister. He crept slowly into the bedroom he had shared with her for the past two nights and slowly eased the doors open.

She was curled up in the corner of the bed, the covers pulled up almost to her chin. And she was sleeping. Obviously, there had been no concern about his whereabouts, he thought bitterly. He had been gone for the day and most of the night and she had not even called to find out if he was okay.

Shaking his head at how unreasonable he sounded, he stepped away and left the room, closing the doors behind him. Going into the room, he had not slept in since their wedding night, he realized that he was not relishing sleeping alone.

He would miss her body pressed against his, her firm derriere brushing against his cock and sending white-hot darts of lust straight to his loins.

Heaving out a breath, he stumbled into the bathroom to see if a warm shower would get rid of the fuzziness and the headache brewing at his temple.

He really should have gotten something to eat. Turning on the tap as warm as he could stand it, he dipped his head beneath the spray and pressed his palms against the tiles. He stayed that way for a few minutes before turning it off and stepping out, reaching for the towel and rubbing it over his wet body.

The headache was still there and his throat felt dry and parched. Shit! He thought hazily as he stumbled into the bedroom and went to the dresser to get a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

He was definitely coming down with something. Hopefully, he could sleep it off and everything would be okay in the morning. He walked with leaden feet over to sit on the edge of the bed. Some Tylenol was in the

cabinet, but the thought of walking several feet back brought the sweat popping up onto his brow.

He was just going to lie down and try and go to sleep. It served him right; he thought grimly as he dragged the cover over him. karma was a bitch and he was reaping the consequences of staying away from her, he thought as his heavy lids drifted shut. He was paying the price for ignoring her the entire day.

She had made up her mind to simply ignore him. She was on a mission and had gotten out of bed at nine. She still could not believe that he had not made it home last night and the painful thought hammering inside her was that he had spent the night with one of those bimbos he had slept with while he had been acting.

But it did not matter, she told herself as she went into the closet to choose an outfit. She was through crying over him and she meant it.

But that was before she went back into the room and saw him stumbling in, his face flushed, his eyes bloodshot.

“I think I am sick ...,” he whispered hoarsely. “I am burning up...,” he was about to crumple to the ground when she rushed over and placed his arm around her shoulders. He leaned against her heavily and she realized that there was no way she would be able to get him to the bed if he did not cooperate and he was as hot as fire.

“I cannot carry you to the bed, you are going to have to help,” she told him urgently, every nasty and hateful thought about him disappearing. “Please....”

“I will try. My feet - they are heavy.”

“A few more steps,” she urged, feeling her entire body bending under his weight, “just a couple more steps.”

His legs gave out just as they reached the bed and he flopped back against the pillows, his eyes closing, his shirt drenched with sweat.

“Don’t leave,” his eyes popped open and he grabbed her hand.

“I am just going to get a wash cloth and some water. I will be right back,” she promised.

Without answering, he let go of her and closed his eyes. His breathing was shallow and that was worrying her a lot. Hurrying into the bathroom, she grabbed a basin and filled it with cold water and then took a towel off the shelf.

He was sleeping, his chest rising and falling rapidly and he was twisting and turning. Putting the things onto the bedside table, she shifted his long legs until he was lying full-length on the bed.

There was no way she was going to be able to move him to get the covers to put over him. grabbing some

blankets from the linen closet, she came back and sat on the edge of the bed. She was going to have to try and get him out of the wet t-shirt and get some medicine down his throat.

He moaned slightly when he felt the water on his chest, his eyes flickering open. A frown touched his brow as he looked at her and his hand grabbed at her as she bathed his chest.

“You are dead.”

“Tucker”

“Mother, you are dead,” he whispered, “you left me and Mariel - how could you?”

Before she could contradict him and clear things up, he drifted back to sleep, leaving her staring at him in naked anguish and a longing to get rid of his pain. Tears blurred her eyes as she continued to bathe his chest.

Somehow, she managed to get off the sodden shirt and put on a sweater on him, pouring the liquid down his throat and making certain he swallowed it. She sat at his side and waited anxiously to see if his breathing would even out and eventually it did.

She sat there and watched as he settled into a somewhat comfortable slumber and pulled the sheets up some more, wiping at the moisture on his forehead and pushing back the tendrils of hair clinging to his skin. “Oh darling,” she whispered, bending to press a kiss on his jaw, “somehow, I am going to make you see me.”

* * * * *

Tucker felt as if he was coming out of heavy fog and had been running for miles. His chest felt tight and he was soaking wet. And he was so damned thirsty, he could drink a gallon of water. His eyes flickered open to the darkened room, a frown touching his brow.

He knew where he was of course. He was at the loft, but not in his suite. His eyes swung around the room, stopping as he saw her curled up on the sofa, her head resting against some cushions. When did he come in here?

He wondered. His brain was foggy and he could not recall most of the events from last night. He knew when he came in in the early hours of the morning and stumbled upstairs. he also recalled the shivering and the aching inside his throat. But he could not for the life of him remember coming into the room.

She stirred just then as if realizing that he had opened his eyes.

“Water,” he rasped.

She got up immediately and went to pour from a jug on the table, bringing it to him. Lifting his head, she guided the glass to his lips and waited while he drank thirstily until it was empty.

“More?” He nodded and flopped back against the pillows. he was feeling much better now that he was hydrated but was still monstrously thirsty. He drank three glasses before he shook his head, indicating it was enough.

“I need to use the bathroom, could you?”

“Put your hand around my shoulders,” she patiently helped him up and they slowly made their way into the bathroom.

“I can manage from here,” removing his hand, he pulled down his pants. Stepping back from him, she took down fresh towels and waited until he was finished to help him back.

“I am going to bring some soup up.”

“What time is it?”

“Ten.”

“As in the morning?”

“In the night. You slept the entire day,” she helped him back to bed, “you must be starving.”

“Like you would not believe.”

“I will be right back.”

He watched as she hurried from the room. He was weak as a kitten and there was a dull throbbing to his temples. She had taken care of him. That much was obvious. He had treated her like crap and she had stayed here and taken care of him the entire day and most of the night.

Why? He thought with a frown. He certainly did not deserve her compassion and he would not have blamed her if she left him to die.

She was back in no time carrying a tray with an enticing aroma that had the saliva pooling inside his mouth.

“What is it?”

“Chicken soup. I had Mrs. Jenkins prepare it and the bread before she left,” she placed the tray over his lap.

“Can you manage?”

He nodded and dipped the spoon into the rich liquid. “Did you eat?”

“Yes.” She went back to sit on the sofa.

“You are far away.”

“I am leaving you to eat in peace.”

He took several spoonful and closed his eyes in delight.

“It’s very good.”

“I had her put a lot of vegetables in.”

“Thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you helping me?”

“You mean after you left me here last night and did not come home?” She asked him mildly. “Just plain

decency.”

“Is that it?”

“What else do you want to hear Tucker?”

“I want you to tell me that I am a lousy husband.”

“You are a lousy husband. But this is not really a marriage, is it?”

He responded with a grunt and continued eating until he had cleaned the bowl and attacked the bread.

“Do you want more?”

He shook his head and she got up to come and take the tray. “I really appreciate it.”

With a graceful nod, she went to put the tray away on a table next to the sofa.

“Could you come here?” He patted the space next to him on the bed.

“Why?”

“Please.”

She made her way toward him and sat gingerly on the side of the bed. “I am sorry.”

“For?”

“For being an ass and not being brave enough to face what you make me feel.”

Meredith felt hope flaring inside her chest, but was careful not to allow it to show. He had hurt her too much and she was not going to stand for it anymore. “And that is?”

He shrugged restlessly. “I don’t know. You are confusing me,” he admitted.

“I see. I should not expect anything....”

“And yet here we are,” he took her hand in his and pressed it against his jaw, closing his eyes briefly. “Get into bed with me.”

“Tucker you are weak and still recovering.”

“I just want to feel your body - your naked body next to mine.”

“I am not certain”

“Please,” he whispered, “just take off your clothes and lie next to me. I still feel sleepy, but I would rest more if you are right here with me.”

With a sigh, she capitulated and taking off her clothes, got in beside him, closing her eyes as he wrapped his arms around her.

Chapter 10

She awoke the next morning to see one hand supporting his face and he was staring down at her.

“Are you ...?”

“I am well. The fever is gone and I am almost back to normal. Almost.”

“Why almost?” She asked with a frown, ready to go and get some more medicine. One hand lifted to feel his neck, relieved to realize that he had been telling the truth. His temperature felt okay.

“I want you.”

Her heart jolted at that. “I am certain you are still weak.”

“I am.”

“There you go”

“With need.” He pulled the sheets down, his hungry gaze going over her naked form. “I have been awake for the past twenty minutes, just waiting for you to open your eyes.”

He touched one breast, his hand covering it completely, eyes flaring as he felt the nipple harden. “My cock is out of control. I thought about trying to wake you with my mouth on your body, but it is a pleasure watching you sleep.”

“Is that so?” Her breath was coming fast between her parted lips.

“Hmm...,” he had progressed from her breast to her flat stomach, pulling the sheets further down. “Your pubic hairs are quite curly. Have you ever shaved down there?”

Meredith could not believe the conversation they were having. Her body felt as if it was on fire!

“Once or twice.”

“Will you let me do the honor next time?”

Her eyes widened and she could feel the tremors starting. “You want to shave me?” Her voice was whispery soft.

“Hmm...,” he was toying with the swollen flesh, sending electric-like jolts into the pit of her stomach. “I think we would both enjoy it. Touch me,” he rasped.

“Where?”

Taking her hand, he wrapped it around the thick length of him. “Feel how hot I am. I feel as if my blood is boiling. This is what you do to me. Pass your finger over the tip. Ah, yes, like that. Don’t stop.” he gritted.

“Put your finger into the slit.” His body arched and he closed his eyes. “It feels so damned good. I had not been with anyone for a long time and that first night we were together - it felt as if I had been denied a meal for centuries. You have to stop now....”

“I thought you did not want me to.” She had become the seductress and was enjoying the role.

“There is something I would like you to do for me.”

“What is it?”

“Come on top. I want you to ride me.” Without waiting for her response, he plucked her up and placed her onto his rigid cock. It felt strange at first - him being deep inside her.

“Am I hurting you?” His large hands were spanning her small waist and the tightness of her wrapped around his cock was so incredibly erotic, that he knew he was not going to last.

“No.”

“Would you tell me if I am?”

“Possibly not.” She started to move, her head thrown back, fingers digging into his chest. The sight of her on top of him, her pert breasts with their pebble-like nipple, her hair flowing down in wild disorder was something he wished he could capture.

He fervently yearned to have some sort of talent so that he could capture her like this. It was an image he would never be able to erase from his mind.

“Slow down,” he instructed harshly. His own body was shuddering, his skin hot to the touch.

“I can’t!” Her head came forward and she bent towards him. “Please.” Using one hand, she nudged a nipple towards his mouth and he did not hesitate. His fingers biting into her hips, he maneuvered her against his cock, his mouth closing over the tight bud.

The control was precarious at best and the minute he touched her nipple - it eroded completely. He pulled hard on the nipple, his hips moving upwards as he drove into her. He had been without her for a night and could not believe that it felt like weeks.

The moans - wild incoherent sounds coming from her echoed around the room and drove him into a frenzy that was too hard to explain. He heard her cry, his mouth still busy on the nipple, pulling harder and faster, his body surging into hers, with a loss of control that was bewildering.

He vaguely heard her call out his name as she crested over his cock, her climax driving her to dig her nails into

his chest, making grooves and eventually breaking the skin. He was right behind her but wanted to prolong the moment.

But it was out of his hands and he did not want to pull out of her. The climax claimed him viciously and changed position so that she was beneath him, he finally released the nipple. Dragging her feet upwards, he placed them against his chest, bending them at the knees as he drove into her.

She cried out sharply, her fingers clenched into the sheets, her bottom lifted as she met his frantic thrusts. She could feel the slight pain as he drove in deep, but it could not compare to the pleasure of him touching the core of her.

He was magnificent, she thought achingly, taking in the wild shoulder-length hair and the signs of passion on his handsome face. His blue eyes had darkened and his expression fierce. "I don't want to come yet," he whispered thickly. "I don't want to - Sweet Christ! My sweet girl ...," his head bowed and he had to stop for a minute.

His heart was hammering inside his chest and he felt as if the fever was back. With a cry of surrender and his body shaking from the effort to try and slow things down, he drove into her, spilling his seed deep and watering the mouth of her womb.

He should have used protection because things were too complicated between them to introduce a child into the mix, but nothing mattered right now, except what they were both experiencing. Absolutely nothing!

She crept out of bed quietly, careful not to wake him. They had both fallen asleep – he had gathered her to him, drifting off to sleep almost immediately.

She had listened to his breathing and monitored it, vastly relieved that he was not feverish and everything seemed to be okay with him. She reached for her robe and put it on, covering her nakedness.

Her plans had changed. She would send Mrs. Jenkins home and continue to care for him. In doing so, she was hoping that they would grow closer. She was not going to kid herself that he had fallen in love with her or that he was suddenly going to trust her. But last night she would like to believe that there had been a breakthrough.

It was almost eleven and as she descended the stairs the scent of freshly made coffee tickled her nostrils as well as what she was sure was oatmeal.

“Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Mrs. Davis.” The woman wiped her hands on her apron. “I had no idea you were still here.”

“So is my husband. He was not feeling well as you know yesterday but is feeling a lot better. What do you have on today?”

“The laundry and some dusting.”

“Are you through with breakfast?”

The woman nodded. “I put a roast in the oven for supper.”

“Excellent. I am giving you the rest of the day off.”

“Miss?”

“You may have the rest of the time off. I want to spend the time to finish taking care of my husband. The chores you have planned for today can wait for tomorrow.”

“Of course. The roast is in the oven and I have set the timer.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins. Take advantage of the time to attend to personal things.”

“I have to run to the store to pick up some things for my church. Thank you for the time.”

“You are welcome.”

Meredith waited until the woman had finished putting the things away and picked up her handbag in readiness to leave.

“See you in the morning Mrs. Jenkins.”

Going over to the sideboard, she poured herself a cup of coffee and scooped up some oatmeal to put into a bowl. The scent of the roast was permeating the kitchen and making her hungry.

Should she bring up a tray for him? She wondered as she took a seat around the counter. She certainly did not

want to appear too eager to please, but taking care of him yesterday had made her feel wonderfully needed that she wanted to continue doing it, even for a short time.

He was not an easy man to love – his moods shifting so much that it makes her feel dizzy. She wanted him to meet her halfway but was not certain when that was going to happen.

She had just taken several sips of her coffee when she felt his presence. Her head lifted and she felt the familiar jolt as she stared at the man leaning against the doorjamb. “The scent of coffee woke me up and alerted me to the fact that you were not next to me. Where is the housekeeper?”

“I sent her home early. I just came down a few minutes ago and breakfast was already prepared. She also started supper.”

“Good.” His blue eyes still looked a little sleepy and gave him a decidedly sexy look that was incredibly appealing. His hair was in its usual tangled mess and he was

wearing sweat pants and a white tee that stretched across his broad shoulders.

“How do you feel?”

“Super.” He gestured to the coffee pot. “I could drink a gallon of it.”

“Coming up.” Pushing her meal aside, she jumped to her feet and went to get a cup.

“You are not wearing anything under the robe,” he murmured.

“No, I ...,” she broke off with a moan when he came behind her and cupped her breasts from behind. “Tucker ...”

“I woke up and you were not there. I thought you had gone.”

“The coffee.” Her head drifted back as he nibbled on her neck.

“I need this more,” he had parted her robe, “you did the right thing in getting rid of the housekeeper.”

“I wanted to take care of you ...,” her body was getting light, her knees trembling.

“Now I would like to return the favor.”

“I don’t need taking care of.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.” He was using his tongue on her skin and his fingers were doing wonderful things to her nipples.

He lifted her from behind and strode with her into the living room. Placing her onto the sofa, he quickly shed his clothing and joined her. “I think we should stay in today.”

“That’s a good idea since you are not fully recovered.”

“Hmm...,” he was busily teasing her nipples with his fingers, “no phone calls or distractions. An extension of our wedding and I want to make it up to you.”

“You are doing very well,” she slid her hands up and around his neck.

“I aim to please.” He slid a hand between her thighs and they parted immediately, giving him access to the core of her. “How is this?” He teased her swollen flesh and watched as her lips parted.

“Keep going.”

“And this?” He slid a finger into her warmth and found the moistness there.

“Better.”

“Am I pleasing you, darling?”

“Very much.”

That’s good because I aim to do so much more.” And he did.

She was on a euphoric high for a few days until the big birthday bash that Heather threw for her husband in the second week of January at the manor. He had instructed the housekeeper to move her stuff into his bedroom suite.

“It’s bigger,” he had said in the way of explanation. And she had not said anything, careful to keep the delight from showing on her face.

Now they were at the rather impressive Nembhard’s mansion and she was not certain she had wanted them to come. The lovemaking was passionate and powerful and they had not left the house in almost a week. At one point, a snow storm had hit and they had decided to stay home.

The housekeeper had not come in and she had enjoyed cooking for them and enjoying the time they spent together. She was irrevocably in love with him and since it was new and nothing she had ever experienced before; she was very vulnerable. He never talked about his past and his plans for the future.

They made love every night and several times of the day, but that was it. She did not know much about him other than what she had read in the magazines and on the internet. They had not been to the manor since that

first time and his sister had called several times to check on him without asking to speak to her.

He had also received calls from Heather Nembhard, something she had been able to identify by the expression on his face and the fact that he always left the room.

She had dressed with extra special care for the party. The dress, a peach cashmere with cowl-neck and very snug was a Romano's original. She had left her hair loose and applied the makeup on her own.

Diamond drop earrings and a matching necklace and bracelet completed the stunning outfit and her black knee-high boots were of the softest leather.

He had told her she was beautiful and she had preened at the compliment, but now standing inside the very luxurious living room with the lavish decorations and the guests milling around the room. The conversation was at a high level and sounds of laughter came from various sections of the room.

She had been introduced to several of the wives and members of her husband's club and had even been invited to become part of the many and varied charities they had going on.

She knew the exact moment he glimpsed Heather Nembhard. Her heart dropped like a heavy stone inside her chest at the wide smile on his lips and the indulgent look on his face. Meredith struggled to keep her face expressionless as the woman wearing a stunning electric blue gown came towards them, her eyes only for Tucker.

"You made it!" She reached out both hands and he immediately let go to take them.

"You had doubts that I would not be here?" He asked her teasingly, squeezing her hands

"Something like that," turning her head, she gave Meredith a cool nod, "welcome to our home."

"I think I will go and say hi to the birthday guy," she tossed her husband a careless smile, "I am quite certain

the two of you have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Meredith ...,” he began, stopping as she hurried away.

“I take it that things are progressing?”

Tucking her hand through his arm he fell into step next to her. “She took care of me for the past week when I had the damned fool idea of staying at my old apartment without any heat.”

“You were ill?” Heather stopped and forced him to do the same. “And you never said?”

“I cannot call you whenever I have a cold darling. We are both married.”

“That has never stopped you before,” her dark brown eyes searched his face, “how are you?”

“Fighting fit.” Grinning, he bent to kiss her on the one flawless cheek. His head lifted and his eyes narrowed as he glimpsed his wife carrying on a very animated conversation with Colin Nembhard. “They seem to be getting along,” he added lightly.

“Are you jealous?”

“Of course not. Why don’t we go and get me something to eat?”

“They are just friends,” Colin told her quietly. They had been talking for the past half hour and the woman had not taken her eyes off his wife and her husband, and he could relate to what she was going through because he had been through it in the past.

Now he was confident in the love his wife had for him and had learned to accept the strange bond between her and Tucker.

“I want to believe that,” lifting her champagne glass, she took a sip of it and deliberately turned away from the couple who had been joined by several others.

Colin eyed her thoughtfully. “My wife is concerned that you might be using him.”

Meredith’s eyes flared at that and she had to force herself to tamp down the anger.

“I am not and even if that’s the case, it’s none of her business.”

“Believe me, I have been telling her that as well.”

She turned her head to look at them and felt the painful stabbing inside her heart when he bent to whisper

something in her ear that had her laughing and punching him on the arm.

“How can you stand the spectacle they are making?”
She asked angrily.

“I am in love with her and she is the mother of my children.” Putting away the glass, he took hers and put it next to his. “Why don’t we make a spectacle of our own?” Grinning wickedly, he took her hand and led her to the dais where there was a live band playing. He whispered something to the leader before leading her onto the dance floor.

“Can you dance?” He asked her with lifted brows as the music started to play.

“I am somewhat of an expert,” she told him airily, resisting the urge to look over to where her husband was to see if he was watching.

“Good, let’s do this.”

Placing her hand in his, she placed one onto his shoulder and lifted her head, a determined look on her lovely face.

“That’s the right attitude. Ready?”

“I am.”

It was the clapping and cheers that had the group where Tucker and Heather were, turning around. A jolt touched his heart as his eyes became transfixed on her. She was lovely and graceful like a gazelle.

He felt a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach as Nembhard wrapped his hand around her small waist and brought her up against his body as the music slowed down.

“What the hell is he doing?” He was not aware that he had said it aloud until he felt Heather’s eyes on him. “He

is doing that to piss me off.”

“Is it pissing you off?” Heather asked him quietly.

“Whatever!” He was trying to be blasé but was not pulling it off. His heart was thudding inside his chest and he felt the tingle of something he had never experienced before.

“How can you stand him holding her so tight?” He demanded after a few minutes and practically stamping his feet.

“I am confident in his love for me and you are imagining things,” she told him mildly, “I am not used to seeing you like this.”

“Like what?” Tearing his gaze away from the couple, he looked at her. He wanted to punch the bastard in the face and it did not matter that he was the father of his godchildren. The man was touching what belonged to him.

As the thought filtered through his head, he felt the awareness tumbling inside his brain. He stumbled back a step as something popped inside his brain. He did not want anyone touching her, because she was his wife! She was his. S

he was his and he had no idea what had happened between the time he had met her and offered his strange proposal – but something was happening between them. And it scared the hell out of him. Taking a deep breath, he excused himself and strode off onto the dance floor to tap on Colin's shoulder.

“I am here to retrieve my wife.”

Colin's eyes twinkled in amusement as he relinquished his hold on her. “I was wondering how long it was going to take you. We will talk some more about your idea Meredith. Shall we say Monday at noon? We could do lunch.”

“That's perfect.”

“We might have plans,” Tucker told him stiffly.

“Call me and let me know,” with that he strode off to get his own wife.

Chapter 11

He was silent on the ride home and a few quick glances at his profile revealed that something was bugging him. Good, she thought grimly. Now he knows what it feels like to be burning up with a fit of jealousy that was so intense that she had been tempted to march over and drag him away from that detestable woman by his ponytail.

She had her husband and perfect children - a boy and a girl and her husband obviously adores her. Why the hell couldn't she be satisfied with all of that?

She thought fuming. He had danced with her and afterwards had stayed glued to her side, not saying anything, not even when the celebration had commenced the speech and the children had been brought down by their nannies to wish their dad, happy birthday.

She had taken a look at them and seen how they gravitated to Tucker and had felt a longing to have some

of her own. To see the look on his face as he holds their child in his arms. Would that ever happen to them? They had been making love without using anything and she was wondering if she could even conceive.

The thought had never entered her mind before now. First, there had been the struggle to make two ends meet when they had lost their mother and then there had been their dad's diagnosis. It had been a very rough and rocky road for them growing up.

"Tired?" She jumped slightly at the sound of the deep voice interrupting her thought and was unaware that she had sighed out loud.

"A little."

"We are almost home."

Home, she thought longingly. It was something she desperately needed, with him. But he was aloof and possibly in love with another man's wife.

“We are here,” he announced a few minutes later as he brought the vehicle to a stop.

She hopped out, dragging the coat closer to her as the wind sliced through the material. “I will be right up.”

Without asking what he had to do, she keyed in the code and made her way up, welcoming the warmth from the central heating.

Going straight into the kitchen, she put the kettle on and rummaged through the pantry for the chamomile packet of tea. She slipped off her boots and put them away and padded in her stockinged feet to get the cup and honey.

She was just pouring the water over the pouch when he came in and leaned against the doorjamb.

“I am making tea.”

“So, I see,” he was looking at her with hooded eyes, his face expressionless, “I have to go away tomorrow.”

“What?”

He came further into the room and walked over to the window to gaze out at the encroaching darkness. “My mother has a maiden aunt who practically raised her when her parents died and she is now dying herself. She asked to see me.”

“You have an aunt on your mother’s side? Was she at the wedding?”

He shook his head and turned to look at her. “She was diagnosed with MS and RA a few years ago and things got really bad a year or so ago, making it very difficult for her to move around.

She never had children and mother was her only remaining family. She never liked dad and thought he was not good enough for her little girl as she puts it. so, it is left up to me to be there for her. Mariel will be going as well.”

“Just family!” She stirred in the honey and tried to keep the bitterness from her tone. “Which I am not. Does she even know about me?”

“I did not want to upset her. She is in a very fragile state right now and it would not have done to tell her that I was getting married because of an arrangement.”

“Of course not. How long will you be gone?”

“A few days, possibly a week.”

“Where is she?”

“Italy.”

Her eyes flew to his face in surprise.

“I told you I lived in Italy for a year or maybe I did not tell you. When mother took her own life, she broke down and has never been the same.”

“Have you made reservations?” She could hardly believe she was being so calm and rational.

“We are taking the jet.”

“I see. How early will you be leaving?”

“Dawn,” he shoved his hands into his pockets.

Invite me to go with you and stop my heart from shattering into tiny pieces. But she did not say the words out loud, after all, she has her pride.

“Would you like me to pack?”

“I would like you to come upstairs so that I can make love to you.”

“I don’t think so.” Her heart had skittered at that, but she had to remain strong and firm. Each time she thought they were at a point where they were coming to understand and move forward, he pushed them a step backwards and she could not stand it.

“Why the hell not?” He asked with a frown.

“I am tired and I am going to an all-day charity event being hosted by some of the wives. I have been asked to be a part of the planning committee and I have accepted.”

There was no need to tell him that the offer had been made tonight and she had told the women she would

think about it. But things have changed. She was not going to sit around waiting for him to traipse all over Europe and come back when he feels like it. “How long have you known about your aunt?”

“A week.”

“I see!” She turned away to hide the hurt on her face. She had taken several sips of the tea and was not in the frame of mind to take another sip. Besides, she did not think it could get past the blockage in her throat.

“I wanted to tell you.”

“But I am not really your wife, am I?” She said bitterly, dumping the rest of the tea into the sink. “I am going up.”

He grabbed her arm as she came alongside him. “What do you want me to say?” He demanded harshly. “That I am sorry for not including you in our family affairs? Is that what you want to hear?”

“Let go of me,” she whispered, the tears stark in her eyes, “and go to hell.”

“I am already there,” he told her hoarsely, “and I cannot give you what you want.”

“What is it that you think I want?”

“Love,” his mouth twisted bitterly, “I cannot give you that.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” taking a deep breath, she steadied herself, “now please take your hands off me.”

“I need you.” The words appeared to be forced out of his mouth. His teeth were clenched so hard that his jaws were tense.

“I did not want to need anyone and here I am needing you.” His fingers tightened on her arm and she could feel his blunt nails biting into her skin through the dress. “I needed her and she chose to leave...,” he broke off and started to turn away.

“I am not her,” she whispered aching, unable to stay angry with him, “I am here and I need you to see me. I am not going anywhere. I am in love with you”

“Don’t!” He said sharply, flinging her arm away.

“It’s too late,” she ploughed on bravely, determined to have her say, “I have fallen in love with you and would like us to have a real marriage.”

“That will never happen,” his dark blue eyes flashed at her, “you married me to get out of your worries and I ...,” he passed a hand over his tumble of blonde hair.

“And you proposed to get your father off your back and to stop the rumors about you and another man’s wife.”

She blinked at the tears.

“A woman you are still in love with - still have confused feelings for, ” she lifted her chin, trying hard not to break down, “I know all that and it makes no difference. I love you Tucker and it is something you are going to have to accept.”

He watched as she turned and walked out of the room, leaving him standing in the middle of the room. She loved him! But could he believe her and did it matter anyway? He had been through so much in life that he did not know what was real from what was not.

His mother had told him that she loved him and yet she had taken the easy way out. His father had never uttered the word, at least not to his children. He had stopped trying to gain his approval when he was thirteen years old, but Mariel had continued and was still trying.

He needed a drink; he thought as he turned to the cabinet to try and quench his thirst. He had unscrewed the top off the bottle and was about to pour the liquor when he stopped. He was leaving early in the morning

and depending on how long his aunt had left he was going to be away from her.

He needed her, needed to lose himself in her and forget the problems tumbling around inside his head even for tonight and that was what she did for him.

Putting the bottle away, he turned and headed up the stairs.

Meredith creamed off her makeup methodically, her eyes bright with unshed tears. She wished she could go back – to where? She stopped in mid-thought and realized that her life had been crappy before she met him and she was not just thinking about the financial aspect of it.

Her only friend was Jasmine and she and her brother had been in a minefield that dealt with first the death of their mother and then the long and excruciating illness of their dad.

An illness that had put them deep into debt - debts that had caused her to accept Tucker's offer and now she was in love with him, with no hope of him returning her feelings.

Getting up from the vanity mirror, she selected a lavender lace nightgown from the drawer and pulled it over her head before going into bed and pulling the comforter over her. He would probably sleep in another room- her breath caught inside her throat as he came slowly into the room, his eyes zeroing on the bed.

"I need time," he told her gruffly.

"Then take it," she told him coolly.

"I do not want to be away from you."

"You will be away from me for a week," she pointed out.

“I have to go, Meredith.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I do - dammit Mer, I am trying to make sense of what I am feeling,” his shortened version of her name made her weaken.

“You hurt me at every turn, Tucker. Every other word out of your mouth is like a gunshot that pierces my skin and shatters my heart. I cannot take it anymore. The fact that I accepted your proposal because I was in a desperate situation is being held over my head like the sword of Damocles and I hate you for it.”

“You said you love me,” he had come further into the room and was now sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Believe me, I can do both,” she took a deep breath, “go away Tucker.”

She watched him slide off the bed and thought he was really leaving, ignoring the disappointment churning through her stomach. But he was merely taking off his clothes. she remained silent when he slid in next to her and pulled the sheets from her. His hand cupped her cheek, his eyes were bright with passion.

“I don’t know what I am feeling, but I know that I cannot be without you. I cannot promise to love you, but I need you. let me have you, Meredith. Give yourself to me so that it can sustain me for the time I will be away,” his lips were sliding along her jawline and heading to the sides of her mouth.

“I do not want to hurt you, darling,” his tongue was tracing the outline of her lips. “I will try not to - I will try Give me your tongue,” he whispered hoarsely.

She capitulated with a ragged sigh and turned in his arms, her mouth opening beneath his.

All the way to the private airfield, he was thinking of her. He had struggled out of bed, and untangled himself from her with great reluctance. It had been the most difficult thing he ever had to do and even then; he had stood there staring at her naked curves.

He had broken the clasp of the gown in his haste to get to her body and had made love to her with an apparent restlessness.

And he had stood there gazing down at her like a lovesick idiot. He had not packed and had crept around the room and inside the closet throwing things into an overnight case. Now he was on his way and thoughts of her were filling his mind.

“You are quiet.”

Stirring himself and shaking away the image of her in his bed, he turned his head to look at her. “Just thinking,” he said briefly.

“And you are different.”

“Different how?”

“More reflective.”

“I have grown up in the last few years.”

“You mean the last couple of weeks.”

“Perhaps,” he gave her an amused smile, “Trying to delve into my mind, little sis?”

“I have not been your little sister for many years now,” she reminded him dryly, “how are things progressing on the home front?”

His expression became shuttered. “Why are you asking?”

“I am concerned about my big brother.”

“No need.”

‘I think there is. I never approved of the match....’

“I did not need your approval,” he reminded her harshly.

“I want you to be happy.”

“Like you are?” He asked her mockingly. They were being driven to the airport by one of the drivers employed by the company and the town car afforded them a certain amount of privacy with the partitions locked tight. “You have been married for three years and still without children. You and that husband of yours are like a couple of strangers.”

“Stay out of my marriage,” she told him coldly.

“I will if you stay out of mine. At least I know exactly where I stand with my wife.”

She gave him a strange look.

“What?”

“The way you said wife - it sounded very possessive.”

“You are imaging things,” he said dismissively.

“I am most certainly not,” she continued to stare at him,
“you have feelings for her.”

“She is an exquisite creature and I have always had a weakness for beauty,” he told her with a self-deprecatory smile, turning his head to look out the window.

“You slept with her.”

His head whipped around and he gave her a hard stare.
“What does that have to do with you?”

“It was supposed to be an arrangement.”

“And it is.”

“Yet you have complicated things by sleeping with her.”

“She is after all my wife,” he pointed out mildly, stretching his long legs out and crossing them at the ankles.

“What if there is a child involved?” She demanded.

He had thought of that as well and realized that he was no longer concerned about that aspect of it. “Then there is. Mind your own business.”

“You are taking this grudge or resentment against dad too far.”

To her surprise, he burst out laughing, blue eyes twinkling. “I have not even given the old man a second thought since I have ...,” he waved one hand in the air, “since of late.”

“That’s good, I think. You both should come to dinner.”

“The very thought of eating in that place is giving me indigestion.” he shook his head as she opened her mouth to speak. “Drop it Mar, and we are here.”

“A hot beverage stand?”

“I thought it was appropriate.” Colin told her with a grin as he screwed the cover onto his foam cup, “and Peter here makes the best hot chocolate I ever had. Go ahead, taste.”

She did, her eyes widening.

“What do you think?”

“I think I will be coming here from now on, at least while I am on this side of town. Where are we going?”

“Over here,” he waved a gloved hand to the quaint little park with its wrought iron benches and winding pathways. “I can see the view from my office window.”

The snow had covered most of the benches and the trees surrounding the area and the stunning whiteness was spectacular.

“Quite a view. I thought we would meet in your office.”

“I wanted to get out and clear my head. Too many meetings back-to-back.”

“It’s a lovely setting.”

“I love your idea.”

She sent him a startled look. “You do.”

‘Low budget homes in the middle of the uptown area is a grand idea.’

“Which is going to cost a fortune.”

“Naturally.” They had started walking along the winding cobbled roads that had been cleared of snow. It was early afternoon and a few people were milling around, probably ones who had the same idea that Colin had.

They were given curious looks but mostly left alone. “There is a block of office buildings on Ritchie Street that had been derelict and abandoned for years. I was thinking of acquiring to build more offices, but the apartment building sounds like a good idea.”

“Cozy little duplexes with balconies across from the bedrooms. Mostly geared towards young executives or couples just starting,” her dark brown eyes bright with excitement.

Colin studied her for a moment, objectively admiring the flawless skin of her face. She was bundled up to the neck, the thick woolen scarf almost covering her chin. Her hair was loose around her face and she was wearing a matching woolen hat that covered her forehead and ears.

“Do I have something on my face?” She asked him mildly.

He shook his head with a smile. “If Davis does not see you, then he is more of a fool than I thought.”

“Thank you....” She took a sip of the beverage and felt the warmth infusing her body. She had awoken to find him gone, which had not come as a surprise to her, but she had been unable to quell the disappointment and pain.

He had called to let her know that they had landed and she had not heard from him since. She had gotten up this bright and beautiful Monday morning, determined to get on with her life. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

“What?”

“Seeing them together.”

“It did at first.” They had come to a lovely green lamp post that had intricate etchings all over it. “I took my wife for granted right after we were married. We barely knew each other, but the attraction was incredible and could not be denied.

I proposed to her on the spur of the moment and we did not get to know each other. ” He gave a wry grimace. “She had a career and when she married me, she gave it up to become a wife and eventually a mother.

After two miscarriages, she started getting depressed and I was not sympathetic to her plight or tried to understand why she was sad. Tucker Davis came back from roaming the world and was instantly taken with her. It was his interest that made me realize what I had.” He touched her hand briefly.

“They are not intimate and I trust my wife. I also believe that he feels something for you. But he has this baggage carrying around and it will not be easy for you to get through to him. It is going to take a lot of patience on your part.

Personally, I think he is not worth the effort. But that's just me," he added with a grin that achingly reminded her of her husband.

"Thanks for that," she told him wistfully, "did you know about his dying aunt?"

Colin nodded.

"Of course, you do. Your wife knows everything about my husband and I know absolutely nothing."

"Do you want your marriage?" He asked her quietly.

"I want to say no, but I would be lying. I want to say that he is really not worth the effort, but that is not the issue right now." A sigh escaped her and her attention was caught by the squirrels scurrying up the nearby tree. "But I am in love with the jerk and no matter how much he behaves like a prick, it changes nothing."

“There is this place - it is owned by the company - I took Heather there for a week.

There is no cell phone tower and no internet connection. I took her camping, that was where our son was conceived.” A tender smile played around his lips. “We have since built a cabin on the property. I am going to suggest that you take your husband there for a week or two. It has a certain serendipity about it that is indescribable.”

Her eyes brightened at that and hope flared inside her chest. Maybe that is what they needed. A place away from everything so that they could connect. “I think I will take you up on that.”

“Just let me know and I will make it available for you,” he promised.

Chapter 12

“I keep forgetting how beautiful this place is,” Mariel murmured as she breathed in the fresh air coming from the sea.

The little fishing village of Vernazza had been home to Agatha Moore for as long as she could remember and had been home for her niece Monica Moore-Davis until in her early twenties when she had met Theodore Davis had visited the picturesque village and swept the innocent beauty off her feet.

Agnes had never forgiven him for taking her little girl from her and blamed him for the way her life had ended up. Monica’s suicide had devastated her so much that she had never truly recovered from it.

“She is frail,” Tucker was restless. Ever since he had landed at the airstrip and the boat had taken them to their aunt’s lovely cobbled residence, he had felt the urge to turn around and go back home. He had spent the

few hours after their long journey, sitting by his aunt's bed and listening to her occasional ramblings.

Her eyesight was failing along with her memory and she had mistaken Mariel for Monica several times. After the first few times, they stopped correcting her.

“She is dying.”

“Yes!” He shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the pillar, as he stared out across the buildings that looked like toys from the vantage point on the crest of the hill. Snow had fallen – what looked like a few days ago and was clinging to the vines.

Agatha Moore had inherited prime land from her parents and had also inherited some of the finest olive groves in the country. “I recalled coming here during the summer weeks and walking those trails with mom.”

“She was so proud of this place that it was a wonder she left.”

“Falling in love does that to you.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “Perhaps she should have stayed here. Find some homely villager and fall in love and marry.”

“We would not be here,” his sister pointed out.

“Instead, she fell in love with a rich and powerful man who promised her the world and did not end up delivering. Love is a bitch.”

“You don’t believe that.”

His thick eyebrows lifted as he looked at her. “I do.”

“You don’t,” she insisted quietly. She was not yet recovered from the long travel and not yet adjusted to the difference in time, but the coffee was making a huge difference. “You have been restless and fidgety since before you got here and I have seen you staring at the phone every few seconds.”

“That does not mean a thing.”

“You miss her. I don’t know her and I will probably always think she is into you for your money, but there is obviously something between the two of you. Why don’t you call her?”

“I did when we landed.”

“That was yesterday,” she pointed out, “this would be a perfect honeymoon spot for you.”

“With death hanging in the air? He scoffed.

“It does not matter. Aunt Agatha has accepted her lot in life and has not been happy since Mom took her life. It is time this place sees some form of life and laughter.”

“You are being fanciful.”

“I am being realistic and you know that,” she glanced at the delicate timepiece on her wrist, “it is now almost four in the afternoon here, which means it is almost ten in the morning. Call her.”

“She might be busy.”

She sent him an amused smile and reaching over, plucked the phone out of his hand and pressed the button. “I will go on in and check on our aunt. Give you some privacy.”

He brought the phone to his ear as it started ringing, his heart thudding inside his chest.

“Hello?”

Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the column. She sounded like a breath of fresh air on a hot and sultry

day.

“Hi. Just wanted to check in.”

“That’s nice. How are you?”

“So, so. You?”

“I was out yesterday. I went to a meeting with Colin and we had a lovely and productive discussion.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. How is your aunt?”

“Failing daily. She does not know who we are most of the time.”

“I am sorry to hear that. How long will you be?”

“Hopefully not more than a week. Ever heard of Vernazza?”

“A little fishing village in Italy. I have heard of it. I have a fascination with all things and places Italian.”

“I never knew that,” he dragged his fingers through his hair, “we could come back here in the future.”

There was a pause and he waited in anticipation. He had left her without a word and now was attempting to make some sort of overture.

“What are you saying, Tucker?”

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the column. “I miss you,” he told her raggedly, “there I have said it. Being here where my aunt looks like a frail

version of herself is making me depressed and I – I wish you were here.”

“I wished that too. Colin suggested something.”

“What is it?”

He listened as she told him about the cabin that was recently erected. He knew about it of course and knew that was where their son was conceived or so Heather had told him.

“You want to brave the wild?” He asked her teasingly.

“I want us to be alone together to see if we can work it out. I want to get to know you Tucker and I would like you to let me.”

He rubbed the side of his head. “My mother grew up here.” He told her absently. “She was born in New York, but her parents died when she was a little girl, a tragic

boating accident that took them from her. Her mother's sister had moved to Italy to take control of this place.

When they died, aunt Agatha immediately came and took charge of mother and took her as her own. She met and fell in love with my dad and he swept her off her feet, taking her away from her home." He bowed his head and felt the headache brewing. "Had she stayed...."

"Don't do that. She made her choice and it is no use going back down that road."

"Mariel said the same thing. It's just difficult seeing her this way."

"I would like you to picture something."

"What is that?"

"Me lying in bed wearing nothing but the sheets."

His heart quivered and his cock came to attention. “How about without the sheets?” He asked huskily.

“Even better.”

“Thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

“Will you talk to me some more?”

“Of course. I love you, Tucker.”

His body shuddered and for a minute he could not speak. “Say it again,” he whispered hoarsely, “I need desperately to hear it.”

“I love you, darling. Hurry and come home to me.”

“Meredith...,” words failed him and he felt his knees going weak. “Good Christ! How I need you.”

“You have me.”

“Do I? Is that a promise you can make, no matter how difficult I get?”

“It is.”

“Thank you. What are you doing now?”

“I am heading out to a luncheon meeting with Leesa and Kelly.”

“Am I keeping you?”

“I just got up and am about to get something to eat. The bed is incredibly empty without you in it.”

“Not for much longer.” He promised her hoarsely. He looked up as his sister came back out, a stricken look on her face. “I have to go sweetheart; I think it is time.”

“Know that my thoughts and prayers are with you.”

“I am beginning to believe that. Talk to you later.”
Straightening up, he shoved the phone into his pocket and looked at Mariel.

“We should call the nurse.”

“Already done. She is asking for you.”

Tucker nodded and took a deep breath. "I am okay. And you were right, talking to Meredith steadied me."

"Shall we?" Holding out a hand, she waited for him to take it so that they could walk in together.

"We could have had this meeting at the manor," Heather told her mildly, pulling apart her neatly folded napkin to place over her lap. She had been the one to choose the restaurant and it was obvious the manager was a close personal friend of hers.

The woman was oozing with self-confidence and was already getting on Meredith's nerves. After her conversation with Tucker, she had been in such a good mood that she had called and asked for the meeting. She had gone to meet with Leesa and Kelly about a function they were planning.

Now in order to solidify her relationship with the man she had fallen in love with, she had decided that it was time for her and the woman standing between them to come to some sort of truce.

Colin had told her that he accepted the relationship between his wife and her husband, but she was a long way from doing so. Tucker kept sending her mixed messages and she had no idea what was inside his heart or his mind.

“I wanted a neutral territory.”

“And you figured that the Salad bar was it.” There was a hint of amusement in the woman’s cultured tone.

Meredith felt uncomfortable and inadequate around her and she suspected that it was due to the fact that Heather Nembhard had been a career woman who had rubbed shoulders with the President and First Lady and the rest of the staff at the White House.

She was a plus-sized black woman, but the pink and white pantsuit suited her figure to perfection. Her thick dark hair was piled on top of her head and diamonds glinted at her lobes and around her throat.

Meredith herself was wearing emeralds and her ash gray dress was made of the finest cashmere, but she felt as if she had tried too hard to make an impression. Heather Nembhard was poised and confident and she admired her for the way she handled herself.

“What are you having?”

“Just juice for me, thanks. I already had lunch.”

“How was the planning with the others?”

“It went very well. The hospital is going to benefit richly from that particular venture.”

Heather nodded in approval. "Leesa and Kelly are experts in getting people to notice them." She smiled at the man who had materialized at their table. "Geoffrey, how very nice to see you. How are Maria and the boys?"

"Maria is very grateful for the recommendation as well as the generosity." The man's dark green eyes glowed with adoration as he turned to include Meredith. "Mrs.

Nembhard made it possible for my two boys to be enrolled in a special school and paid the tuition. We are forever grateful."

"Nonsense. They both deserved to be attending that school. They are gifted children."

He bowed and thanked her again. "Will you be having your special salad with the raisins and fruits?"

"And this time I insist on paying my bill. You cannot run a business successfully if you keep giving away the food."

“Your money is no good here, Ms. Heather,” he told her firmly, “I will send your meal immediately. And you, Mrs. Davis must try the butterscotch salad – it’s to die for.”

“Why not?”

“You will not be disappointed.” With a respectful bow, he hurried away.

“You have a fan,” Meredith murmured.

“It appears to be the case. Have you heard from Tucker?”

She nodded, pleased to tell the woman that her husband had called.

“Poor dear, he loves his aunt.”

Meredith tamped down the irritation. “I suppose you gave him some measure of comfort when he called?”

“I was the one who called actually.” Two pairs of dark brown eyes clashed. “Tucker is lousy about communicating and I just wanted to check on him.”

“It never occurred to you that is not your job?” Meredith’s eyes flashed. “That as his wife, that is my job?”

“My dear”

“Please do not patronize me!” Meredith hissed, taking several deep breaths to calm down.

They both waited for their meals to be placed before them before resuming the conversation. “That was not my intention. I was just going to say that I have known him longer”

“And since the wedding, we have shared a bed and not to sleep.”

Heather eyed her for a moment before taking a sip of her Perrier. “I am not your enemy, Meredith.”

“Why does it feel like you are?”

“How is the salad?”

“Wonderful. I am in love with Tucker. I know it is the consensus that I married him for his money....”

“It’s not a consensus, darling, it’s a fact.”

Meredith’s eyes flashed. “You sit there with your supercilious attitude. You do not know my story. I was damned desperate and was at the end of my rope. My brother and I were drowning in debt. The medical bills wiped us out. My brother made an ass of himself and did not follow up on his child support payments.

He was not allowed to see his daughter and while I was very good at my job, I was working for some bigoted jerks who did not think that I was supposed to work towards advancement. In short, Tucker came into my life and he saved both of us.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Heather told her quietly. “Faced with a situation, I would have done the same thing.” She leaned forward, her expression intense. “Tucker is damaged. The first time I met him, he flirted with me and I found it delightful and was flattered.

My husband was not paying me the attention he should and Tucker made me feel beautiful. But I was in love with Colin and that never changed. After a time, I realized that I loved him – I want to say like a brother, but it is much more than that.” A smile touched her lips as she dug into her salad.

“I discovered that there was a bond between us and it has grown stronger. If Colin had demanded that I stopped talking to him, it would have been very difficult for me to do so. But like I said, he is damaged and he

means the world to me. I will not allow anyone to hurt him, he has been through too much already.”

“He tells you everything, I suppose?” There was a tinge of bitterness in her tone.

“Look, like I said, I am not your enemy, but I care about him very much. We tell each other things. He does not open up to a lot of people. If you noticed, his father would never get the father of the year award and you know what happened with his mom.

He has been running away from himself and his problems for years. I am certain he told you about the many places he lived in. He came back two years ago and is staying put.”

“Because of you.”

“At first, and then there were the children and he adores them.” Heather eyed her speculatively. “He is very good with them and would make a great dad.”

“You do not have to tell me that,” Meredith told her stiffly, “I want to be the one he confides in, but he does that with you. I want to be there for him when he is going through his issues. He has nightmares.

Do you know that? He would wake up crying out, a tortured expression on his face and it breaks my heart. I want to make him forget ...,” she shook her head and reached for the glass of water and took a few sips.

“I want him to see me. He called me today and he said he misses me and I felt as if we were finally getting somewhere, but each time I reach that conclusion, he would turn away from me.”

“You want me to take a step back,” Heather said shrewdly.

“I want to form a relationship with my husband and you are in the way. Yes, I am asking you to step back.”

Agatha's grip was surprisingly strong as she held Tucker's hand. "You must not blame yourself." Her voice was a thready whisper that he had to bend his head to hear. "Your mother loved you and your sister to pieces.

She did not leave you, darling. A week before it happened, she sent me a letter. It's in my jewelry case and I have asked Mariel to retrieve it so that you both can read it. She was a troubled soul and had not fully recovered from the tragic passing of her parents.

I thought she was okay and never believed in therapy, but I was wrong!" She shook her sparse white head. "I should have insisted that she get some help but I thought I was enough for her." She swallowed and closed her eyes.

"I need some water."

Tucker beckoned to the nurse who came forward with the glass and fed her from it.

She released Tucker's hand and fell back against the pillows, her skin pale and wan.

"Aunt?"

"I am not gone yet, dear boy," she opened her cornflower blue eyes and stared at him, "you both look so much like her. For a long time, I could not bear to look at you, and for that I am sorry."

"It's fine," Tucker told her briefly.

"No, it's not. I have left this property to you. Mariel will get my jewelry, but this place has wonderful potential and you might consider coming here to live. It's a wonderful place to bring up a family and it is great for a

fresh start,” she eyed him shrewdly, “I would like to see a photo of that wife of yours.”

He gave a start and she smiled slightly. “I do get the news all the way here, dear boy. Why didn’t you bring her with you?”

“The timing was not right....” He took out his phone and went into his gallery, bringing up a photo of her in her wedding dress.

“She is exquisite,” Agatha murmured, “is it too late to call her?”

“It’s – you want to talk to her?”

“I would, yes. I am on my death bed, but I would like to speak to the woman my nephew has chosen for a wife.”

“She is gone!” Tucker leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes wearily. It had been a very long day.

“I am happy I was able to get the chance to talk with her. She seemed like a very nice lady.”

“She was,” a smile played around his lips, “I am not keeping you up?”

“I was watching TV anyway. How are you?”

“You mean after reading that very long letter from mother? Peachy.”

“She had been unhappy for a long time, Tucker.”

“I know,” he rubbed his forehead wearily. “She left me the place and it’s a beauty. She also suggested that I

might consider coming here to live.”

“And?”

“It’s an ‘us’ decision.”

“Do you mean that?”

“About us making the decision? Yes. I want to include you in everything Mer.” He closed his eyes again. “I would like things to be different between us.”

“I never thought I would hear those words from you,” she told him huskily.

“I never thought I would say them. Look, I am going to have to make funeral plans for her. I could be here for much longer than I anticipated.”

“I could come over. That is if you would like me to.”

“I would love you to come. How soon can you get here?”

“I will book a flight....”

“No. I will send the jet back for you. Can you be ready by tomorrow?”

“I will be,” she told him breathlessly, “I cannot wait to see you.”

“And I cannot wait to show you around and make love to you. I need you, Meredith.”

“You have me.”

Chapter 13

The flight was long, but the luxurious jet was a delight to the eyes. She tried her best not to appear gauche and wide-eyed and wondered if she pulled it off. She had told her brother and Jasmine that she was going to Italy and that he was sending the jet back for her and they had been impressed.

“Make sure you take lots of pictures and tons of sex. I want you to come back to the States pregnant.”

She had not told her friend that she wanted that too, but she was afraid of introducing another person to the mix when things were so up in the air with them.

He had called and included her, something she was very happy about, but she had come to realize that there were so many layers with her husband, that it was sometimes confusing. This minute he would be all over her and the next minute he would be like an aloof stranger.

And here she was sitting in a plush comfortable seat in a private jet with powder-blue decor, the flight attendant catering to her. She had been outside of the US once and had had to scrape and save to take the trip to Paris.

She had maxed out her credit card and had returned home wondering if she should take a second job to help pay off the debts. Now she was on a private plane where she was the only passenger and being catered to. Life could be so unpredictable at times.

“Would you like some champagne, Mrs. Davis?”

The polite and cultured tone of the chicly dressed woman made her lift her head and she realized that she was talking to her. She was Mrs. Davis and she felt the pang of awareness inside her chest. “I would, thank you and some more of these wonderful nuts. How much longer will be up in the air?”

“Another three hours. There is a bedroom back there if you would like to take a nap.”

Meredith shook her head ruefully. "I am like a kid getting his first taste of Disneyland. even though it is nothing but clouds, I want to see everything."

"I understand," the girl smiled politely, "I will be back with the champagne."

"And the nuts.....," she called after her. Settling back against the cushions, she marveled at how different this flight experience was. Her first and only flight had been on a cheap airline - she had gotten a deal and the flight had been packed.

She had been assigned the middle seat and had been between an overweight man and an elderly woman who insisted on engaging her in conversation for the whole damned flight.

She had tried to get some sleep, but that had been impossible. The man who had had no difficulty falling asleep had used her shoulder as a pillow and no matter the times she had pushed him off her, it had not worked.

Then when she was ready to go and use the facility, she had almost fallen over the woman's feet. She had requested a seat change but the flight was so full, that she had been denied that.

"Thank you," she smiled graciously as the flight attendant came back with the refreshments.

"If there is anything else you need, please let me know."

"Oh, believe me, I will," she assured the woman, bringing the champagne glass to her lips. She glanced out at the window at the puffy white clouds scudding by her and could almost believe she could touch them.

She was on a jet going to Italy to be with her husband in his time of grief and need. She had asked him if his dad was coming and he had told her no.

“They hated each other. My aunt blamed him for taking my mother away and causing her death. She was there for the wedding, or so I was told, but she never came to visit. We were the ones who were always coming over.

Mother would take Mariel and me here for the summer. It was glorious. And she was happiest when she was here. I realized that now.”

He had sounded so distant and sad that she had found herself wishing that she was there to take him into her arms and comfort him. She wished he would cry and wondered if he had ever done so.

Tears were therapeutic, as she had discovered over the years, and she had had to face the many challenges thrown at her. She barely remembered her mother and after she died, life had been incredibly difficult. Then came her father’s illness which had thrown the family into a quagmire of uncertainty and debt.

What would her dad say if he could see her now? She wondered. Would he have been happy for her? And if she had met Tucker when he was struggling through his

illness, would he have been able to live longer? Taking a swallow of the champagne, she did her best to wash away the sadness.

The impatience could not be curbed. ever since he had agreed to have her join him, he had been unable to stop the thoughts from rioting through his head. He had told her he missed her and that was the truth. He had also told her he needed her and he had never said that to anyone before.

But he did. He kept glancing at his watch. The flight had left at six - which meant it had been two in the afternoon here. And it was going to be almost nine hours. She was not going to get here until close to midnight.

“You could occupy your mind by helping me to sort through her things,” Mariel suggested as she came into the lovely teal blue kitchen to see him seated around the counter.

The body - it was strange thinking of her as impersonal as that, Mariel thought with a pang. But she had been taken to the funeral home and they had started funeral arrangements.

The workers had come to pay their respect and many of them had told them in their rapid Italian how much their employer had impacted their lives, there had also been the question of what would happen to them and Tucker had reassured them that nothing was going to change.

“And you have not eaten!” It was almost five in the afternoon and the maid had prepared a meal which was still there in front of him.

“I am not hungry.”

“You miss her.”

“She loved our mother very much. I keep thinking that she should have stayed here.”

“She fell in love,” Mariel went to get a glass and poured some wine.

“With a heartless monster,” Tucker said grimly as he sipped his own wine.

“Love makes strange bedfellows!” She turned so she could look out at the stunning view from the large treated glass in the kitchen. Snow had fallen last night and was clinging to everything in sight.

The shimmering water and the myriad of small fishing boats could be seen from here and appeared like toys bobbing onto the surface. It was too cold to be out on the sea, but she could see some activities going on along the shore.

“Jason and I are going through something.”

Tucker’s eyes glowered. “I never liked him for you.”

“And it was never your decision where that is concerned. I am in love with him,” she told him defiantly.

“He is not good enough for you.” Tucker pointed out tersely. “He was a guy just looking for an heiress and he found one.”

“That’s not fair and you know it.” She said heatedly, dark blue eyes flashing. “Yes, he did not have the amount of money we do, but he is smart and clever and has made some very successful investments for the family.”

“Is he cheating on you?”

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “He says no.”

“But you do not believe him.”

“He has been rather distant.”

“And popular opinions indicate that is usually the precursor to an affair.”

“You are supposed to be cheering me up and telling me that is not the case.”

“I am your brother and will always tell you the truth.”

“We are not an easy family to be a part of. As I am certain your wife is discovering for herself.”

He shrugged and stared into his wine. “I think I am in love with her,” he heaved out a harsh breath, “and it scares the crap out of me.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. "I am a mental case," he said with a grim smile, "have been one for a long time and I do not know how to act in a relationship, having not been in one. Our home was shattered when we were young and the hours of therapy have not alleviated the anger and rage inside me. I have been with more women than I can count.

The first time I ever came close to loving someone was with Heather and she happens to be a married woman. I never expected to feel anything for Meredith – but I cannot get her out of my head." He closed his eyes briefly.

"She is on her way here and I cannot wait to see her. It feels like I have been gone months." His eyes flickered open and a wicked smile touched his lips. "You might want to make yourself scarce when she arrives. I am not certain I can make it to the bedroom in time."

"That's gross and not something I wanted to hear from my brother," she trailed a finger around the rim of her glass, "I am happy for you darling."

“It’s going to be rough – I am still hurting inside and I have no damned idea how to be a husband. I will more than likely hurt her along the way, several times, but I cannot envision my life without her in it.”

“This could be the honeymoon for both of you. What about the reasons that you two got married?”

He shrugged that away. “Water under the bridge. I have now established that she is not greedy and grasping and was in a rather difficult position. I want to protect her from those.”

She stared at him in surprise. “Look at you.”

“Yeah....” He grinned, his mood turning lighter. “Let’s go tackle that stuff. We have to decide what to do with her clothes.”

“I am certain we can find people to give the things to.”

It was almost midnight when she landed and the view was so breathtaking that she could barely stop the gasp from escaping her. Her initial disappointment about him not picking her up himself had turned to delight as the olive-skinned Italian with the bulging biceps who was manning the boat, explained why that was.

“Signor Davis instructed me – how do you say?” He gestured with one hand as he navigated the small craft with one hand through the shimmering water. “He wants to greet you at the home. This is a great view, yes?”

“It’s wonderful.” She wrapped her jacket around her as the wind sliced through her jacket. She had insisted on staying on deck so that she could take in the spectacular view.

“You have never been to our lovely little fishing village?”

“I have never been to Italy, period,” she told him with a laugh.

“How is that – how do you say – posseible?”

“Lack of funds. But I intend to take advantage of my trip.”

“Signora Agnes was a kind soul and well-known around here. She will of course be missed.”

“I am sure she will be.”

He left her alone with her thoughts and gave her the opportunity to take in the group of houses precariously built close to each other and the myriad of boats bobbing up and down in the water.

Throwing back her head, she breathed in the rich air and felt a feeling of contentment stealing over her.

“Your sister...?” She broke off with a moan as he dragged off her jacket and pulled her sweater over her head.

“In bed.”

“We should go upstairs ...,” she gasped when his fingers found her rigid nipples. He had broken the clasp of her bra and it was hanging off her shoulders.

“How were the flight and the boat ride? We should – Christ! I cannot stop long enough....”

Lifting her up against the door, he seized a nipple and suckled hungrily. Meredith had to bite down on her lip to stop the cry. He had met her outside and taken her case. She had wondered about his aloofness and polite nod, but as soon as they entered the foyer, he had taken her jacket, dropped the case and reached for her.

“We should go upstairs,” he repeated her earlier statement, his hand unbuttoning her denims and dipping his fingers in. A groan escaped him when he encountered the curls covering her sex.

He went further down and dipped into her, almost whimpering when he discovered how wet and ready, she was for him. “My sweet.” His breath was backed up inside his throat and he was aching – his cock was rigid and polling with pre cum liquid.

With a muffled groan, he reluctantly removed his fingers and lifted her into his arms, heading for the stairs. A light had been left on inside the foyer for them, but other than that, the place was shrouded in darkness and silence.

The maids did not stay there and after his aunt’s death, it was only him and Mariel. She had retired right after supper, claiming exhaustion.

He made his way to the bedroom suite that had been assigned to him and kicked the door shut before going to the bed, where he laid her down gently.

“Do you want lights?”

“No. Just hurry!” She wriggled out of her figure molding denim and her underwear. Her boots had been taken off and left by the front door along with her jacket.

“Is it disrespectful?”

“What?” He rasped. He was trying to get out of his denims and was having a hard time doing so. The sight of her rounded curves and bare breasts were driving him out of his mind.

“Your aunt just died and this was her house....”

“We are celebrating life and the place is now mine. Goddammit!” He exploded as the zipper got stuck. “Something is conspiring against us - finally.” He grunted as he peeled off the denims and got rid of his underwear.

He reached for her as soon as he slid beneath the sheets.

“Foreplay is not going to be possible.” He reached for her blindly, turning her head to face him. “I should let you rest – the long flight- the time difference ...,” he nibbled at her lip and sent white-hot flames shimmering along her spine.

“It does not matter.” She moaned when his tongue soothed the sting of the bite. “Only this – Oh, how I have longed to feel you like this.”

“I missed you,” his tongue darted into her mouth and he groaned as the familiar sweetness of her breath mingled with his, “I think I love you.”

She jolted at that, her body going rigid. “Think or know?” He had stopped kissing her and was climbing over her.

“Know. I have never been in love before, but I think that this is it.” He was sliding down to take a nipple inside his

mouth. Her fingers gripped his tangled hair and she stopped him before he could take the tight bud into his mouth.

“We need to talk ...,” she moaned as he rotated his hips so that the tip of him was rubbing against her core.

“No time....” Dragging his head away from her, he bent his head and seized the nipple. His mouth was rapacious and greedy and before long she was calling out his name, her body bucking against his.

Tucker knew that he was probably hurting her, but he could not stop. Lifting his head, he gave her a brief glance, taking in the thick dark hair and the parted lips.

There was no lamp lit, but the sliver of moon steaming through the window was highlighting her exquisite beauty. He felt his heart twist and the enormous emotions he was feeling made him acutely aware of how much she meant to him.

“You are beautiful,” he told her thickly, his hands framing her face, “exquisite and completely mine. I don’t care why we got married in the first place. I want a life with you. Do you understand?”

“I do.” Tears shimmered in her dark brown eyes and rolled down her cheeks. “I love you, Tucker.”

“I know.” A smile touched his lips as he lowered himself over her. Reaching between them, he used trembling fingers to guide his aching cock into her welcome warmth. “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

His teeth gritted as the familiar tightness gripped him with a fierceness that was almost his undoing. Bowing his head to her forehead, he had to take several deep breaths, his entire body quivering.

“I need a minute, my sweet....” Lifting his head, he kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose before brushing his lips against hers. He had hoped to delay the inevitability for a few more minutes, but that was before she wrapped her slender legs around his waist.

He kissed her then, his tongue plunging into her mouth as his body drove into her. He swallowed her moans, his fingers racing restlessly along her ribcage, before coming back up to tangle into her hair. His long lean body molded against hers - becoming one with hers as he showed her with his body – how much he was feeling.

She came – her fingers digging into his shoulders and back, her body arched against his. He came right then too, his body shuddering from the powerful climax as he poured his seed into her.

“You should get some sleep.”

She had her face buried into his chest. “I am not tired. I did manage to take a nap on that fancy jet.”

“In the cabin?” He was sated for the moment and contented. The feel of her body snug against his was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

“I did not want to miss anything, so all I did was take a peek in the cabin and used the bathroom.” She lifted her head and propped it on her palm. “Which by the way is bigger than the bathroom in my former apartment.”

“Is that so?” He pushed the heavy lock of hair from her forehead. “Did you take a bath?”

“I thought about it and decided not to.” She touched the deep dent in his chin in wonder. “I think we broke something.”

Taking her hand, he popped her finger into his mouth and sucked on it hard, causing her breath to whoosh out of her mouth.

“And we are about to break something a lot more,” his blue eyes had darkened as he pulled her on top of him,

“you did say you were not tired.”

“Hmm....” Shaking back her heavy hair, she placed her hands on his chest, loving the feel of his smooth golden chest.

“I am planning to take you sightseeing tomorrow.”
Hoisting her up, he placed her onto his cock which had hardened again. It threw him how much power she had over his body. Just the thought of her was enough to throw him into a frenzy.

“I would love that.” Her fingers dug into his chest. “You made a declaration earlier.”

“Hmm ...,” he was toying with her breasts, cupping them into his palms and loving how they fit.

“I would like to hear the declaration again.”

His eyes lifted to stare at her. “What declaration was that?”

“Don’t play with me.”

“The one where I said I am in love with you and I cannot live without you? That you make my heart race out of control and I cannot stop thinking about you? That declaration?” He asked her hoarsely.

“That very one....” She swallowed the lump inside her throat and felt her heart thundering inside her chest. The tears were spilling down her cheeks unchecked and the emotions churning inside her was making her weak.

“I love you so much.”

His hand lifted to cup her cheek, his expression tender. “I never thought it would happen to me.” He admitted. “I was never looking for this – for you and here you are.” He wiped the tears away with the pad of his thumb. “My sweet wife.”

“I am your wife. Oh, Tucker!” Leaning into him, she pressed her lips to his and he obliged her by opening his mouth. Placing her hands onto her hips, he navigated her movements until they were both moving frantically together!

Chapter 14

A smile played around her lips as she stood there looking at the magnificent naked form sprawled among the blankets. He was fast asleep and after making love to her for the third time, had burrowed his head into her neck and succumbed to oblivion.

It had taken her longer to follow suit because she had been so high from both his words of love and the frenetic lovemaking.

And her body clock was all screwed up anyway. It was 7.00 am. and even though her body was still on US time, which means it was probably almost midnight, she could not sleep. Now here she was standing at the foot of the bed, staring down at her husband.

At some time during the night, he had pushed off the blankets she had covered him with and she had a full view of the golden flesh. He was wiry and muscled, buttocks taut and firm. His shoulders were wide and his

legs long, with an abundance of golden hair dusting them. His hair - thick and blonde was decidedly unruly.

His face was turned away from her, but she had memorized every feature, the deep cleft in his chin, the almost straight nose, the absurdly long dark brown lashes and the dusting of freckles along the bridge of his nose and his mouth! She drew in a deep breath as she felt the desire and passion starting up. the man has a mouth on him.

Shaking her head, she belted the robe around her waist and carefully and quietly made her way out of the room. She had to get downstairs to take up her clothing and boots that they had left at the front door. It would not do to have the household staff finding them there.

It was still dark, but someone had put a light on at the bottom of the stairs, making her descent easy. The place was a delightful mix of modern and ancient and Tucker had told her that it had been part of a much bigger building several hundred years ago.

The stairs led down to the narrow passageway and she quickly went to pick up her items of clothing, putting the jacket on a coat tree, the boots next to it. The sweater and bra which he had broken, she took with her into the kitchen. She needed coffee, she decided, looking around the white and gold room with interest.

The furnishings were antiques - the richly carved table in the corner of the large room, with the six matching chairs - the wine rack built into the wall - with bottles of what she knew to be wines dating back to several years and there was also a shelf with cookbooks in Italian.

The stove was ultra-modern and so was the fridge. A large granite counter was in the middle of the rich oak floor with stools placed around it. And the coffee pot was one she could handle, she realized with delight as she moved towards it and set about preparing it.

Pulling out the cupboard door, she took out the cup and went into the fridge to get the mixture of heavy cream.

She was hoping to through here and back upstairs before the household staff made their appearance. She

never knew the former owner of the house and even though her husband said it now belonged to him, she still felt uncomfortable rummaging through another person's things.

"I see we both had the same idea." The soft cultured voice at the doorway had her whirling around. Mariel was standing there, managing to look beautiful and sophisticated in a soft blue robe - her blonde hair piled on top of her head.

"I could not sleep," Meredith felt the need to explain why she was in the kitchen, "I woke up yearning for coffee and I thought I would prepare it and be out of the kitchen staff way before they start working."

"They are off for today," she came into the room and went to get a cup, "the funeral is today and we thought it would give us the time to prepare for it."

"Of course," Meredith poured her coffee and wondered how soon she could disappear upstairs, "sorry for your loss."

“Thank you. Please sit. I am not going to bite.”

“I am not certain about that,” Meredith told her dryly, but sat anyway, “I am aware of your dislike of me. You have made it abundantly clear that I am not good enough for your brother.”

changed my mind. He loves you and I can see that you love him too,” her blue eyes drifted to the pile of clothing on the chair.

“Your brother was very impatient,” Meredith explained, her smile a little smug.

“He sent me off to bed as soon as he knew you were due,” she sipped her coffee, “he has been through a lot and I did not want him going through anything more.’

‘We really do not have control over the things that happen to us, do we?’ Meredith took a sip of the

excellent coffee and could feel the weariness drifting away. "This is quite good."

"It is. Aunt Agatha always prided herself on having the best of everything. She lived a very good life."

"Then her death should be celebrated."

"I suppose you are right," Mariel murmured, "the only blight in her life, was my mother's suicide. She never quite recovered."

"Tucker told me about the letter."

The other woman gave her a surprised look. "He must really love you and I am happy he is finally opening up to someone."

"He opened up to Heather Nembhard," she pointed out.

“They are best friends.”

“And I am not going to stand for that. I am in his life now and deserve that status.”

“I agree with you.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” Mariel shook her head. “My brother has been unhappy for most of his life and that unhappiness has led to self-destruction. You are changing that.”

“I think Heather changed that before I came along and I suppose I should be thanking her. But I am not certain I can be friends with her. The love for my husband is very new and I am vulnerable where he is concerned.”

“There is no need for that...,” the deep voice just inside the doorway had both women starting. “I woke up and you were gone.” Walking further into the room, he came over and kissed the top of her head, before greeting his sister. “Would you mind taking that to go?” He indicated the coffee cup in her hands.

“Of course not,” sending Meredith, a friendly smile, she left the room.

“I did not mean for you to hear....”

“Hush.” Plucking her up, he sat on the stool with her on his lap. “I am happy I did.”

“And?” She had turned so that she was facing him. His hair was hopelessly tangled and the sleep was still evident in his dark blue eyes.

“And there is no need for insecurity where Heather is concerned.” Taking her hand, he placed it against his heavily beating heart. “You have this. And this ...,” he

slid her hand over his bare arm. “She is a friend- more like a sister and I am going to ask you to be understanding where that is concerned. I love her, but I am not in love with her.”

“I sound very insecure.”

“You have a right to be. You are my wife.” He whispered against her neck.

Her heart slammed into her chest and she felt herself going weak.

“Say it again,” she demanded.

“You are my wife,” he repeated, his mouth finding the side of hers, “you are, and saying those words makes my cock and everything else quiver.”

“We should take this upstairs. Your sister ...,” she broke off with a gasp when he parted her robe and cupped her

breasts.

“She knows not to come back in here.”

“I want to prepare us some breakfast but, damn that feels so good.” She moaned, arching her back as he lifted her so that he could stroke her nipple with his tongue. Her fingers fisted into his already tangled hair and every bashful thought about his sister coming back into the room flew out of her head.

She could only feel him – his mouth on her nipple, sending spikes of desire shooting through her body. His body against hers – nothing else mattered but this. And that he loved her.

“Tucker – darling!” She ended with a gasp as he placed her onto him, driving into her forcefully.

“Oh, Lord.” Her body trembled, her fingers dragging restlessly through his hair. She had to bite down on her lip to stop from screaming as he plunged into her. The

climax came, claiming her viciously and she felt the tears starting as she bowed her head to his.

The funeral was held on the grounds. A path had been cleared where the snow had piled up and a tent had been erected to accommodate the mourners.

A priest droned on in eloquent tones, the words flying over Meredith's head. And Tucker was holding her hand. She knew he spoke Italian as well as several different languages and was listening attentively to the words of the priest.

A nice crowd had gathered even though it was cold, showing how much respect there had been for Agatha. The workers were dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs as they laid flowers on the casket.

Mariel, looking ethereal in black wool with her blonde hair drawn back into a neat chignon, shed a few tears.

And then it was time for Tucker to read the eulogy.

“You got this,” Meredith assured her husband as he let go of her hand to take his place at the podium.

“Thanks!” With a brief nod, he wound his way to the top.

“As an actor, I was expected to memorize lines and I would practice the various facial expressions that were required for the part,” Tucker’s eyes scanned the crowd, “that came easy to me because acting is in my blood. This is real though...” He glanced at the box in front of him.

“I was here at the end and we had a very good conversation. What can one say about a woman who had been so full of life? Aunt Agatha was a seemingly frightening individual until you get to know her.” He smiled slightly.

“My sister and I would come and visit for the summer when mother ...,” he paused and automatically sought

out Meredith who gave him a reassuring smile.

“When Mother was alive.” His hands clenched into fists and he took several deep breaths. “She loved it here – as we did – we would help with the olive plants and be running wild through the groves. This is where I learned to fish. Aunt Agatha was considerate and loving, something we can all attest to.”

He looked around at the people gathered there. “I am certain that I speak for all of us when I say that she will be sorely missed. Thank you.” Making his way back, he immediately went to Meredith who snuggled against him. A tender smile touched his lips as he realized that he was no longer alone.

“What do you think?”

“I think that I am about to pass out.” She flopped down on one of the flat stones and took several deep breaths.

The air was cold and felt like shards of ice inside her lungs. She had insisted on their first visit being to the Castello Dei Doria and he warned her about the steepness of the journey.

“But the view from here is spectacular.” Leaning down, he hauled her up and wrapped his arms around her. Tourists were milling around, taking photos and she had brought her camera as well. “And we still have to go and do the tour.”

“Just let me get my breath back.” She leaned against him and closed her eyes. No one seemed to know who they were or if they did, they did not care.

It felt wonderful not to be under scrutiny all the time and she was seriously thinking about them moving here.

“It’s so lovely.” She murmured; her hands wrapped around his as he hugged her from behind.

“Ready?”

“Hmm.” She leaned back against him and breathed in the clean air. “I am.”

He was the perfect tour guide, telling her the history of the castle, his Italian pronunciation of the various rooms, lilted and so good that several tourists came up to him for interpretation and directions.

She stood there in one corner of the cylindrical tower which had been restored in the twentieth century, her eyes dancing with amusement as he took on the role seamlessly.

“You should charge for the service,” she told him when he rejoined her.

“I was thinking about it.”

“You speak the language like a native,” she murmured as she twined her fingers through his.

“I grew up here half the time and have a head for languages.” He brought their joined hands up to his lips and kissed the back of hers. “Are you up for the tour of the Church of Santa Margherita di Antiochia?”

“Most definitely.”

“Then we will go and have lunch.”

* * * * *

She was not in the least bit tired after her tour and the view from the Ristorante La Torre with its lovely view of Vernazzo and the Ligurian sea was a perfect way to end a wonderful day. He recommended the octopus with potatoes and tomato and it was delicious.

“What’s next?” She asked, sipping the chilled white wine that accompanied their meal. The sounds of muted conversations in several different languages were like music to her ear.

They were not heckled by paparazzi’s and there was no one they knew within sight. It was like they were all alone and she loved it. The wine was seeping into her bloodstream and creating a kind of lethargy that was wonderfully pleasant.

“I can think of something,” his leer made it perfectly obvious what that something was.

“You are always thinking of sex,” she reproved him, shaking her head.

“You make it easy.” Spreading her hands out, he turned it around to look at the palm.

“Mariel is leaving in the morning.”

“Oh?”

“We could stay longer if that is what you want.”

“Could we?” She asked eagerly.

He nodded. “And we could think about living here. You love it.”

“I do. But what about back home?”

“What about it?”

“You have Heather and your godchildren.”

“We could do with a fresh start away from everyone.” He twisted the rings on her fingers thoughtfully. “I have

never seen you so happy.”

“I am happy and so are you.”

“I really do not have any ties in the States.”

“What about the memories of this place?”

“They are beginning to be wonderful ones. With you.”

“I would love for us to stay. But can we just live here?”

“I have citizenship here as well as in the UK. I told you I spent half my life here.”

“What would we do? It’s a small village.”

“You could still do your real estate; we could buy a vineyard and produce wine. We already have olive groves which are very productive, or we could become people of leisure and travel the world. Basically, we can do whatever the hell we want to do.”

He touched the napkin to the sides of her mouth. “You have spent years struggling to make two ends meet, working at a dead-end job and worrying about money. We are here now and that is no longer an issue.”

She was getting caught up in the idea of staying here. It would be a wonderful place to grow their children. “I could learn the language,” she said breathlessly.

“And I would have fun teaching you to fish.” His dark blue eyes glowed as he stared at her. He had seen the look on her exquisite face as they toured the different areas and it was an idea that had come to him as soon as he knew his aunt was leaving the place to him.

Back home had too many bad memories and he wanted to get to know her, for them to have the chance away from the hectic social life to get to know each other.

Here, people did not even give them a second look and he loved that.

“You could teach me to fish.” Her fingers tightened on his. “Are you sure?”

“I am. How about you?”

“I do love the place and it already feels like home.”

“It does,” he agreed, “whenever we want a taste of the city, we could go to Rome, Naples or Milan.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I would love that.”

“I could buy a boat and we spend a few days on the water.” He stared at her quizzically.

Can you swim?”

She nodded.

“Good, then it’s settled.”

“You are going to be living here?” Mariel stared at her brother with a frown. “Why?”

“Because we want to,” Tucker looked over at his wife with a grin, “I think you called it an enchanting place, right darling?” They were sitting down at supper that had been prepared by the housekeeper before she left for the day. They had returned from their trip exhausted but happy and had taken a nap before coming down to eat.

“I do believe I said that.” Meredith agreed, her eyes dancing.

“It’s a tiny fishing village,” Mariel protested.

“And it suits us perfectly.”

“Father is going to have a lot to say about this.”

“Let him...,” Tucker sliced into his baked spaghetti, his expression turning grim. “This decision is between my wife and me, and no one else.”

“I am just saying”

“We have already made our minds up.”

“You are not even going back home?”

“What do you think, darling?” A smile hovered on his lips as he stared at his wife. “We can certainly purchase

clothes here and what we have at the loft can be shipped to us.”

“You are right. I think we should stay here.” She turned to look at Mariel. “We have decided that we need a fresh start.”

“And you can always come by for a visit.”

“I wish you would return and try and sort things out with father.”

“He knows where to find me and has my phone number.” His expression softened as he stared at her. “I do not want you to think that I am deserting you, darling, but this is my life and for years, I never had a say in it.” He looked at his wife, his expression tender. “I did not have a purpose or any sort of happiness.

Now I do, now I want the chance of a life with this woman right here. I am happy and contented – my heart does not sink at the thought of getting up in the

mornings.” His hand tightened on hers. “I want to be alone with you darling – to get to know all there is to know about you.”

“And I feel the same way.” She told him softly.

“Then it is settled.”

“She was unhappy for a long time and I did not know....” His fingers trailed the length of her back and upwards to her neck, brushing the hairs away. They had come up after dinner and he had made love to her so gently that she had cried in his arms.

“She was always so full of life and so beautiful that I never thought that she was sad. She never said anything to us of course. But I recalled nights when I could not sleep and I would go downstairs and see her sitting in the blue salon and she would be crying.

“He stared up at the intricate pattern of the ceiling and was silent for a few minutes. “I wanted to go to her, but she seemed so solitary and alone that I did not know if I should and now, I find myself wondering if it would have made a difference if I had.”

“I don’t think it would have. Her unhappiness was innate – she was obviously suffering from depression and should have gotten help for it.” She combed back his tangled hair.

“My dad suffered from it as well, but he would pretend that everything was fine. After our mom died, he struggled to cope. He had two children to take care of and never had the means to do so adequately.” She kissed his nose and placed her forehead on his.
“Now we have each other.”

“Now we have each other.” She could feel the tears again and blinked them away. “Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome, darling.” he told her gently.

Chapter 15

Their lives were filled with events of idyllic happiness and brimming over with contentment. Meredith had called and told her brother of their decision and he had told her he was happy for her. Jasmine told her that as soon as she could take time off, she would fly over. “Possibly in that fancy jet of yours.”

They had no immediate plans for the future other than overseeing the olive groves which more or less ran themselves, along with very competent workers. They would go exploring and twice they had taken commercial flights to Rome and Naples. And he had shopped for her.

Their things had been transported over to them (Mariel had seen that everything was packed and sent to them by air). Theodore Davis was chomping at the bit and there had been some harsh words between father and son. But that night, he had told her that he was officially liberated and intend for it to stay that way.

They would get up mid-morning after spending most of the night exploring each other's bodies. He had taught her how to please him and she found pleasure in taking him into her mouth and using her tongue on top of him.

"I think you are becoming too good at this," he had told her shakily after a particularly intense passionate lovemaking where she had kept him inside her mouth until she swallowed his semen. "You almost made me blow the top of my head off."

She had become accustomed to him talking to Heather because she was that confident in his love for her. The winter months flew by swiftly and before long they were welcoming spring.

The rain washed away the last vestiges of snow and all around, flowers were peeking their heads up out of the damp and rich soil. He took her fishing, and they would come back loaded down with the catch, which he would gut and scale in order to get them ready for the meal.

It was the beginning of spring when she started to notice the changes in her body. She had been so happy and

busy running all over the place, that she had forgotten to mark her time of the month on the calendar.

She was taking a quick shower to go and meet him by the harbor when she happened to notice that her nipples were quite sensitive to the touch. She had not told him of her fear of not conceiving and he had not said anything to her.

In fact, they had not really talked about having children at all. A conversation they had had a month ago came rushing back. It had been one night after he had made love to her and she was cradled inside his arms, his body crushed against hers. "I love this," he had murmured.

"Us being naked?" She had asked him teasingly.

"Just the two of us. We get to wake up whenever we want and make love at various times of the day. I love having you to myself and not sharing you with anyone else."

“I love it too,” she had told him quietly, feeling her heart sinking. And she had not lied. She loved the fact that they were constantly together and their lovemaking was something she would never want to do without. But she wanted his child nestled inside her womb.

Wanted to look at their son or daughter and see his features reflected there. She knew chances are that he or she would inherit the color of her hair and possibly her eyes, but she wanted a child with him. It would be something to seal their love for each other.

Taking a deep breath, she weighed her breasts in her palms, surprised that with the amount of attention he paid to them, he would not notice that something had changed. They were bigger and the nipples larger and she could barely bear the touch of her fingers. She was definitely pregnant.

A look at her calendar showed that she had not had her periods in two months. Which means that she was six weeks pregnant or closer to two months. What if he did not want children? She worried her bottom lip as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She was so happy right now, that she did not want anything to spoil it. She was going to have to find an OBGYN and confirm her suspicion, but she knew without a doubt that she was carrying his child.

Should she tell him or wait until it was confirmed? And what if he told her bluntly that he did not want children? But ever since they had made love to her that first night after their wedding, he had not used anything. And he knew that she was not on anything either.

Her hands cupped her belly and a soft smile touched her lips. It was now April, which meant that she could possibly be having their baby in November or even October. Next year she was going to be a mother.

Their activities - flying all over the place and just getting up and going somewhere on the spur of the moment might have to be curtailed. And he might not like that.

“He loves me,” she whispered to her reflection, “surely, he will accept this as well.”

His past was behind him and over the past couple of months, the nightmares have become few and far between. The first time she had experienced it, he had woken up screaming and clinging to her tight.

And she had soothed him until he was steady. He had spoken to her about it and told her that ever since his mother's suicide it has been happening.

But now he was hardly going through that and she would like to think that it was because of her. He had expressed that as well. "You steady me, darling," he had told her whimsically, one evening at dinner. "Your influence on my life is amazing and I am grateful to you for what you do to me and for me."

She would wait until she went in for a visit before breaking the news to him. And she was not going to entertain any negative thinking, not while she was carrying precious cargo. Firming her lips, she went into the bedroom to finish getting ready.

She would be careful of course because she could not entertain the thought of losing her baby. Humming beneath her breath, she stepped into the closet and selected something to wear. She wanted a boy first and then a girl - someone she would be able to spoil. But first she wanted a son for her husband she decided.

“You took your time,” taking her hand, he led her towards a bench that overlooked the water.

“How was your meeting?”

“Productive. We are now the proud owners of a small vineyard. We could go and check it out if you are game.” His blue eyes searched her face. “You, okay?”

“I am fine.” She forced a smile. She could not allow him to see that she was worried and hated that she was going to have to hide her news until she was certain of the result. “We are not vintners.”

“There is an excellent staff that comes with the place.” He brought her hand up and kissed the back of it, his expression one of excitement. “Do you have any idea how much you have brought life back into my dreary existence? I am excited about this part of our lives.”

“So am I. We are busy.” She pushed the panic thought out of her mind that he was saying all this to mean that he did not want to be a parent.”

“Precisely. We could alternate between here and the vineyard. I have tied up the business side of it and got the place for a steal. The owners or rather the former owners are moving - an elderly couple who are getting too frail to carry on,” he looked at her anxiously, “are you certain you want to give up your home and be here full time?”

“You are my home,” she assured him quietly. “I never had one before - or rather for a long time, I was just in space. You are my home and my family.”

“I think this deserves a celebration,” he murmured huskily, pulling her onto his lap.

“Tucker, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” He growled., his mouth going to her neck. “I am appreciating my wife.”

“There are people”

“I don’t care much and neither do they.” He continued to nibble at her skin, sending shards of passion coursing through her body. She clung to him; eyes closed as she succumbed to the familiar passion. “I think we should go home, don’t you?” He whispered, his tongue soothing the bite marks.

He was hard, his erection nudging against her bottom and was on the verge of exploding. The villagers did not care about their amorous activity, but he could not very well make love to her right here in the open, as tempted as he was. “I am impatient to have you.”

“I think we should hold off on having children,” he was still trying to get his breath back and was tracing a finger over the red rashes that had been caused by his teeth as his control had disintegrated. He really should try and control his passion, he thought with an inward wince.

“Why?” She asked him sharply.

“We have just acquired a new business and we get to up and leave any time we want. I love the fact that it’s just the two of us. Are you allergic to any form of contraceptives? If you are, I could use rubbers.”

“You do not want children,” she said dully.

“You are putting words into my mouth,” his dark blue eyes stared at her quizzically, “I am not saying that

eventually, I would not want to be a father, but not right now.” He pushed back the hairs from her forehead.

“And I think we should wait until I am a little more mature psychologically before adding someone else to the mix.” He touched her cheek gently, completely oblivious to the turmoil his words were creating inside her.

“Besides, I have just discovered something wonderful with you and I am selfish enough to want to keep it between us.” He trailed a finger down her flat stomach and watched as it quivered. “It’s something to think about darling.”

“It is.”

“What do you say?”

“I will think about it.”

“Good enough. Now, if you are rested up, I think it is time for round two.”

She could not sleep that night. They had dinner inside the dining room and for the first time, she was starting to feel the effect of her pregnancy as soon as the chicken marsala was placed before her.

She had managed to swallow down most of it and prayed that Tucker had not noticed the revulsion that was on her face. He had stepped out right after the meal to deal with some sort of emergency and it had given her time to request some tea to quiet her stomach.

She was propped up against the pillows staring at him as he sprawled onto his stomach, one hand thrown above his head.

He had started out sleeping with his arms wrapped securely around her waist, but she had managed to slip

out when he was fast asleep. She was going to have to tell him, she thought bleakly. And face the outcome. She had not tricked him into getting pregnant.

He had asked her the very first time if she was safe and she had told him yes because then, she had been. But they had never used anything at all and he had told her that the feel of her wrapped around him was so erotic that he did not want to lose that.

They were old enough to know the result of unprotected sex - that it usually leads to pregnancy. She wanted them to be this way for a time, of course, she loved the fact that they were just the two of them.

They had gone into the marriage without knowing each other - it had begun as an arrangement which had turned into a love match, but they were still in the getting to know each other stage.

And she was scared that this was going to drive them apart instead of bringing them closer. A smile touched her lips as she gazed at the golden skin - made even more so, by the time they spent outdoors.

He had started to learn the olive oil business and was constantly in the field. They would go for a swim in the beautiful water and fishing had become a sort of sport for him.

He had become an entirely different person, who laughed more and appeared to be more alive. She would like to think it was because of her. But she was going to have to tell him and soon.

But before she could do so, they received the news.

“Dad is in the hospital. Heart attack,” his sister told him, her voice shaky.

“How bad?” Tucker dragged his fingers through his hair and started pacing. They had just come back from the delightful vineyard where he was full of anticipation and

excitement. Meredith had determined that she would tell him tonight after supper.

She had made the appointment in the little village and thankfully, the doctor there - someone only a few years older than her, was an American who had followed a man over here. "The romance had not worked, but I am happy to say that I found a place to call home."

"Bad!" She told him tersely. "They are talking about triple bypass surgery. I am scared, Tuck. Please come home."

"It is no longer my home and I ...," he closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "I will be there."

"I will send the jet for you."

"Yeah. Keep me updated if there is anything else," he had put the phone on speaker so that Meredith was privy to the conversation.

“I have to go, but I would like you to stay here.”

“You need me”

“No.” He walked over to sit next to her on the sofa and took her hands. “I need you here darling. He has enough money for the best doctors and I have a feeling he is going to pull through.

They are probably going to tell him that he needs to slow down,” he sighed harshly. “Being a world-renowned producer has never been enough for him. He has dabbled in real estate, and banking and has shares in a shipping company.

He is controlling and instead of leaving that side of the business to the people he hired, he insists on sitting in on every board meeting and having the last say. I am not that ambitious. I want a quiet life and I have found it here with you.”

“If anything happens”

“He is going to live to be a hundred,” Tucker said with a grim smile, “he is that perverse.”

“Are you going to try and make peace with him?”

Tucker shrugged, getting to his feet and going over to look out the window. The weather was lovely, the sun shimmering on the surface of the water. From his vantage point, it looked as if the boats bobbing on the surface, were toys. He had grown to love the place and had told the truth when he said he had found peace.

“I tried that a couple of times over the last few years and it always blew up in my face,” he turned to face her with a slight smile, “in the past it always bothered me that he was incapable of love, but it doesn’t anymore.

I want to make love to you darling - to carry the image of your exquisitely passionate face, the parted lips, wet from my kisses, the tight buds that I so love to worship, with me.” Moving forward, he extended a hand to help

her up. "I want to erase every unhappy thought and fill it with something wonderful."

"We should talk about the future." Theodore Davis's face looked haggard and taut with worry. "Those incompetent doctors are not telling me the truth. I could be dying for all they know."

"You should allow them to do their jobs. You have invested heavily in this hospital; I am certain they are going to do their damndest to make certain that you do not die on their operating table," Tucker told him sardonically.

He had been flying all morning and was jet-lagged and drained. He had been on the plane in less than an hour and wanted to order the pilot to take him back home to her. He needed her.

His father chuckled hoarsely. “Trust you to tell me to my face what you are thinking, everyone else, including your sister and that weak man she married tries to pretty things up. How is my daughter-in-law? Is she pregnant yet?”

“Why don’t you concentrate on your own life for now?”

“I know the marriage is no longer an arrangement, son, and I would think that you are close to becoming a dad.”

“I am not certain I want to be one. You are not a very good example.”

Theodore chuckled again and coughed, gesturing to the jug of water. Tucker went to pour a glass and brought it back to him.

“Thanks. They have me so hooked up to the damn IV that I cannot think straight.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing. The operation is in the morning.”

“I am scared,” he admitted, woefully, “the prospect of dying was not one I ever entertained.”

“Shocking to find out that you are human after all?”

His father eyed him carefully, “I have failed you and your sister. I have certainly failed your mother.”

“A deathbed confession, dad?” Tucker asked him bitterly, “isn’t it a little too late for that?”

“I am sorry, son, and I know that there is nothing I can do or say to make it right.”

“Precisely.”

“I am just saying that I wished I had done things differently.”

“No, you don’t,” Tucker hissed angrily, “you are just saying all of this because you fear that you will not make it through tomorrow.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I am hoping to meet my maker if that is the case with a clear conscience. ” He reached out a hand which was ignored by Tucker. Dropping it back onto the side of the bed, he gave his son a pleading look. “I need your forgiveness.”

“I hope you live long enough to earn it!” They both looked up as the doctors came in.

“I am afraid we are going to ask you to leave, Tucker. We need to get Theodore rested for tomorrow.”

“Will you be back tomorrow?” He asked his son.

With a curt nod of assent, he left the room.

“How is he?”

The sound of her sultry voice over the line was enough to make him forget the disturbing conversation with his dad, earlier.

“He wants to make amends because he thinks he is dying.”

“Is he dying?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did you make amends?”

“Not quite. I don’t want to talk about my wayward dad anymore. I miss you and I am staying in our old place.”

“I thought you would be at the manor, lending your sister support.”

He grimaced at that. “Are you always going to be my conscience?”

“As I expect that you will always be mine.”

“I am just a phone call away and I cannot stomach that place.”

“I wish I was there with you.”

“Pretend that you are darling,” he told her huskily. He had found a t-shirt of hers among other things and they

were right near to his pillows.

“I am not having phone sex with you.”

“Not even to make me feel better?”

“It’s not satisfying.”

“Alas, you are right,” he said with a sigh. He paused a moment before rushing on. “I saw Heather and her family a few hours ago.”

“You are thinking I am going to be upset.”

“Are you?”

“No. I know where I stand with you.”

“I am happy you do. Now about that phone sex...”

Tucker watched as his father’s eyelids fluttered open.

“I am alive,” he said in a weak voice.

“It seems that way.”

“Oh, daddy!” Mariel rushed forward and sat gingerly on the side of the bed. “Thank God.”

“I think we should thank the excellent team of doctors.”

“You said they were incompetent,” Tucker reminded him sardonically.

“Trust you to remind me of my earlier statement,”
Theodore took his daughter’s hand in his, “dry up the
tears girl, I am still alive.”

“The doctors’ said that from now on you have to take it
easy,” she told him.

His gaze strayed towards the young man slouched into
the chair. “You are going to have to take your rightful
place as my heir.”

“And do what exactly?”

“Come back to the states.”

“Not a chance in hell. I am happy - my wife and I are
happy where we are.”

“You heard the doctors”

“Sell off some of your many assets and stop trying to wear too many hats. I am staying put.”

“I meant what I said about trying to earn your forgiveness,” he divided his gaze between the two, “I have not exactly been a good father.”

“Not at all,” Tucker held up a hand as his sister sent him a pleading look, “but I am willing to listen.”

Chapter 16

“Hello?” Tucker heard the ringing of his phone and rolled over to feel for it automatically. His first thought was that his dad had had a relapse. Sitting up in bed, he reached over to turn the lamp on. “This is Tucker.”

“Tucker, this is Meredith’s OBGYN. She is currently in the hospital”

“What?” He was wide awake now, his heart hammering inside his chest. “Did you say OBGYN? Why - what’s wrong with her? I just spoke to her last night.” A glance at the clock showed that it was 9.00 am. which meant that it was 5.00 pm. there.

“The baby is fine”

“Did you say, baby?” He blinked, feeling as if he was in another hemisphere. “What baby?”

“I thought she had told you that she is two months pregnant.”

“No, she did not. What the hell is wrong with her?”

“Dehydration mostly and an awful bout of nausea. She just confirmed the pregnancy a day ago and”

“I need to speak to my wife.” He told her grimly, swinging his legs off the bed. Why the hell would she keep something like this from him?”

“I don’t want her to be upset,” the woman warned.

“What’s your name?” He asked abruptly as he went to find some clothes. There was no way he was going to get any sleep now.

“Charlotte Matthews.”

“And American doctor living in Italy. Let me speak to my wife. Now.”

“Of course.” Putting the phone on speaker, he dragged on his denims and went to get his t-shirt.

“Tucker?” She sounded weak and vulnerable and he felt as if his heart was breaking. He was not there with her and she had somehow felt the need to keep this information from him.

“Hey!” Dropping into the sofa, he cradled the phone.
“You decided to go into the hospital when I am not there? What were you thinking?”

“I should have told you but I wanted to be certain. I know you are upset”

“Do I sound upset?” He was careful to keep the anger out of his voice. Time enough for that when he was face to face with her and when she was feeling better. “How are you?”

“I think it was something I ate. The shellfish”

“No more shellfish. Got it. I will be flying back today.”

“You don’t have to”

“I have to. Let me talk to the doctor. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He waited for the woman to come back on. “How bad?”

“As I said before, she is dehydrated and is getting the necessary fluids.”

“How good are you at your job?” He demanded.

“Pardon?” The woman sounded affronted, but he did not give a damn. That was his wife and the most precious person in the world to him.

“I don’t know you and I just need to be assured that you know what the hell you are doing.”

“I know what the hell I am doing and I am taking very good care of your wife,” the woman told him calmly.

“That’s all I need to know. How long will she be there?”

“She will be released as soon as you get here.”

“I will contact the pilot and get started. But first I am going to have to check in on my dad.”

He automatically called Heather. After the phone call, he sat there thinking about it. His wife was pregnant and she had said nothing to him. Why the hell not? Swearing beneath his breath as he recalled the conversation, he had had with her just recently.

Dragging his fingers through his hair, he lunged to his feet. "You should have told me then darling," he whispered. It was then he reached for the phone and called Heather. "I need to meet."

"Good morning to you too," she told him mildly, "is your dad, okay?"

"As far as I know. You busy?"

"The children are going through their morning routine and Colin is out of town. Want to come over?"

“Can we meet at Joe’s? I am going to the hospital now and then I have to be on the plane to go back home.”

“I thought you were staying longer.”

“New development,” he told her briefly, “say about the next hour and a half? It will give me time to get some coffee in me and take a shower before hopping over to the hospital.”

“I will meet you there.”

“Thanks.” Hanging up, he went into the kitchen and put the pot on. He was seriously going to have words with her about transparency.

“You are leaving?” Theodore stared at his son in consternation. “I am getting out in a day or two.”

“And the doctors said that you are getting better every day,” Tucker pointed out, “Mariel will keep me updated. I have to go and be with my wife. She is pregnant.”

Theodore’s eyes lit up with pleasure. “You never said anything.”

“That’s because this is the first time, I am hearing about it. She is in the hospital.”

“Is she all right?”

“Dehydration and a particularly nasty attack of nausea. Shellfish.”

“You are going to be a father.”

“And scared as hell about it. You were not a particularly good example of what that looks like.”

“I apologized-”

Tucker waved that away. “It does not have anything to do with it. I told her that I think we should wait and she took it to mean that she could not tell me about the pregnancy.

Now I am going to have to convince her that I am on board or at least try my damndest to get on board. She needs me.”

“I would like to ask you a favor,” his father said quietly.

“Such as?”

“Will you at least allow the baby to be an American citizen?”

“I am not certain”

“Please. At least discuss it with Meredith. He or she will be my first grandchild and I would like the chance to be part of the process whenever that is.”

“I will discuss it with her and let her know,” he got to his feet just as Mariel came hurrying into the room, “hey, keep me updated,” he gave her a tight hug.

“And congratulations.” She told him sincerely, “tell Meredith I said congrats too. And let us know when she is well enough for a phone call.”

“Will do.”

“I ordered the burger for you,” Heather told him as soon as he arrived.

“I have to eat and run. The pilot says the jet is all gassed up and ready to leave,” he kissed her on both cheeks, hugging her tight before letting go. He marveled before he had fallen in love with his wife, Heather had been the most important person to him. She was still important, but Meredith was the core of his life.

“What’s going on? Everything okay?”

“Let’s get the order out of the way first,” he signaled the waiter, indicating their readiness before reaching for the glass of water. Joe’s was an outdoor dining experience and was situated in the heart of uptown, offering a delightful view of several quaint-looking storefronts. “The weather is wonderful.”

“I am sure you did not ask to meet just to talk about the weather,”

He turned his head to look at her, an indulgent smile touching his lips. "Beautiful as ever," he murmured softly. "The first time I saw you, I was bowled completely over." Taking her hand in his, he gazed at the long, elegant fingers for a few seconds.

Their meals came just then and he let go of her hand. He waited until the waiter had left before continuing.

"Meredith is pregnant."

"Oh?" Heather felt a jolt and for a minute, she felt something akin to jealousy. She had always thought of Tucker as hers and even though she was completely in love with her husband, there was a definite bond between them. "You do not look too pleased."

"I am trying to be," he nibbled on a fry with little interest.

"She was afraid to tell me."

"How did you find out?"

He told her of the call he had received early this morning. "I don't know what to feel."

"You are going to be a father, darling and that is wonderful news," she reached out a hand to touch his hand.

"I want it to be and before I enter that hospital room, I am going to have to show the woman I adore that I am over the moon about this pregnancy."

"You really love her," Heather said quietly.

"More than my damn life," he admitted shakily.

"Then there is nothing to worry about. She will need your support,"

“And she has it. Completely.”

“I am so proud of you,” she told him earnestly.

“Why?”

“You have come a very long way from the Tucker I knew before.”

“I certainly hope so,” he drew in a deep breath, “and I am determined to be a better father than what I have had.”

“You will be,”

The minute he stepped into the hospital room, she burst into tears, driving away the lingering anger and fear that he had been experiencing. He had spent the long

journey battered this way and that by uncertainties. He had no idea how to be a father and he had wanted time to be with her before he was thrown into fatherhood.

But seeing her propped up against the pillows, the tears coursing down her cheeks as he stepped into the room dissolved all of that.

“I hope those are happy tears,” he said gruffly as he wrapped his arms around her. She only cried all the harder and he tightened his hold on her.

“Hush darling,” he whispered in her hair, his voice shaky, “I am here, my sweet, and I am not going anywhere. I am here.”

She quieted down after that, her face pressed into his chest. “Hormones,” she murmured with a sniff.

“How are you?”

“Feeling much better, especially since you are here,” she moved so that she could stare at him, “you must be tired.”

“After several hours of travel and unable to snatch even a few minutes of sleep?” He teased her. “Oh, definitely,” he trailed a finger down one wet cheek. “You are keeping secrets from me.”

“I did not”

“We will discuss it when we get home. It’s early morning but I have a longing to sleep in my own bed with my wife in my arms. And I am told that you are going to be discharged.”

“I am.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of here. I am sick to death of hospitals.”

He did not make love to her as she hoped, but after taking her home, he carried her up the stairs and then crashed, only managing to take off his shoes. But she could understand that he must be exhausted. He had rushed home before time to be with her and she was humbled by it. She knew there would be questions, but she was prepared.

He was back and that was all that mattered. She had not wanted to tell him the news over the phone, but the decision had been taken from her when she had gotten violently ill and passed out on the dining room floor, scaring Isabella who had called the hospital and asked that an ambulance be sent for her.

He was here and she had missed him so much that it had been like a permanent ache inside her heart. It was scary how much she loved him. In a few short months, Tucker Davis has become the most important person in her life. She brushed back the tendrils of untidy curls from his face, her touch gentle.

They would talk as soon as he was rested - she knew he was scared of what kind of father he was going to be, but she was going to assure him that he would be a good one, unlike his own dad. One hand drifted to her stomach and a slow smile touched her lips.

She was pregnant! The thought of the baby - it was technically just a fetus, but she had already bonded – this little bump was a product of their love for each other and she was going to love this baby with everything in her.

“Now that’s a sight for sore eyes....” The lazy drawl just inside the doorway of the kitchen had her head lifting.

“I was planning to take you breakfast in bed,” she protested.

“And you are not supposed to be exerting yourself.” His dark blue eyes glittered as he stared at her. She had

donned a thin blue silk robe and was clearly naked under it. Her thick dark hair was slightly damp and curling at the edges and secured into a loose ponytail. She looked so young and innocent that he could not bear it.

“What happened to the staff?”

“Since I was in the hospital, I told Isabella she could go and visit her sister for a few days. I made oatmeal. Taste.”

“Hmm. delicious. I need you and since we are quite alone and you look as if you are recovered, we could do this.” Drawing her away from the stove, he untied the robe and took it off her, dropping it to the floor.

“Tucker, the oatmeal,” she protested.

“It can wait.”

“We need to talk.”

“We will.” Lifting her into his arms, he strode towards the balcony overlooking the olive groves.

“The workers”

“Will never see us from here and I am certain it is too early for them to be out,” he lowered her onto the blue and white striped chaise with the plump cushions, “I have missed you so much. How is the babe?”

“Good. I feel wonderful.”

His hands spanned her flat stomach. “How pregnant are you?”

“Two months.”

“You are not showing.”

“I will not be for some months.”

He stood up just to take off his clothes before rejoining her. “Your breasts ...?”

“What about them?”

“They look a little fuller.”

“My nipples are decidedly sensitive.”

“Because of the pregnancy.”

“Hmm. Could you ...?”

“Of course.” His head swooped down and she cried out when he latched onto the nearest nipple, her body

arching towards his. He was hungry for her, one hand parting her thighs to touch her sex.

His fingers dipped into her moisture and he grunted in satisfaction and passion at how ready she was for him. He brought her to a crashing climax, the moans echoing through the air, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Releasing her nipple, he climbed on top of her and drove into her swiftly without finesse.

“Am I hurting you?” He asked harshly, his head lowered to hers. He had finally woken to find her side of the bed empty and had felt panic before remembering that there was no need to fear that she would leave him. There will never be any need to fear that where she is concerned.

“No,” her hands clutched at his hair.

“Good. Because I cannot wait.” His climax was vicious and had him calling her name and declaring his love for her, repeatedly, his long lean body shuddering on top of hers.

Moments later, he was tracing a circle around the indentation of her navel. His head was propped up onto his hand and his hair was wonderfully mussed by her. One powerful leg was thrown over both of hers, imprisoning hers. “Dad wants the baby to be born in the States,” he murmured, breaking the silence.

“And what do you want?”

His eyebrows lifted as he continued to trace the pattern on her stomach. “It’s what we want darling. We are a team, remember?”

Her heart quivered at that. He still had not said how he felt about the pregnancy, but by all indications, he was on board all the way. “He made amends?”

“He is trying to. I am being cautious.”

“I supposed we could consider it. My brother is there as well and our friends.”

He nodded, eyes searching her face. “You were afraid to tell me because you thought I would not want any part of it.”

“You said something like that.”

“I did and it was foolish of me. We were making love without protection and it would naturally result in a pregnancy unless one or both of us were unable to produce. Obviously, nothing is wrong with us.”

“Nothing at all.”

“I want you to be healthy. I want to be there for all the doctors’ visits and I would like it if you tell me everything. I will not tolerate you hiding anything from me, Meredith,” he said sternly.

“I won’t,” she promised fervently. “I am so happy it is out in the open. I felt miserable keeping it from you.”

“I am going to be a dad.”

“And a wonderful one at that.”

“Heather echoed the sentiment.”

She stiffened at that. “You told her.”

“I did.” He stared at her for a second, his expression knowing. “And we have passed the point where you are insecure where she is concerned. I have proven repeatedly that this belongs to you completely.” Taking her hand, he placed it over where his heart was beating a little unsteadily.

“As well as this,” moving her hand, he drew it over his chest and further down. “And this.” He wrapped her fingers around his flaccid cock and shuddered out a breath when she clutched at him. “I am yours, darling and no one will ever be able to change that.”

“I am going to need more proof,” she told him huskily.

“Such as?”

Using her free hand, she pulled him on top of her. “Such as this,” she whispered as she guided him inside her.

After the first trip to the hospital, the pregnancy was surprisingly normal with just small bouts of morning sickness that was bearable. He was very attentive to her and she blossomed under his wonderful care and attention. Her brother and best friend came for a visit and spent two weeks, absolutely enchanted by their home.

“I do not want to leave,” Jasmine admitted with a longing sigh as she stretched her legs out. They were at the

edge of the sea where the breeze wafting off the water felt very pleasant against their skin.

Meredith was five months pregnant and scarcely showing, except in her bosom where her breasts had become very full. Her husband had declared several times that it was his very favorite part of her body and had proven it by spending time on them each time they made love.

Which was shocking, at all hours of the day. Ever since she had touched her second trimester, her sexual appetite had grown to enormous proportions and she would demand his attention during the days. “

He would be out on the field and she would be calling him. He would come home in the middle of the day and she would be waiting for him in their bedroom with the housekeeper downstairs.

It was a good thing the suite was soundproof or Isabella would hear her screams and cries of satisfaction. Her body was primed and always ready for his. During the nights, she was not satisfied unless he was able to go at

it three times for the night and would wake him with her mouth on his body. She was positively insatiable.

“You know you are always welcome here, any time.” She was feeling it again. It was almost noon and her husband had gone into town with her brother and would not be back until close to dinner time. Biting down on her lip, she attempted to quell the rush of desire coursing through her body.

“I am starving.”

“We should have bought a picnic basket.”

“I have a yearning for an Italian sub.”

“We are coming back after.”

“I am a pregnant woman who demands her sleep. I am afraid you are on your own where that is concerned.”

“You are here.” Meredith blinked in surprise as she stepped into the bedroom and saw him reclining on the bed. “I did not see the vehicle.”

“I walked back and left it with Jerome. Where is Jasmine?”

“She went back out. I am”

“I know. Come here, darling.”

She went to him and within minutes they were both naked. “You knew.” Her hands rushed over his naked body and she felt the quickening of hers.

“I knew.” Turning her over, he took her from behind, his hands wrapped around her slight bulge. “I always do,” he whispered as he drove into her.

Their son, Zachary Walter was born in the States on Thanksgiving Day, the delivery a breeze according to Meredith. “Four hours of labor, makes me want to do it all over again pretty soon,” she told her husband.

“We are not going to,” he said softly, gazing down at the boy with the creamy complexion and dark brown hair. Large hazel eyes looked up at him and Tucker knew he would slay dragons for him. “We are going to remind mommy that she needs her rest and you might be an only child.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it. Come here you two.”

Tucker brought him over. “He is exceptional.”

“He is our son.”

“An entire entourage is waiting to meet him.”

“Your dad heads the list.”

“He does.”

“Then we should not keep them waiting.” Meredith passed a gentle hand over his dark brown hair. “Just a few more minutes with him.”

“Take it, darling,” tearing his eyes away from his son, he smiled at the woman who had saved his life and felt his throat clogging up, “I love you.”

“I think I love you more,” she whispered.

Climbing in next to her, he gathered her against him - his son cradled in his other arm. A contented sigh escaped him - his family was complete and he felt thankful and blessed.

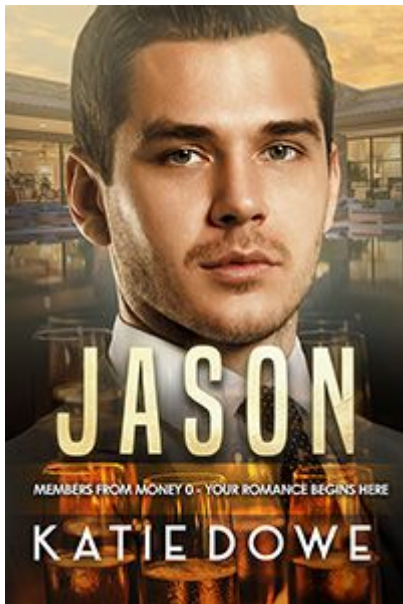
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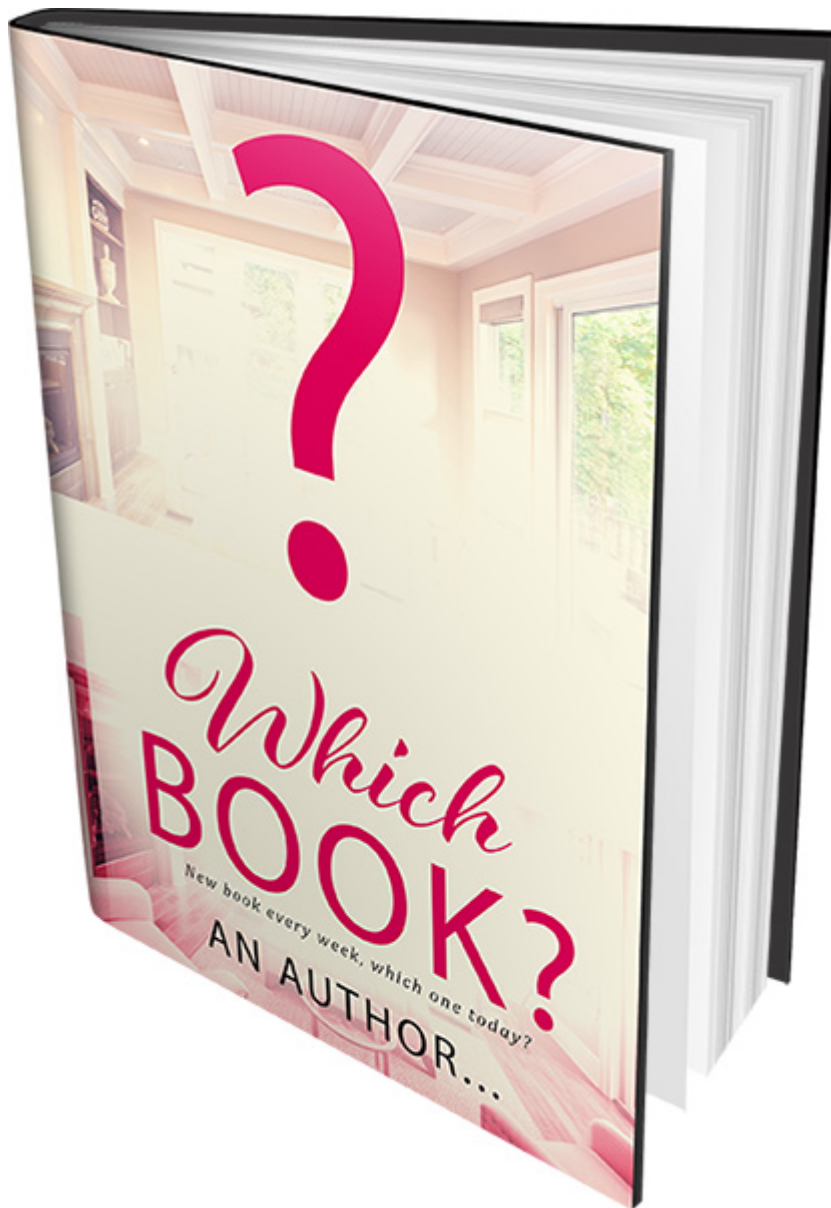


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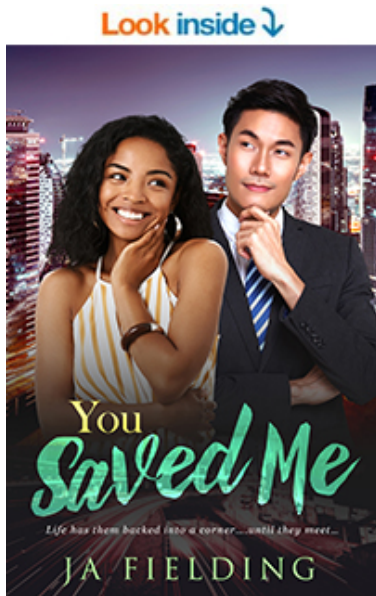


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*

Also available: [You Saved Me](#) by J A Fielding:



Description:

A sexy Chinese man romance by J A Fielding of BWWM Club.

Ava Grayson is in one of the worst phases of her life, nursing her sick brother and trying to save up the money for a procedure that will save his life!

Billionaire Kenichi Park isn't faring much better as he is struggling to move on with his life after the death of his wife.

When he and Ava first meet, they are both at a point in their lives where they feel the universe has them pinned to a corner...

Yet their fast romance is proof that there is light at the end of the tunnel!

But the journey to happiness will not be as easy as they may think...

As they try to travail the intricacies of their romance, will Ava and Kenichi be able to move on from their traumatic past?

Or will their past find them first?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by J A Fielding of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get You Saved Me now.](#)

*

Also available: [The Billionaire's Surprise Quads](#) by Taylor Holton:



Description:

A sexy quadruplet surrogacy romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

When Tiffany signs up to be a surrogate for a wealthy couple, she didn't expect to be carrying quadruplets...

And neither did the couple!

As soon as the news breaks, billionaire Miles Turner realizes that his relationship to his fiancée is not strong enough to last.

But when he steps up to the plate to be the sole parent for his babies, he quickly realizes that he has no idea what he is doing!

Tiffany is recruited to help Miles out with his transition to fatherhood...

And the unlikely pair quickly form a bond that turns into a heated romance!

But when the children's mother returns into their lives, Miles must make a life changing decision:

Will he follow his heart to be with Tiffany?

Or will he do the sensible thing and stick with the mother of his children?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get The Billionaire's Surprise Quads now.](#)

*

Also available: [First Love](#) by Alanna Richardson:



Description:

A sexy BBW romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

Asia Harris thought she was living the dream...

But on her first night as a medical intern, she loses a patient and is stuck baby-sitting a little girl whose next of kin happens to be the one night stand she has never been able to get off her mind!

What's worse is that he lives right next door from her parent's old house, so there's no escaping him!

Not that she wants to!

Phil Adams never thought he needed love...

But he has never met a woman this charming, and Asia makes him feel sensations he has never experienced before!

And after a few months with Asia he's considering having a family with his sister's kid!

But does Asia feel as passionately about him as he does her?

Or is she only denying what is truly in her heart?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get First Love now.](#)

*

You'll also want to check out these hot billionaire brothers and cousins in the [Brothers From Money series](#) too:



& many more...

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*

Also available: [Future Mrs Maxwell](#) by Jada Scott:

Look inside ↴



Description:

Living with the Maxwell's for my entire life has its perks...

But the biggest one is being near the hunky billionaire heir, Ryan Maxwell!

And now that he is back from college, old feelings blossom that neither one of us can deny!

There's just one problem though: the Maxwell's company is in debt and Ryan's mother has arranged for him to marry an heiress to restore their fortune!

I should have known that our relationship would never work out...

I'm just the Maxwell's nanny, after all!

But when Ryan proposes to me out of the blue, what am I going to do?

Will I accept his hand in marriage?

Even if it goes against everything his family desires?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Jada Scott of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Future Mrs Maxwell now.](#)

*

Also available: [Four Times The Love](#) by Erica A Davis:



Description:

A sexy quadruplet pregnancy romance by Erica A Davis of BWWM Club.

It began as a fairy tale romance:

After handing over her crown to the next winner, former Miss America Andrea met multi-billionaire CEO Mark Remington and the two fell madly in love...

And they married within the year!

Fast forward to six years later, Andrea is now desperate to have a baby, and she and Mark may have to come to terms

with the fact that they might not be able to.

So when Andrea comes to him one day to tell him that she is carrying quads, it should be a happily ever after...

But not everyone is happy by their miracle...

And now their relationship is on the verge of falling apart!

Will Mark and Andrea find common ground amidst the drama that surrounds them?

Or will their relationship suddenly end as quickly as it began?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Erica A Davis of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Four Times The Love now.](#)

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