

A close-up portrait of a man with short dark hair, wearing a black leather jacket, looking slightly to the left. The background is a restaurant with tables, chairs, and hanging green plants.

KENJI

WILL HIS FAMILY FIND HIM A SUITABLE WIFE?

KATIEDOWE

Kenji

Will his family find him a suitable wife?

A sexy BWAM, arranged marriage romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

African American restaurant manager Chantelle Williamson is very good at her job.

And anyone could see that the feisty and fearless beauty is a perfect match for her boss's cousin, billionaire heir Kenji Lee!

There's just one big problem: Kenji irritates her to no end!

After an attempt on his life, Kenji had fled Korea to make a new life in the States.

He thought he would keep a low profile, but never did he expect to fall for his cousin's employee, Chantelle!

After a fling in Chantelle's office leaves her pregnant, she must now fight a raft of emotions about the man she

both loves and hates.

And until now, Kenji has never thought about settling down, especially when danger still lurks around the corner!

Can Kenji convince Chantelle of his love?

Or will danger reach him first?

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

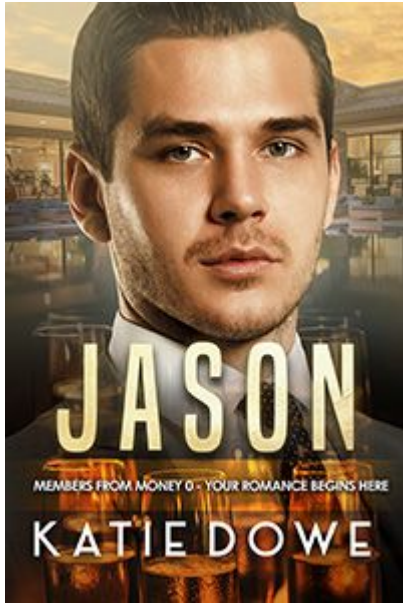
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Chapter 1

Kane watched as the younger man flicked the flavored cigar, and it landed in the crystal ashtray. It was still smoldering, the thin smoke spiraling upward. He hadn't bothered to remind him that this was a non-smoking area. It probably wouldn't have made a difference.

"Your silence speaks volumes."

Kenji turned to walk over to the large bay window. He had a restless energy and cat-like grace that was unmistakable.

There was also a restrained power about his long, lean body that couldn't be hidden. He was a fighting machine, having spent most of his life training in taekwondo. His life was one problem after another. Kane was trying to shield him from the next one.

“I need to go back.”

“You need to stay put for the time being.”

“You’re not my father,” Kenji growled.

“You’re my beloved aunt’s son, and if I have to tie you to the chair and lock you up, I will do.”

Kane dragged his fingers through his dark hair, cut fashionably short, impatiently. “Look, a year ago, they came after you and almost succeeded in ending you.”

“Ending me?” Kenji’s thick dark brows lifted. “It sounds like someone has been watching too many action movies.”

“Kelly’s influence,” Kane muttered, the faint

embarrassment coloring his tone. “My point is-“ They both looked over at the discreet knock on the door before it was pushed open.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.” The sleek and stylishly beautiful woman barely glanced at Kenji as she came into the room, bringing with her the scent of her exotic perfume.

“That’s fine, Chantelle.” He offered her a smile. “What is it?”

“A bit of overbooking and some ruffled feathers. I could use your kind of influence. Benny Lassiter is being an asshole.”

Kane hid a smile at the woman’s bluntness, dark eyes twinkling. “I’ll be right there.”

“Thanks.” With a regal nod, she exited the room and closed the door behind her.

“She looked right through me,” Kenji told himself that it shouldn’t matter, but ever since he’d met her two months ago, there’d been fireworks between them, and not in a good way.

“You did remind her last time you were here she was just an employee.”

“Well, isn’t she?”

“She is much more than that, Kenji, and I don’t need you coming here and stirring up my staff.” He pushed back from his massive desk and rose gracefully to his feet.

“Stay put, will you? I’m not through with the conversation.”

“I have somewhere- “

“Give me a few minutes.” Kane growled. “You owe me that.” Before he could protest, Kane was out the door, leaving Kenji staring after him in frustrated anger. Hissing out a breath, he went for the recessed liquor cabinet and poured himself some of his cousin’s very expensive scotch.

Taking it with him, he wandered restlessly over to the sofa in the corner of the room. Rolling the glass between his palms, he stared broodingly into the amber liquid. He was pissed at the world. His life had been a series of drama that he could do without.

The attempt on his life last year had shaken him badly. Despite being warned, he’d gone to the country where he holds second citizenship, the very country where his father and uncle had been assassinated.

They had business interests there and Kenji was now the heir of the vast holdings. Taking a sip of the scotch, he leaned back and closed his eyes. It wasn’t because of some business venture gone wrong; it was just an element of evil that had risen up against the wealthy.

He was a Korean-American and had been born in this country. His parents were both Korean and the culture as well as the language had been drummed into him since birth. He'd been given the best of education. He was also taught to be loyal to his heritage.

Tossing back the drink, he went to pour himself another, this time standing by the window to stare broodingly. The fall weather was in full swing and it was evident in the multi-colored leaves drifting to the lush green grass.

This restaurant was the latest of Kane's acquisitions and it was already making waves. The land was a prime area and offered quaint outdoor eating space – chairs and tables beneath canopies.

At the far side of the grounds, there was a raised dais with a sprinkle of dazzlingly white table and chairs which will be used for special events. His phone beeped in the pocket of his slacks and jarred him from his contemplation.

“I just want a table – a suitable one for a group of five. Is that too much to ask?” Benny’s eyes flared. “I’m not only a customer who has been supporting you and your wife’s restaurants for years, but I’m also a friend.”

“Making a scene isn’t going to get you what you want.” Kane steered him firmly away from the reception area and into a huge pantry. With a curt nod of his head, he sent the employees stacking the shelves scurrying out. “We’re booked solid for the next ten weeks- “

“I’d like to think I warrant some sort of special treatment.” His watery blue eyes sought out Chantelle who returned his gaze without flinching. She was extremely good under pressure and didn’t allow herself to be intimidated. Kane admired that about her.

“And being a friend should ensure that you understand the situation here.” Chantelle’s sultry voice was more than a little frosty as she stared at the balding man. “We don’t overbook, ever. The reputation of this fine eating establishment is based on us keeping our word and not making promises that we can’t keep.”

“You have no right- “

“She has every right. She’s the manager here and will do whatever she deems fit.” Kane’s voice was brittle hard. Taking out his phone, he made a call. “Darling, I need your help.”

Chantelle watched the transformation on Kane’s face in amazement. It wasn’t the first time she’d witnessed it of course. She’d met Kelly several times and seen how she somehow managed to turn the otherwise secretive Kane into a puddle. The love the two shared was so obvious and glaring that anyone could see it.

He had eyes for no one else. She'd also seen women eyeballing him whenever he walked into a room, but it was as if they were invisible. He shared something potent and wonderful with his wife and it shows.

"You have a reservation at my wife's midtown restaurant." His expression had changed and his voice cooled as he addressed Benny. "They're waiting for you."

Benny had the grace to look ashamed. "Thank you." He muttered, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "I- Ah- I guess I'd better go on then."

"That's a good idea."

With a nod at both of them, he scurried out.

"I should've been able to handle that on my own."

"You did very well under the circumstances."

“I interrupted you.”

“Kenji can wait.” He gave her a slight smile, dark eyes watchful. “You’re doing an excellent job, Chantelle.”

“Thanks, Kane.” She turned to leave. “If you have time later on, I need to discuss something with you.”

“You’re not planning on leaving, are you?”

She gave him a startled look. “Absolutely not.”

“Good. I’ll make time.”

He watched as she walked away and stood there for a minute in contemplation. An idea was forming inside his head. He didn’t interfere in people’s lives and wasn’t into matchmaking.

He left that entirely to his beautiful wife. He'd seen the chemistry or rather the resentment simmering between Kenji and his manager. There was something there. Chuckling softly, he strode out of the room and went back to his office.

Chantelle slipped out of her shoes and padded barefoot into the kitchen to make herself a pot of tea. It'd been a hectic evening and she was feeling the fatigue course through her body. The movement behind her had her turning and smiling.

Bending at the waist, she scooped the cat up and tickled its belly and was rewarded by a sultry purr. "Missed me, did you?" She murmured, moving towards the kitchen where she put the kettle on. "I brought a treat for you."

The cream and brown bundle of fur jumped out of her arm and padded over to the bowl. "Some cream from the

restaurant, some of the best, in my opinion.” She poured the cream out of the container and watched as Tabby lapped it up eagerly.

“You’d think I never fed you.” Shaking her head, she went to the cupboard to grab a box of herbal tea. Shaking a teabag out, she put it into the cup and waited for the water to start boiling.

She was tired, but pleasantly so and didn’t mind she had to be on the floor. She enjoyed putting out fires with the very moody and excitable chef and trying to attend to the needs of the VIP’s who poured into the restaurant.

Kane had poached her from a very lucrative position at a corporate office when he came there for a meeting and she’d denied him access to her employer. He’d simply dropped in without an appointment and told her arrogantly he was a friend and was in the neighborhood.

She hadn’t been impressed by him and had told him coolly he was a businessman and should know better than to drop by unannounced. “I will give Mr. Major your

message and if you need to see him, I suggest you call and make an appointment.”

He'd stared at her with those unreadable dark eyes of her and she'd stared right back, refusing to be intimidated.

The next day, he called and asked her to have lunch with him. She'd thought fleetingly he was trying to hit on her, but she'd seen pictures of him and his wife and knew that wasn't the case.

The venue had been his new restaurant slated to open in a few months. The chef had prepared lobster in raspberry sauce and had her salivating. He made his pitch. “I've got a gut feeling you're who I need to manage this place.” He'd told her in his deep voice. The man was hot - extremely hot, with his tall lean frame and handsome face.

He was all business. His wife had called during their meeting and she'd blinked in surprise at the change in his expression. His dark eyes had gone liquid and a

smile flirted at the sensuous lips.

He'd excused himself to take the call but hadn't gone too far away. He'd been near enough for Chantelle to notice his body language. She recalled thinking to herself that to love like that must be heaven on earth.

He'd come back, the smile still lingering on his lips and the slightly bemused expression on his face. "My wife wants to meet you."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "She's on her way back from an appointment. We're in competition with each other and it gets fierce sometimes." He resumed eating.

"Why does she want to meet me?"

“She’d like to form her own opinion. Check you out, so to speak.”

“I haven’t agreed to accept the position yet.” She reminded him.

“Haven’t you?” He leaned back against the padded seat and gave her a direct look that almost had her squirming. “I’m offering you twice the salary you’re getting, along with the freedom to do as you please, within reason. Also, the health benefits to go along with it.

I can see you’re excited at the prospect of managing a place of this magnitude. You’re not easily ruffled, and what’s more, you don’t give a damn who I am. Most people would have rushed to announce my presence at that office, but you didn’t. I’m not easily impressed and I was, right after I calmed down.”

She inclined her head. “Then let me ask you this – you’re friends with my employer, is it that easy for you to steal me away?”

He smiled at that. “This is purely business and Greg will understand that.” He looked up then, his face lighting up as an incredibly beautiful woman glided in. Kelly Takahashi defined grace and style. She’d been wearing a chic yellow dress with thin straps and high heel shoes.

Her husband rose to his feet and reached out to pull her into his arms. Right there before her, he’d kissed her with a passion that had her fidgeting in her seat.

“We’re embarrassing the poor woman.” Kelly chided, touching his cheek gently. “You must be Chantelle. It’s nice to meet you.”

She took a seat next to her husband, her hand still clasped in his. They were a unit and that was very obvious.

“I am. I still have magazines with you on the cover.”

Kelly laughed, golden-brown eyes twinkling. “My husband still isn’t comfortable with other men ogling those photos.” She gave Chantelle an appraising look. “Now he wants to steal you away from Greg. My husband and I are always in competition,” She glanced over at him. “Makes the marriage very interesting.”

“You’re not stealing her away.” He told her mildly.

“More like enticing.” Kelly grinned at Chantelle. “I can tell you I’m much more interesting and fun to work with, but my darling here is sober and fair. I love him too much to do that to him.”

“She can make up her own mind.” Her husband pointed out.

“The place is amazing.” Chantelle enthused. “I adore the gardens and how on earth did you get streams in the middle of the city?”

“She’s sold darling.” Kelly told him, before turning back to Chantelle. “Kane is very innovative and a smart businessman. He was determined this restaurant would be something extraordinary. What do you think of the food?”

“Delicious.”

They’d gotten down to basics by discussing pay and compensation packages. To her surprise, Greg Major had wished her the very best.

“I can’t resent Kane for doing what I would’ve done.”

She enjoyed the hectic day to day operations. It was her first time running a restaurant, but it wasn’t too much of a step away from what she’d been doing for years. Kane had given her the kind of freedom she enjoyed and the men and women working beneath her were more or less easy to handle.

There were a few spats and just the other day, a blossoming romance between the hostess and the sous-chef had gone up in flames, leading to some minor crisis that she'd managed to sort out.

She was enjoying herself and even getting to know Kane. There was just one hitch and that was his cousin Kenji. The man was arrogant and rude and got on her nerves, to say the least. She figured if she ignored him, she would be okay.

Kenji was restless, which wasn't unusual. He possessed this edge that made it impossible to stay still for very long. He felt like a caged tiger. It'd been that way since he was growing up.

That was the one of the reasons he'd been enrolled in various sports as well as marital arts. He'd mastered everything he put his hands to – he was an expert in taekwondo and enjoyed it.

The art had saved his life more than once while he'd been in Korea. His expression darkened as the memories came flooding back. They'd taken out his father and uncle and had put his mother in a wheelchair until she had succumbed to her illness, two years ago.

He was still grieving and the anger inside him couldn't be quelled or even subdued. They'd caught the guys responsible for the heinous act, some renegade gang who were intent on wiping out the supposed rich guys 'riding on the backs of the oppressed'.

He was an American citizen, but he loved Korea and it was still his home. He resented the fact that now he was relegated to staying where he was. Others were out to get him and as Kane pointed out, he was still in danger.

Picking up the drink he'd poured, he climbed out of the indoor pool, water streaming off his naked body. Grabbing a towel, he used it to wipe most of the water off him, before dropping down into the comfortable chaise.

He wasn't currently seeing anyone right now. One reason was that he wasn't really in the mood to cultivate a relationship and the other being he was restless and angry all the time.

He was grieving for his entire family, especially his mother. He was an only child and the extent of his family had narrowed to Kane. He felt like the man was determined to try and run his life. He had the utmost respect for Kane and Kelly, but the interference was driving him nuts.

"You've not been in for meetings, Kenji. The company is yours, completely yours and you need to at least show your face."

"You sit on the board." He pointed out.

"My interest in the company is tiny. I have my own company to run."

“They killed my parents and my uncle.” He said bitterly. “I wasn’t supposed to inherit this for years and now I’m head of the everything because those bastards saw fit to kill my family. I want to kill them with my bare hands.”

“You could do that.” Kane told him quietly. “But they’re rotting away in a deep dark hole and paying for their crimes.”

“It will never be enough.”

“I know.” He agreed quietly. “The fact remains they’re gone and it’s up to you to carry on. I’m here to help you with anything you need.”

Leaning his head back, he took a sip of the scotch and closed his eyes briefly. Kane was right. He was going to have to get it together.

Kelly rubbed the cream into her skin and gave her husband a bland stare. “What’s that look for?”

“I can’t believe you’re even entertaining the idea of them together.”

“Why?” He’d slipped out of the robe and was walking toward the bed. Kelly felt the familiar heat between her thighs. She’d been married to Kane for a number of years and he still managed to make her feel as if she’d just met him.

“Because that’s so beneath you, darling.” She slipped off her silk robe and joined him in bed. “Kenji is a wild card.” She rubbed her hands over his smooth chest and murmured deep inside her throat. “Chantelle is as cool as a cucumber and they can’t stand each other.”

“There’s something there. I’ve seen the chemistry between them.” He reached for her, his expression tender. “I also remember how much I fought the

attraction I felt for you.”

“You thought I was a shameless hussy.” Her lithe curves settled on top of him.

“You are a shameless hussy.” His hands settled on the taut buttocks.

“Aren’t you happy I didn’t give up?” She whispered against his mouth.

“I thank the heavens every single day. Will you help?”

“Hmm?” She was busy rotating her hips against his cock.

“With Kenji and Chantelle?”

“I will agree to anything if you slide yourself inside me.
I’m wet darling – soaking wet.”

He broke off a groan, his body vibrating. “We should do
something about it, then.”

“Please.”

Lifting her slender body a few inches, he lowered her
until she was wrapped around him. “How is that?” He
asked, kissing her lips.

“Perfect.”

Chapter 2

The house was comfortable. It was more than that actually. It was big and spacious and had a backyard with a large deck. It was situated in a neighborhood where the houses weren't close together.

It belonged to her stepfather, who'd moved both her and her mom in when she was a girl. Chantelle recalled how intimidated she'd been by both the man and the house and scared of her stepbrother who was five years older than her.

George had loved her mother and had embraced her. There'd been a few bumps along the way with Jason, but they'd grown close over the years.

He'd opted to live elsewhere. George had been a very successful real estate agent and owned several houses and apartments. He'd split the inheritance equally between her and Jason and her stepbrother hadn't minded.

“You were more his daughter.” He’d assured her. “Your mother was wonderful to me. You are my sister, Chan, nothing less.”

He was married and living several miles away, but she made it her duty for them to meet every Sunday. He’d followed into his father’s footsteps and was now running the company.

The only bump in his solid life was the lack of children and she knew it was a sore point between him and his wife. She’d seen the sadness there and was hoping he’d finally agree to adoption.

He was just pulling into the driveway as she opened the door. “You’re early.” She exclaimed in delight.

Jason Whittaker was a strapping six foot two inches well-built man in his early thirties with a smooth chocolate complexion and waves in his expertly cut black hair. His dark-brown eyes twinkled as he bounded up the steps and came toward her.

“I had a meeting with a client.” He embraced her, before stepping in out of the cold and closing the door. “I’m surprised you’re up. Didn’t you work late last night?”

“You know I can’t sleep past eight o’clock.” She took his coat and hung it up before linking her hand through his arm as they made their way to the black and white kitchen.

“I smell hot chocolate.” He sniffed the air as he took a seat around the wide counter.

“I’m making oatmeal, Mom’s special recipe.”

“Now I’m delighted I decided to stop by.” He watched as she bustled around the stove. “How’s the restaurant?”

“Wonderful.” She gushed, stirring the pot before going over to pour them coffee. “I never thought I’d enjoy anything like that.” She handed him the cup and settled

across from him. “It’s new territory for me, but I’m learning. Also, the celebrities keep pouring in.”

“Knowing you, you maintain that professional manner, even though you’re like a schoolgirl inside.”

She laughed easily. “You know me too well. Kane is nice-” She shook her head as that wasn’t enough. “He’s a man of few words, but he’s a stand-up employer. I can’t believe I’m working for Kane Takahashi.”

“The wife isn’t bad, either.”

“Kelly is wonderful. You’d expect a woman like her to hide behind a mask, but she doesn’t. She’s as real as they come.”

“What about that wretched cousin?” Jason raised a brow at her. She’d told him about the several encounters with Kenji since she’d started there. “He still giving you problems?”

The mention of his name was enough to put a damper on her mood. “I’ve employed a new strategy by ignoring him.” Hopping off the stool, she turned off the flames and reached for two bowls.

“Is it working?”

“So far.” She didn’t want to talk about Kenji Lee. He didn’t bother her or so she told herself. Setting the bowl and spoon before him, she sat back down. “How’s Sara?” She asked, referring to his wife.

“She went to the spa this morning with some friends.” Jason busied himself with the oatmeal, scooping it into his mouth.

“Jason, I know you don’t want to hear-”

“Then don’t say it.”

“I’m still going to say my piece.” She plodded on firmly. “You and Sara are a lovely couple and I’d hate to see that disintegrate because you’re too stubborn to listen to reason. There are hundreds, make that thousands, of children out there who’d be grateful for the lovely home you can provide.”

“Children who aren’t really mine.” He spat out bitterly, reaching for his cup. “Not of my blood.”

“I wasn’t of your dad’s blood and he embraced me.” She pointed out quietly. “He accepted me as his own and the only thing I didn’t have was his name and that was because he wanted me to remember who my father was.”

She reached out to place a hand over his. “I loved him as if he was my own flesh and blood. He provided a wonderful home for me and Mom and I’m still reaping the benefits of his generosity.”

“I want to have my own child, Chan.” There was a bleak expression on his face. “Someone who looks like me. A boy or a girl who inherits certain traits - someone to carry on my name.”

“You can have that with a baby you adopt.”

He removed his hand and used it to wrap around his coffee cup. “We’ve been married for almost six years with nothing to show for it and the arguments are getting worse.”

“That’s because you won’t listen to reason. What’s the harm in checking it out? You have an excellent lawyer on retainer who I’m sure would be willing to guide you through the various phases.”

“I have to think about it.” He muttered.

She didn’t remind him that he’d been thinking about it for years. Noticing his cup was empty, she rose to get the pot.

She had Sundays off and, during that time, she tried to cram in everything she wanted to do. After Jason left, she tidied the kitchen and then tackled the laundry. She could easily afford help.

Along with the excellent salary, she had the insurance money from her mother and a sizable inheritance from her stepfather. She was so rarely at home though that the usual household dust didn't get a chance to gather. Once a month, she'd send for someone at the agency to do a thorough clean, from top to bottom.

It was approaching Thanksgiving and that was the planned grand opening of the restaurant. She had some ideas to pitch to Kane as soon as he was back from wherever he'd gone to. The man had business interests all over the world and he and his wife did a great deal of traveling.

The restaurant was new, so he was spending more time there to get her acclimatized. “After the first three months, you’ll be on your own.” He’d warned her. “I’m just here to guide you through. Don’t worry, I have every confidence you’ll do just fine.”

She’d told herself she would be just fine. She’d mentioned to Jason it was something new to her, but it was a challenge she intended to tackle head on. She was in charge of the entire operation, something that could be a little daunting if she let it.

For the first time in her life, she had people working under her. It was exhilarating as well as intimidating.

She was responsible for their well-being and was careful to strike a balance. She was never going to be like Kane, who with one look from those piercing and intense black eyes could send someone scurrying, but she was determined to be fair.

She’d also learned she couldn’t be their superior and their friend at the same time. She could certainly live with

that. She had her own friends outside the restaurant.

She was dumping the laundry into the dryer when her phone rang. Sliding it out of her pocket, she felt the pleasure coursing through her as she looked at the LED. Work had called several times and she'd dealt with several minor hiccups, but this time it was a call she'd been waiting on for weeks.

"You're back." Pressing the knob to get the dryer going, she moved away and went into the living room. "When?"

"Just last night. The flight got delayed and we had to sit in the airport for close to two hours. You can imagine how pissed I was."

"You're back now, though."

"I'm back and can't wait to see you. I brought you back some goodies."

“I asked you not to.”

“Too bad. I’m on my way over. I just have to make a stop and then I’ll be there. We’re going out later tonight.”

“I figured you would be too tired to go anywhere.”

“You figured wrong. See you in a few.”

Hanging up the phone, Chantelle felt her smile widening. Knowing Caleb, he was going to want something to eat as soon as he arrived. With that in mind, she went about finishing the tidying up before going upstairs to take a shower.

He’d opted to go to the club for the day. Kane was away on a business trip and he told himself that at least he’d gotten him off his back. He’d also decided to drive instead of using the company jet to make the trip.

He needed the miles and distance to clear his head and to do some thinking. Doing a circuit in his well-equipped gym hadn't managed to relieve the energy coursing through his body. He figured a day spent at the club would do the trick.

He could lose himself in everything there and put a halt on the thoughts churning through his mind. Perhaps have some mindless sex - perhaps not, he shook his head as he rejected the idea.

His life was too complicated right now to be thinking of anything remotely concerning a relationship. He had things to sort out and didn't want to draw anyone into the drama.

The day was lovely, the drive along the countryside managing to calm his fevered brain. He was happy he'd decided to drive himself instead of flying. His mind turned to his cousin and their conversation two nights ago.

He was right. Kane was right, of course, about him taking the reins of the company. Lee's Enterprises was a diversified multi-billion-dollar company with interests in several businesses. Their car dealership was top of the line and the reputation was second to none.

They'd been in business for more than a hundred years and had started as a car rental place in Korea before blossoming into a holding that had interests all over the world.

Fortunately for him, the managers were well placed and absolutely loyal, giving him the freedom to do whatever hell he pleased.

He was going to have to start to take a more active interest, start going into the office more often, show his face - actually sit in on meetings. The company belonged to him, whether he wanted to accept it or not.

God knows, he was having a hard time accepting it. He wasn't supposed to take over the reins for years. Even if his dad had died, his uncle should've been the one to step forward. Both of them had died at the same time and the anger inside him was too much to bear.

Punching the volume on the radio, he tuned out the bad memories and focused on the lyrics.

"It's cold as hell out there." A grin lit up his handsome face as he stepped into the foyer and lifted her, crushing her tight against his long, lean body. Pressing a kiss on her lips, he asked. "Anything?"

"Nothing." She hugged him fiercely. "It's good to see you."

"I was hoping there would be some sort of spark and we'd end up in bed."

“Fat chance.” She laughed at his nonsense. Tucking a hand through his arm, she led the way into the kitchen where she had soup and sandwich ready.

“Are you sure there’s nothing?” He nodded to the spread. “You’d make me an excellent wife.”

“As if you would even dream of settling down.” She scoffed, going for the case of beers she had in the fridge. “How was it?”

Shrugging out of his battered leather jacket, he slung it carelessly over the back of the chair.

“Three months of undiluted misery.” Dipping the spoon into the soup, he took an appreciative sip. “The food was lousy and I was afraid to let my guard down long enough to get laid.” His dark blue eyes twinkled. “Hence the hope that you changed your mind about the status of our relationship.”

“Nope.” She flicked the moisture from her glass at him.
“And neither have you. How does it feel to be a number one bestselling author? How about the fact that your detective series has been picked up by a major network?”

“Still processing.” He shrugged one broad shoulder. “I still miss being out there solving crimes.” Caleb had been on the force for ten years until he got shot and decided it was time to call it quits. He’d taken his experiences to become a novelist.

His first book had been a minor success, but then an agent had noticed him and taken him under her wing. Now, he was pumping out book after book and racking up credit and recognition.

“Really?”

He grinned at her. “Hell no. I enjoy the freedom of getting up whenever I feel like and staying in my drawers for the

entire day. Did I tell you that I don't shower for days?"

"Not something I like to hear. There is such a thing as oversharing."

"Part of being a best friend. Deal with it."

"It's so good to see you. How long are you staying put?"

"For a while. I've more than enough research to last me for a while and I need to be near my best girl." He gave her an appraising look, mentally shaking his head at the fact that they weren't more than best friends.

Chantelle was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen and he'd seen plenty. She had that flawless caramel complexion going on for her. The tumble of permed dark brown hair was piled on top of her head, giving her a youthful look.

Her nose was small and pert and her lips full. She was tiny and a bundle of energy and was never still for more than a few minutes. They'd explored a deeper relationship at one point, but decided it was better to remain friends. "How's my best girl?"

"Enjoying the job." Her dark brown eyes sparkled. "I had no idea managing a restaurant could be so interesting."

"I imagine you get to meet all sorts of people. The rich and famous."

"Of which you have now become one. You should stop by and have lunch."

"I will. How's the personal life?"

"What personal life?"

"Maybe we should-"

“No.”

He gave her an exasperated look. “We could try.”

“The fact we have to try means it isn’t meant to be.”

“If you say so.” He didn’t pursue the topic, knowing she was right. “I’m taking you out to dinner.”

“I happen to work at a restaurant.” She reminded him.

“I’m taking you to my favorite haunt. Big juicy burger and ale coming up. I caught a damn bug while I was in Mexico City and am still as weak as a kitten.”

“Have you been to a doctor?” The concern was immediate.

“Since I arrived last night after a hellish flight and, as soon as I opened my eyes, the first thing I thought about was seeing you, the answer to that would be a big fat no.”

“Then before we go anywhere, we’re going to see a doctor.”

“Yes, Mom. God, I missed you.”

“Ditto. Finish up, you’re going to help me fold laundry.”

“As long as I get to get to do your underwear.” He gave her a wicked grin.

“Pervert.”

The rousing game of tennis was followed by several laps in the pool and afterwards there was the card game that lasted several hours. Feeling the tension and anger ebbing away, he decided to join some friends for dinner. The conversation was animated and friendly.

He was among his own peers. They were men who knew about his past but had never brought it up. He'd made it clear he didn't want to discuss it and his request had been respected.

He was content to simply sit back, enjoy his after-dinner drink and engage in mindless conversation about the latest car on the market and who was seeing who.

Whoever said that women were the worst gossips had it wrong. Men were definite contenders for the title. He didn't contribute much, of course, because they knew him to be a closed book. He certainly wasn't one to have a heart-to-heart and spill secrets.

"The grand opening is next Saturday?"

He'd been so deep in thought he hadn't realized Liam Moses had lowered himself into the chair next to him.

"Yes."

"Kane has invited almost everyone." The man's eyes were lit with amusement as he took a drag of the cigar clamped between his teeth. "I've not been there yet, but my darling wife has and she's raving about it."

"It's prime location and the food is excellent."

"I'm going to wait until the opening." Liam gave the younger man a contemplative look through the haze of smoke. He was supposed to be quitting, but every now and then the craving would take over.

Amani didn't approve of course, but what the darling of his heart didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Shaking his head

mentally, he wondered when he'd turned into a man who gave a rat's ass about a woman's opinion. That's what happens when a man's heart has been taken over completely, there's no turning back.

"You okay?"

"Yes." Kenji took a sip of the scotch and stretched his legs out. "Getting there, at least. Kane is determined to keep me in line."

"He cares."

"Perhaps too much." Kenji said dryly.

"Is there such a thing?" A whimsical smile touched his mouth. "You went through hell only a year ago and for a moment there it was touch and go. I've known Kane for years and that was the first time I ever saw him unravel. You're family and he made a pledge to take care of you."

“Even given the fact that I’m an adult?”

“Even so.” Liam grinned at him. Leaning back in the comfortable chair, he stretched his legs out. “Caring complicates things. I have sisters who are adults and I’m still protective of them.”

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.” Kenji patted the pocket of his jacket and took out a slim case. Opening it, he selected a cigar and leaned forward to accept the light Liam offered. “I’ve proven that time and again.” He drew the smoke into his lungs and closed his eyes as the taste took over.

Yes, it was a very good idea to come here today. He could feel himself unwinding and letting go. Tomorrow would be a different story of course, but today was a day of relaxation and the company wasn’t bad either.

He’d had offers, subtle ones and not so subtle from unattached women, but he’d brushed them aside. He didn’t need the distraction at this time.

“I’m sure you did.” Tossing back the rest of his drink, Liam rose to his feet. “How about some fencing? I’m suddenly feeling very competitive and light on my feet.”

Kenji’s eyebrows rose as the battle light came into his eyes. He was an excellent swordsman naturally and was relishing the idea of trouncing the older man. “I don’t want to humiliate you.”

“Cocky, aren’t you?” Liam grunted.

“Wouldn’t you be in my place?”

“Let’s go put your words to the test, shall we?”

Chapter 3

“There’s no smoking in the building.”

“I’m not in the building.” He gestured to the spacious balcony with a smirk.

“In case you didn’t notice, this is an enclosed space which means the rule applies.”

“Sue me.” He watched her through the haze of smoke and waited for the explosion. He’d come out here to get away from his date and her mindless chatter. He’d called her up in an attempt to take his mind off his worries, but that had been a massive mistake.

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Her lips curled slightly in distaste, or was it in disgust, he wondered.

“You’re already the manager of the place.” His deep voice stopped her as she turned to leave.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you don’t have to try and impress management. You’re already at the top of the food chain.”

Her eyes glowered at him and he could swear he could see fire. “This isn’t about impressing management. I’m simply trying to ensure the smooth running of the place, not that it’s any of your business.”

“Oh, but it is.” He took another long drag of the cigar and eyed the glowing tip of it. “I happen to own ten percent of this fine establishment.” He smiled slightly as she stiffened. “I bet you weren’t aware of that little bit of information.”

“Ten percent means ten percent. It doesn’t give you any deciding votes.” She told him primly. She should just

leave and go back to her duties. The place was packed to capacity and she had lots of work to do, due to the opening on Saturday. She shouldn't be standing here arguing with him.

"Perhaps not. You don't like me, do you?"

"I don't know you well enough to form an opinion."

"You're just pissed because I referred to you as just an employee."

Her gaze turned scornful as she looked at him from head to toe. "If you think your opinion means shit to me, then you definitely don't know me. Enjoy your smoke."

Before he could make a comeback, she'd left and closed the doors with a snap. A smile touched his lips. He was intrigued by her. Naturally, he'd noticed her beauty. That flawless complexion, the heavy lashed dark brown eyes and those sexy pair of lips. She wasn't intimidated by either him nor his cousin.

He'd noticed her on the floor. She would smile at the customers, listen with interest and flick away the interests from men who were there for business meals. She'd do it without being insulting. She also avoided his table like the plague. He could force her to come to him of course, and had actually toyed with the idea, but decided against it.

He enjoyed sparring with her. It was strange and a little disturbing that the few minutes arguing with him had revved his blood and piqued his interest more than the entire evening spent in the company of the woman he'd invited for dinner. Taking a last drag of the cigar, he went in to get rid of his date and have another round with her.

"If you can't find me a table, I have no problem eating in your office." Caleb told her with a grin. "I spruced up for the occasion, as you can see." He held his arms out for her to examine him. "What do you think?"

“I think you look dashing. Is the outfit new?”

“Brand spanking.” He pointed at the diamonds at her lobe. “I see you’re wearing one of my gifts.”

“It goes with my outfit.” Taking his hand, she led him to a small booth in the corner. “How’s this?”

“Perfect. Will you be joining me? I just spent the entire day with my agent who told me some numbers that sizzled my brain. You’re looking at a very wealthy man, darling. One who can keep you in diamonds for the rest of your life.”

“I accepted the ones you brought back, but that is where this ends.” Leaning down, she brushed her lips against his, not resisting when he touched her cheek. “I’ll send someone over with a bottle of Cabernet and the house special.”

“Appreciate it.”

That was how Kenji saw them. She was bent intimately towards the guy and his hold on her was proprietary, leaving no doubt that they were involved. For some reason, he could feel the gut-wrenching anger twisting inside him as he continued to stare at the couple.

Straightening up, he saw when the laughter was completely wiped from her lips as she met his gaze. With a curt nod, he turned away and went to the booth where his date was waiting. The entire evening had been spoiled for him and for the next few minutes, he drank steadily.

“How was it?” She’d finally found a bit of time to sit with him and rest her aching feet. She’d shed her heels and put on comfortable flats sometime during the night. The place had emptied out considerably as it was almost midnight.

“Excellent. The boss man not here tonight?”

She shook her head, reaching for his glass to take a sip of the wine. “They have a function or something.”

“So, you’re the one running the show?”

“It takes team effort.”

Caleb gave her an amused smile. “Modesty is overrated, darling. You’re doing a damn good job. I’ve been watching you making the rounds and putting out small fires. Like the one where the asshole was shoving his date. You took care of that before the other customers even got a whiff of what was happening. How did you get him to leave?”

“By telling him he wouldn’t be allowed back and that I wasn’t his date and I wouldn’t sit back and allow herself to be abused. I told him that I fight back and it isn’t pretty.”

Caleb chuckled in delight. “He hightailed it out of here fast.”

“Yep.” She smiled at him. “So, the deal is done.”

“The deal is done. Netflix, Prime and a couple of other networks signed on the dotted line. I’m now officially a millionaire.” He cocked a brow at her and popped a plump shrimp into her mouth. “You can ditch the job and marry me.”

“I love the job and marrying you would be a disaster.”

“Ouch.” he grimaced, plucking the wine from her. “You really know how to hit a guy where it hurts.”

“Yeah, right.” Leaning forward, she kissed his cheek.
“Duty calls.”

Kenji told himself he should get the hell back to his place and go to bed. He'd ditched his date, sending her home in a cab and the place was now practically empty. He was pissed and ornery and was ready for a confrontation.

He'd seen them together again. The guy had his arm around her waist and they'd been cozied up at the doorway of her office. He'd told her he had an interest in the restaurant and that was precisely what he was going to use.

With fire burning in his eyes and his gut, he waited until the last patron had left for the night and the rest of the staff had cleaned up and was making their way out before he made his way to her office, his steps purposeful. Without knocking on the door, he pushed it open and saw her standing by her desk.

"I am-" Her voice trailed away when she saw him standing there. "May I help you?"

Closing the door with a snap, he leaned against it and closed his arms over his chest, his gaze insolent. “Is Kane aware that you allow your boyfriend to eat here for free?”

Her gaze smoldered. “I am the manager of-”

“I get it. You’re the manager here so you feel you can do pretty much what you damn well please. Did he pay for the meal?”

Straightening her shoulders, she took a careful breath before responding. “I don’t answer to you.”

“I happen to sit on the board.”

“You’re not my employer. Now, if you would excuse me-”

“In a hurry to go home to him, are you?” Straightening from his position, he started forward.

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“He wasn’t gentleman enough to wait for you?”

“I don’t need a man to take care of me. Now get out.”

“Or?” He stopped right in front of her, near enough to smell her perfume and to drown in the liquid of her brown eyes. What the hell was he doing? He wondered.

“I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not.” His hands clamped on her arms and stopped her from walking around him.

“Let go of me.”

“How long have you been seeing this guy?” He was literally backing her into the corner of the room.

“That’s none of your concern.” Her breath was coming rapidly between her lips. His body was pressed up against his, and she could feel her pulse skittering.

He was tall, perhaps an inch or two taller than Kane, and she had dumped her heels in favor of the flats, which meant that she barely came up to his chest. A lock of unruly dark hair had fallen over his forehead, and his dark eyes were focused on her mouth. “Let go of me.”

“I’m curious.”

“I don’t care.” She pushed at him, but he wouldn’t budge.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m curious about?”

“I don’t care,” she repeated.

“Are you as cool as people think you are?” One hand came up to cup her face. “Or is it just a facade?” His voice had deepened, breath stirring her skin. “I saw you dealing with that idiot who was manhandling his date. I said to myself she could handle herself. Can you handle me?”

“I wouldn’t want to.” She was getting weak at the knees and despising herself for it. She wanted to feel his lips on hers, and it must have shown on her face. “Back off.”

“Not a chance.” His head swooped down, and before she could turn away, his mouth was crushing hers. He tasted of cherry brandy and something else. Something potent she couldn’t put a finger on. His hands were clamped on her face, his tongue working its way into her mouth.

She told herself she could stop him, that she should, that nothing good was going to come of this. Her insides were curling, and her body felt hot. The kiss not only seared her lips but sent a hot ball of fire burning through

her body. Her hands came up to grip the lapel of his sports jacket to anchor herself.

She felt her knees buckle, her stomach jittering. Emotions, so many of them that she lost count, swamped her, threatening to pull her under and overwhelm her. She lost herself in the most potent and sizzling kiss she'd ever experienced. Then, common sense reared its head.

She almost ignored it, almost ignored the clamoring of her conscience, the voice hammering at her to abort. Something inside her kicked into gear, and she somehow found the strength to drag her lips from his and push him back.

He blinked at her, dark eyes blazing with passion. For a few moments, neither of them moved - standing there as if they were carved in stone. Then Chantelle broke the tension, scraping against the wall to get away from him. Dragging her coat off the tree, she shoved her arms in and avoided his eyes.

Kenji could have stopped her, thought about it for a minute, but decided not to. He watched her fighting with the buttons and continued to watch as she grabbed her pocketbook.

“I’ll walk you out.” His voice was quiet, which was funny, considering that his insides were raging out of control.

“No!” She snapped it out. “Just go. Security is here, and I can find my way out. Just-” Lifting a hand, she passed it over the tangled mess of her hair. It’d been secured neatly into the usual bun, but the pins had been thrown away by his passion, and she couldn’t find the strength to look for them.

“Is he waiting for you?”

“Yes.” She pushed out the lie needing to hang onto something. She needed to try and regain some semblance of order or sanity.

“Are you going to tell him about this?” His voice had taken on a hard edge.

“It’s nothing – there’s nothing to tell.”

“Perhaps you need a reminder.” He started forward, and she shrank back against the desk.

“Please. Just leave me the hell alone. Is that what you do? You were with someone earlier tonight, and what? You wanted to prove a point? That you can have your way with the help?”

“That’s not-”

“Go away and leave me alone.”

He stared at her for a minute, and she could actually feel the seconds ticking by slowly. She wanted him to leave, needed the time to berate herself - to beat herself up. He was Kane’s cousin, a multi-billionaire playboy with too

much time on his hands. She couldn't afford him and couldn't afford to be attracted to someone like him.

She almost sagged with relief when he turned on his heels and left the office. Taking a few minutes more to compose herself, she took out a hairbrush from her bag and tried to undo the tangle before making her way out.

She would hold it together until she arrived home. To her relief, his vehicle wasn't in the parking lot when she said her goodbyes to security and made her way to the car.

Kenji headed straight to the well-equipped gym inside his apartment. It was almost one in the morning, but he wasn't going to kid himself into thinking he was going to get any sleep. His body was too wired; his cock felt like steel pulsating against the material of his trousers.

He was riled up and angry with himself that he'd touched her. He'd let his guard down and had given into his lust,

and that same lust was now tearing through his body.

Stripping naked, he dragged on a pair of sweats and tied a band around his head to keep the hair away. Picking out the bag hanging from the roof, he went into attack mode. It was a pitiful attempt to get rid of the fire burning its way through his lower body.

Her mouth – Sweet Christ! It'd tasted better than he could have imagined. Her slender curves pressed up against him had almost driven him insane.

Curling his fingers into fists, he pummeled the bag, dancing out of the way as the bag bounced back and almost knocked him over. Grabbing the bag with both hands, he steadied it and started again.

He had to get rid of the desire churning inside his body. He would stay away from her from now on. Giving the bag one last vicious punch, he slid down onto the mat and dragged his fingers through his hair.

She made it home and made it all the way upstairs and into her bedroom before sitting on the edge of the bed. She'd tried rationalizing her actions. Yes, he'd been the one to initiate it. He'd come at her, stalked her into a corner, and put his hands on her. She could have worked harder to push him away.

Chantelle realized she'd been a willing participant and had enjoyed it so much that it'd taken a massive amount of willpower to stop. She'd enjoyed it more than she'd ever enjoyed being kissed before.

She could still feel the imprint of his lean muscled body against hers. It had a solidness that was undeniable. Scrubbing her hands over her face, she wondered if he was going to mention it to Kane.

"Oh, Lord." She whispered, flopping back and putting her hands over her face. "What have I done?" She had to tell

someone. She had to tell Caleb. He'd put it into perspective for her. Before she could change her mind, she reached for the phone and called him.

"I was just thinking about you. You home?"

"Yes." She took a breath. "I did something incredibly stupid."

"Specify."

"There's this guy."

"I knew there was a guy. Why else would you refuse a hot-looking man like me?"

"That's gross. I happen to think of you as my brother."

"Ouch. That stings. What about the guy?"

“Kenji Lee.” She waited for him to place the name.

“That’s your boss’ cousin. He was involved in something iffy back in Korea. Wait! You’re involved with him?”

“No.” She closed her eyes briefly. “He cornered me in my office and -” She passed a hand over her forehead and could feel the headache brewing. “He - he kissed me.”

“Did he force you?” Caleb’s voice had gone dangerously soft.

“No,” She told him wearily. “I shouldn’t have allowed it to happen, and I have no idea how it’s going to affect my position there. He’s not only Kane’s cousin; he also has an interest in the restaurant. How could I have been so stupid?”

“Do you like him?” The question jolted her, and for a minute, she couldn’t respond.

“I despise him. No. I can’t stand him, and he’d be the last person I’d ever be interested in.”

“How was it?”

“How was what?”

“The kiss, my sweet girl. On a scale of one to ten, what’s the rating?”

“I’m not telling you that.”

“That good, huh? What are you going to do about it?”

“What do you think?” She demanded, sitting up. “I’m going to pretend it never happened.”

“Want my advice?”

“No.”

“I’m going to offer it anyway. It sounds to me like you’re attracted to the guy. Go to bed with him; get it out of your system.”

“That’s your take? Have sex with him, and then what?”

She could hear the shrug in his voice. “Then go on from there.”

“You’re a lousy friend.”

“Hey, I’m just giving you moral support.”

“That’s far from giving me moral support.” She curled her feet beneath her. “Why are you still awake?”

“Perhaps because I’m talking to you. I knew I shouldn’t have left you there by yourself.”

“I wished I’d told you to wait.” She blew out a breath.
“You know what? I’m a big girl, and I made a mistake and am going to have to live with it. I’m going to move on and forget it.”

“Can you?”

“I will. Kenji Lee isn’t my type, and I’m sure as hell not his.”

“Don’t be too sure about that, darling. Have you looked in the mirror lately? You are every man’s type.”

“I told him you were that we were together.”

“I feel so used.” He told her dryly. “So, I’m going to have to show up at that fancy restaurant whenever he happens to pop by?”

“Would you?”

“For a price.”

“What price?”

“You read the draft I just started and tell me honestly what you think.”

“You don’t need any validation. Your books are amazing. Which brings me to the burning question.”

“What’s that?”

“The love scenes.”

“Ah.” He chuckled.

“From experience?”

“What do you think?”

“They’re smoking hot.”

“They were meant to be. Got you all hot under the collar, did it?”

“Something like that.” The reminder brought her back to the scene in her office. “Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime, darling. It seems I’ve lost my chance with you for good.”

“You never had a chance where that’s concerned.”

“I suppose not. Now I get to be your pretend guy.
Sweet.”

“You’re such a moron.” She told him with a laugh. “Go to
bed. I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

“Get some sleep, darling, and put it out of your mind.”

However, that was easier said than done.

Chapter 4

She told herself she was a professional, and she was, of course. She'd proven to herself and others that she could work under pressure. She'd spent last night and this morning analyzing the situation. She'd allowed it to happen, and it'd been amazing.

Now it was done. She'd move on with her life and be done with it. She'd avoid him if that's what it takes. If he happened to come into the restaurant, she'd be too busy to even look at him.

No doubt he'd come in with a date, and she'd do her best to avoid his table. She was the manager and could easily send someone else to him. It was just a slip, nothing more.

It didn't matter her lips were still stinging from the potent and powerful kiss, and her nipples were still aching. It would pass, and hopefully, he'd have the decency not to mention it to Kane. That had kept her up even more.

She'd locked lips inside her office with his cousin. Kenji Lee was no ordinary guy. He was the heir to a multi-billion-dollar enterprise. She'd read up on him, and their holdings and business interests were too staggering for words.

He didn't work and had a reputation where women were concerned. Of course, he did. He was tall and lean and dangerously handsome. He had more money than she could wrap her head around.

It'd been a game to him, and she'd allowed him to have his way with her. Now the game was over, and she was back to reality.

She had an opening to fine-tune, and it was going to be a big deal. Reporters were already sniffing around. Ever since the opening of the restaurant, it'd been packed to capacity every single night. They had bookings all the way through until next year of people who wanted to be part of the hype.

That's how Kane and Kelly had put it. "We belong to a society where people want to belong. The latest buzz around is 'Magnifique.' They are going to want to experience it for themselves."

They were right, as well. People were curious, and their interest had them making reservations or waiting until something opened up. It wasn't just hype. The restaurant was all it'd reported to be and then some. A famous food critic had given it a five-star rating.

"Magnifique lives up to its name and the buzz going around. The ambiance is amazing, the food is out of this world, and the service is excellent. The servers are friendly and professional. I have to say that Kane Takahashi has done it again. And kudos to the manager, the very beautiful and gracious Chantelle Williamson."

She had a reputation to uphold and couldn't afford a tiny unimportant lapse to unsettle her. With that in mind, she finished preparing to leave.

The pep talk she'd given herself lasted as long as she journeyed from her home to the restaurant. Kane had told her he would be there to go over some details with her.

"Take your time getting here. I know you were late leaving. I'll be in the office."

She'd worked the midnight shift, so she was supposed to come in at eleven. They had a lunch crowd coming in, some of Kane's business associates from Europe. She'd spoken to the chef about the menu already, but it didn't hurt to check on things again to make sure everything was in place.

The cleaning crew had come in early, and the place was spotless. Kane didn't spare any expense when it came to his restaurants. The health department had already been there and given it their stamp of approval.

She'd just stepped out of her vehicle when she noticed several vehicles were already in the large parking lot, and one of them belonged to him. What was he doing here so early? Her hands trembled slightly as she engaged the alarm.

Was he here to complain to Kane about her? No, he wouldn't do that, would he? Taking a deep breath, she tugged the jacket closer to her as the wind whipped at the material.

It had rained earlier, and the aroma was pungent and somewhat heady. She nodded to the doorman as he held the doors open for her and headed straight to her office to put away her jacket and pocketbook.

A few messages were waiting for her on her desk – one from Kane asking her to meet as soon as she arrived. Picking up the inter-office phone, she called the kitchen and asked that a pot of coffee and some fruits be sent to him.

Delaying for a few minutes, she rose and made her way to his office. Knocking on the door, she waited for him to admit her before pushing the doors open. Kenji was lounging on one of the sofas near the window. Ignoring the prickle of awareness and the rush of memories, she smiled at Kane as he rose to his feet.

“Chantelle.” With a nod of acknowledgment, he gestured for her to sit. “Kenji and I were just finishing up a discussion.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.” With a curt nod at Chantelle, he made his way out.

“How are you?”

“Good. Fine.” She folded her hands in her lap and took a breath. “Last night was a success with only a few incidents.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Those unnerving dark eyes looked so much like the man who had just left the room

she had to stop herself from fidgeting. “You said you had some ideas for opening night?”

“Yes. Of course. I jotted them down right here.”

Determined to focus on the job, she rose and handed him her device.

He should leave. The sensible and smart thing to do was to leave. He had things to do. Meetings to attend. A board meeting, to be precise. Trouble was brewing in one sector of the business. That was what he'd been discussing with Kane when she walked in.

The cherry red suit suited her, and his eyes had zeroed in on her lips. He wanted her. The pep talk he'd indulged in last night and this morning had gone out of the window the minute she stepped into his cousin's office.

His loins were burning for her. He really should leave. He didn't have to be here. Kane and Kelly had other

wonderful restaurants he could patronize.

He didn't have to come here. He had an office - a big one with an excellent view. He could have Kane come to him. He was sure he wouldn't mind. He was edgy and irritable, and it was because of her.

He had a craving for a cigar. Pacing the winding passageway, he contemplated his next move. Had she left his arms to go straight into his bed? That was driving him crazy. He'd recognized the guy.

Some former cop who was now a famous novelist. He'd seen him being interviewed on TV. Why the hell had she allowed him to kiss her like that when she was involved? Dammit, he really should leave, but he really wanted to see her again.

That was why he was standing outside her office like a lackey begging for scraps. His head lifted when he heard the click of her heels on the glossy tiles. She stopped and stared at him.

“You’re blocking my door.”

“I know I am.” Smiling insolently, he leaned against the hardwood and crossed his arms over his chest.

“I don’t have time for this. I have work to do. Please let me pass.”

He shifted slightly and opened the door for her with a mock flourish. Hesitating slightly, she moved forward and was careful not to brush against him. A sigh escaped her when he simply came in behind her.

“What do you want?”

“A number of things.” His dark eyes swept over the elegance of the office and decided it suited her. “How was your night?”

“Wonderful.” She told him sweetly. “Now, if you’re quite finished-”

“Not by a long shot. How’s the boyfriend?”

“His name is Caleb, and he’s wonderful.” She felt a jolt of fear as he came forward to ease a hip on her desk. He was wearing a thin cashmere sweater and black trousers. His hair was in its usual disorder, giving him a carelessly boyish look.

Intense dark eyes swept over her face and settled on her lips, making her acutely aware of what the touch of his mouth on hers could do.

“Is he?” He murmured silkily. “Did you happen to mention what you did right here with me?”

“It wasn’t important. Now, if you’d excuse me-”

“I’m not finished.” He watched in amusement when she backed away and dropped into her chair. “Are you afraid of me?”

“You flatter yourself.” Chantelle was desperate not to reveal how affected she was. Perhaps it was fear as well as desire coursing through her foolish body. “I have a lot of things to do and-”

“So do I. I stood there for several minutes debating whether to wait for you. I was unable to sleep last night. You made quite an impression.”

“Please leave.” She hated that her voice had dropped to a whisper.

“I want to get some things out in the open first.” His dark eyes wandered over her hair before going to her face. Her eyes were wide and had flecks of gold; some might call it honey gold. He’d noticed that last night while his tongue was deep inside her throat.

Her skin was flawless, and he knew by touch that it was soft as silk. Her lips were coated with a gloss that highlighted the shape, and he knew what they tasted

like. He'd nibbled enough last night for the sensation to last. He wanted more, and everything he'd said to himself in the early hours of the morning had dissipated like smoke.

"Come to my apartment tonight." Turning slightly, he reached for a notepad and a pen and scribbled the address and his personal number. "We'll have the privacy needed. I want to make love to you."

His head snapped up at the sound of her husky laughter.

"Your ego is astonishing. You expect me to just agree to come to your place just because you say so? I'm not one of your mindless bimbos, and I happen to be in a relationship." The lie slipped easily off her tongue, and she was hoping desperately he'd buy it and leave her be.

"Are you?" He asked her. "How involved?"

"Deeply. Now please go."

“What would he say if he knew what we’d been up to last night? Right over there.” He nodded to the section of her office that she’d avoided looking at since she came in.

“He’d chalk it down to temporary insanity on my part.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“Yes. Now-” Before she could ask him to leave again, there was a knock on her door that had her bolting from her chair in shock. Her temper simmered as he merely got up and stood beside her desk.

“Come in.” Her consternation increased when she saw who it was.

“Oh, Kane. I’m sorry. Were you trying to get hold of me?” She sounded guilty and was almost certain she looked it.

“No. I was on my way out, actually.” His eyes took in the scene, and even though his face was expressionless, she had a good idea of what he was thinking.

“Mr. Lee-”

“I was just offering Chantelle my services in the upcoming grand opening.” He chipped in smoothly, staring at his cousin and daring him to think otherwise.

“Generous of you.”

“I was just telling Mr. Lee that we have everything under control. He was just leaving.” She gave him a pointed look, almost begging him to leave.

“Ah, yes.” He gave her a sultry look that had her going hot. “We’ll talk.”

Not if I can help it, she said silently.

“If you need anything else, please call me on my personal number.”

“I will.”

Kane nodded and waited for his cousin to leave.

Chantelle sank down on her chair and felt the trembling of her knees and the unnatural thumping of her heart. Pulling the notepad forward, she stared at the precise handwriting. She was about to rip out the page and toss it into the wastebasket when she hesitated. Pushing it away from her, she took a breath and went to work.

“Please don’t say anything.”

“I wasn’t going to until you asked me not to.” Kane nodded to the doorman as he held the door open for them to exit. His car was parked in his designated spot, with Kenji’s Porsche parked next to it.

“What was that all about?”

Kenji shrugged as he pressed his alarm. “Nothing.”

“It looked like something to me.”

“It’s no big deal.” He growled it out irritably. “Just- hell-” He passed a hand at the back of his neck. “She gets under my skin.”

Kane hid the triumphant smile as he leaned against the hood of the car. “I thought you two couldn’t stand each other.”

“We still can’t.” He closed his eyes briefly. “This is the last thing I need right now.”

“What is?”

Kenji glared at him. “You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“It doesn’t bother you. There’s a thing between us? She works for you.”

“Chantelle is an adult,” His dark eyes smoldered. “But if this is one of your games-”

“I don’t play games.”

Kane gave him a look. “If this is one of your games, I’m going to kick your ass. She happens to be a valued employee, and I wouldn’t want to lose her.”

“There’s heat.” Kenji shoved his hands into his pockets, his expression moody. “Too much heat, and it’s throwing me off my game. I kissed her last night and - ” He closed his eyes briefly. “I can’t seem to get her out of my head. The kicker is she’s involved with some writer.”

“Is she?”

“Yes. “He bit out. “I should back the hell off as I said; I don’t need this added complication. I have enough as it is.”

“Who is the guy?”

“Caleb, something. He was a cop.”

“Ah. Kelly loves his books. I had no idea that Chantelle knew him.”

“He was here last night, and they seemed to be glued to each other.” He said darkly.

“It doesn’t bother you that she’s with someone?”

“I don’t give a crap.” He spat out. “I wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp.” He sighed softly. “She says she’s not interested.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way around it.” Kane was about to say something else when his phone beeped. “I have to take this. Dinner later?”

“Yeah.” Kenji climbed into his vehicle and sat there for a minute before pulling out of the slot.

Kane watched with pleasure as his wife glided towards him. He’d often thought of her movement as a sinuous, sexy, gliding motion. She’d been a model and had

graced the international stage, showing off her spectacular body by wearing skimpy lingerie, something that had pissed him off to no end.

He'd tried to resist her various approaches, telling himself she wasn't his type, but she'd managed to break through every barricade he'd put up and shot right to the heart of him.

He was still in love with her. He was as in love as he had been since he'd grudgingly accepted it had to be her.

Rising slowly to his feet, he enfolded her in his arms and inhaled her scent. They were meeting at one of her restaurants and were in a private booth. His hands passed over her back and further down, staying there for a minute.

"Hi."

"Hi." Her arms went around his neck; her head tilted to his. She was so crazy about him that it was ridiculous.

One touch, even a look from this broodingly handsome man, could send her spinning into orbit. “I ordered dessert and coffee.”

“Hmm.” He kissed her slowly and felt the heat spreading. She was the first and only woman who’d gotten under his skin and into his bloodstream. She was his heart. Moving away from her reluctantly, he slid into his seat. Before they could settle, a waiter brought the order to their table with a respectful bow.

“That will be all, Monica. Thank you.”

“Is she new?”

“Yes.” Kelly poured him a cup from the delicate white teapot she’d picked up in Italy. “A friend recommended her. The poor dear is newly divorced and has two children to support.”

“We know how much of a bleeding heart you are.” His tone was indulgent.

“Yet you love me anyway?”

“I love you for it.” His eyes flickered over her face. Her hair was a series of short, spiky blonde curls, her makeup flawless. Her face with the pointed chin was eye-catching. She had on a clinging wool sweater over dark blue dress pants and leather boots. “I just saw Kenji in Chantelle’s office.”

“Oh?” Kelly took a sip of the coffee. “Were they naked?”

He gave her a look that had her laughing. “He kissed her last night.”

“So, progress.”

“I have no idea. She has him tied up in knots.” He gave her an amused look. “I happen to have first-hand knowledge of that.”

Kelly laughed in remembrance. "I did give you a run for your money."

"He says she's seeing Caleb, the writer."

Her eyes widened. "She knows him?"

"Apparently."

"Well. Hmm. She doesn't strike me as a woman who'd be seeing a man and having another man kiss her. They might just be friends."

"Perhaps. It was good to see Kenji thinking about something other than murder and mayhem." There was a grim look on his face that had her reaching out a hand to touch him. "I want him to be happy. He's been through so much that I want him to be happy."

“Perhaps this is his chance to be. I can talk to Chantelle. Get a feel if she’s really involved with the guy, although I strongly doubt it.”

“Why not? He’s single and attractive, and from what I read, he’s now a bestselling author.”

“One whose series has been picked up by Netflix and several other networks.” She sipped her coffee. “I mean, he’s not rolling in dough like you and Kenji, but he’ll be getting some serious money.”

“Hmm.” Her husband grunted as he dug into the strawberry delight. “Perhaps we should leave well enough alone.”

“I’m not backing off, and you were the one to rope me in.” Her eyes glinted. “I happen to love a challenge. I spoke to Leesa about it.”

His look was indulgent and exasperated at the same time. “I thought we were keeping this between us!”

“Were we supposed to?” She asked smoothly, stretching a foot out to brush against his. “You never said.”

“If I had, you would’ve ignored me.”

“Possibly.” She gave him an alluring smile that sent heat to the core of him. “You know I’m always your obedient wife.”

“Like hell you are.” He growled.

“In the ways that matter, I am.” Leaning forward, she used the napkin to dab at his mouth. “God, I love you to pieces.”

His heart jolted. His hand snaked out to grip her chin, dark eyes smoldering. “I adore you.” He whispered before capturing her lips. The kiss was potent and had them both dissolving from the heat.

With trembling hands, he pushed her away and tried desperately to regain his composure. Before her, he was always in control. Now, even after several years of marriage, she still managed to make him feel like a besotted schoolboy. It was frustrating as hell.

“I feel it too.” She said, quietly interpreting the look on his handsome face.

“Yeah. Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Chapter 5

“You’re making me nervous and dizzy at the same time,” Caleb told her mildly, eyes tracking her progress across his small living room.

“You need a maid.” She muttered, staring at the dust gathering on the windowsill. “Why aren’t you living in some fancy apartment in a better area?”

“Because, my irritable one, I happen to like this apartment and this area. I’m well-known and well-liked. As for hiring a maid-” He shrugged. “The last one ended up in my bed and refused to do her maidly duties.”

She sent him a pained look that had him grinning. She was off today, and after paying a visit to her brother and running a few errands, she’d decided to drop by. “There are agencies who can send you respectable older women who will actually do the work.”

“I have someone coming in one day a week. I love my space and my privacy. Now, sit and tell me what’s bugging your pretty little ass. Or shall I hazard a guess?”

“He was waiting for me outside my office yesterday.”

“And?” She still wasn’t sitting but had wandered over to swipe her fingers across the tiny mantle.

“He came in and-” She dropped down onto the rocker near the fireplace. “He wrote his address and phone number.”

“Ah.”

“That’s it?” She raised her tapered brows. “That’s all you’re going to say?”

“The man clearly wants you in his bed.” Putting away the contract he’d been perusing, he stretched his legs out. “Might not be such a bad idea.”

She stared at him with wide eyes. "I'm supposed to be involved with you, and he's Kenji Lee."

"There is that. You could tell him the truth."

"No. You're supposed to be my best friend."

"I am your best friend who happens to know you haven't been laid in years."

"One year." She muttered.

"One, two - what's the difference? What happened to that jackass anyway?"

"He hooked up with someone from his company."

“Bastard.” He shook his head. “He wasn’t good enough for you.”

“I happen to agree with you there. God, what am I going to do?”

“The fact it’s bothering you so much should tell you something.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact, you’re really into this guy. I’ve never seen you so rattled before.”

“That’s because I have never been this rattled before. I can’t and won’t get involved with him.” She rubbed her palms over her denim-clad thighs. “The opening is tomorrow night.”

“I have my invitation right here.” He gestured to the tabletop. “Formal wear, is it?” His eyes twinkled. “I just

picked up my tux from the cleaners. How thick do you want me to lay on the affection?”

“Inches. I want him to get the picture I’m deeply involved. Hopefully, by then, he’ll leave me alone.”

He gave her a shrewd look. “Do you want him to?”

“Yes.” She interpreted his look. “Absolutely.”

“I read up on the guy, and he is trouble. His parents, or rather his dad and uncle, were mixed up in some shadiness. Drugs found in cars being shipped from Korea to here, and gang members out for revenge. Your guy was almost killed a year ago and narrowly escaped with his life.”

“He isn’t my guy.” She muttered.

“The point is-” He continued, ignoring her comment. “He has some major issues, and you’d do well to avoid the

mess. From what I understand, there are people still out to get him.”

She eyed him curiously. “How do you know all this?”

He grinned at her. “I still have cops in my old precinct who feed me info, and you happen to be the most important person in my life. I have to look out for you.”

“It’s not like he’s a terrorist.”

“He’s a very rich guy with a boatload of issues. He has an incredible amount of money at his fingertips and people out to do him harm. I’m surprised he isn’t walking around with a contingency of security.”

Caleb rubbed the back of his neck. “He also has a reputation for being a hothead. He gets in fights and happens to be a martial arts expert. And he’s Korean.”

She frowned at him.

“He was born here certainly, but he has Korean blood running through his veins.”

“So does Kane.”

“They are a frightening breed. That blank look on their faces and the intense dark eyes makes you wonder what the hell they’re thinking.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

He grinned at her. “When I was on the streets, we happened to be investigating a Korean gang. They were running drugs and guns - and trafficking young girls from Korea.

They would pack them like sardines in boats and ship them here to be sold to perverts for their sick pleasure. It was going on for years until we managed to get someone infiltrated in the gang. He was an Asian guy

and could speak the language fluently. The head guy was scary as hell and wouldn't tolerate disloyalty.

Several of his members ended up in pieces in the East River." He shook his head. "My point is when we got the guy in an interview room; he wouldn't budge. He'd sit there, staring at nothing in particular, and wouldn't say a word."

"What happened to him?"

"He ended up in prison and was finally shanked by some brave soul."

"And the moral of the story would be?"

"Be careful." His expression had turned sober. "Kenji Lee isn't some ordinary guy. He has seen enough action, lost all of his family, and is carrying around anger that is waiting to find an outlet. He's also wealthy and entitled. He might just want you for a night or two and then discard you. You deserve better than that."

“My sentiments exactly.”

Kenji wasn't comfortable sitting behind a desk. More than that, he wasn't comfortable taking over his father's plush and spacious office, but this was his birthright. He wasn't supposed to be here at this time. It wasn't supposed to have been for years. Now, he was thrust into the role, and he had to take charge.

The board members had hinted at him. They hadn't come right out and said it, but it was there. Kane, on the other hand, had said it outright. They were all right, of course. He couldn't run away forever. He knew the company inside out, of course.

He'd been brought up learning the ropes. He knew the holdings, the shipping company, and the import and export business. The car dealerships that had been plunged into scandal and made the news several years

ago. Stories of hardcore drugs being shipped from Korea to the States.

The scandal had broken his father's heart and put a blight on their name. It was still there, the looks and questions, something which he did his best to ignore. Now he was seated behind the massive desk taking his father's place.

He would do the job. He would carry on their legacy and would find a way to tame his anger. He would also find a way to get her out of his mind. The first was doable; the second, he wasn't so sure about.

"You're nervous." Kelly glanced at the younger woman, admiring the slinky black dress overlaid with silver that suited her so well.

"Can you blame me?" Chantelle's hand went to her throat, where she'd decided to wear diamonds. "I'm

going to be judged by all and sundry.”

“Everything looks great, and the live band is one of the best in the country. How on earth did you manage to pull that off?”

“I used Kane’s name.”

“Of course. My husband has a way of influencing people. Love the dress. Romano’s?”

“It cost me an arm and a leg, but it’s totally worth it. Green is definitely your color.”

“I’d like to think so. Ah, here comes the gang. You’ve met Leesa before, right?”

“Yes. As well as Monique and Stacy. Wonderful women.”

“They are. I’ll leave you to it then and go and find that husband of mine.” She touched Chantelle’s hand lightly. “Any date for tonight?”

She shifted slightly. “Caleb. You might know him-“

“The writer. I love his books.” Kelly stared at her curiously. “He’s also hot.”

“He is.”

“See you around. Don’t worry; everything looks wonderful.”

Chantelle waved to a few people she recognized and made her way around the room. The decorations were tasteful and had the theme of all of Kane’s restaurants. Burgundy and cream. The tables were draped in dazzling white, and champagne seemed to be flowing from an unending supply.

Caviar, tiny sandwiches, fat shrimp, and canapes were heaped on plates. The bar was very busy, and the laughter and conversation muted. The chandeliers hanging from the sloped roof gave the dazzling jewelry the women had on an added layer of glitter.

She was awestruck by the number of celebrities present, but it didn't show on her perfectly made-up face. She was in her element and would stop to admire a customer's dress or simply make a welcoming comment. She almost sagged in relief when she noticed Caleb coming into the room and heading straight toward her.

Kenji had arrived with a stunning blonde on his arm, and it made her want to scratch the woman's green eyes out. It was very good that she hadn't been foolish enough to accept his invitation to go to his place. She would've looked like a fool.

"Wow!" Caleb whistled softly as he turned her around to get the full effect of her dress. "Where's the rest of it?"

“Don’t start. You’re late.”

“Yes, Mother. It so happens I had to make a stop somewhere before I came here.” Leaning down, he kissed her on her cheek. “This party won’t be breaking up until around midnight. How’s it going?”

“I’m shaking, and my belly is quivering so much I can’t eat anything.”

“Everything looks great.” He guided her over to a table bursting with food. Snagging two glasses of champagne, he handed her one.

“He’s here with a blonde.”

“Oh?” Caleb angled his head to see Kenji leaning against a sturdy column, his arm draped casually around the blonde’s waist. “I know her.”

“She’s an actress.”

“Yeah. Think he’s doing her?”

“Don’t know and don’t care.” Downing the champagne like it was water, she grabbed his hand. “Dance with me.”

“You really should eat something.” He pulled her into his arms as they hit the dancefloor.

“Not yet.” Wrapping her hands around his neck, she swayed to the music.

Across the room, Kenji eyed them with narrowed eyes. He’d done his best to avoid going in her direction, but it hadn’t done any good. He was acutely aware of her, even though they were several feet apart. He’d also noticed when the guy arrived and had stiffened when he wrapped his arms around her.

Damn them both to hell, he thought viciously, downing the champagne.

“Darling?”

Forcing himself to concentrate on his date, he turned to look at her. He’d invited her out of defiance and desperation; now, he was regretting the decision. “Yes?”

“We should dance.”

He was about to refuse when a sudden idea hit him. “We should.” Taking her arm, he led her onto the dance floor, maneuvering until he was near the couple. “Mind if I cut in?” The steely note in his voice wasn’t lost on Caleb.

“We’re good.”

“We don’t want to make a scene now, do we?” Kenji’s eyes flickered over Caleb coldly.

“We don’t. But I don’t think my girl wants to dance with you.”

“Why don’t we ask her?” His sharp dark gaze settled on Chantelle’s face. “Shall we?”

“No.”

Letting go of his own date, he stepped smoothly in the way and tugged at Chantelle’s hand.

“What the hell are you doing?” Caleb hissed.

“Taking matters into my own hands. This is Karen.” He wrinkled his brow at Caleb. “I don’t know your name.”

“We’re attracting attention.” Chantelle had never been so mortified in her life. “It’s okay, Caleb; I’ll dance with him.”

The two men glowered at each other for a moment, and Chantelle had a sinking feeling that there was going to be bloodshed. To avoid that, she tugged at Kenji and pulled him away.

“How dare you.” She hissed, her lips parting in a forced smile.

“I asked him nicely.” His arms came around her, and to his delight and pleasure, he encountered bare skin. Her hands curled into his jacket as he brought her flushed against him. “Love the dress.”

“As soon as the song is over, I’m going back to my date.”

“What does he have that I don’t?” He looked down at her, eyes going to her lips. “I asked you to come to me, and you didn’t.”

“I suppose it’s a shock to the system to know that there’s one woman who isn’t enraptured by you.” She said scathingly, trying to ease away from him, but he held her fast.

“You think that’s it?” He asked her mildly. “Perhaps you’re right. Why don’t we go back to your office and see if we can work things out.”

Her eyes glinted. “I happen to be here with a date, and so do you. You might not respect that, but I do.”

“I want you.” He told her softly. “I’ve tried to stay away from you, but it’s not working.”

“Let me guess-“ she said sweetly, ignoring the thumping of her heart. “You usually get what you want.”

“Something like that.”

“I’m going to have to disappoint you.”

His hand tightened at her back, and she could feel his fingers stroking the skin.

“Let me go.”

“You can’t deny what you feel.”

She had to escape, or she would end up disgracing herself. “From what I’ve read about you, it seems like you’re quite experienced.”

She forced the sarcasm into her voice. “You’re also a very attractive man and, as I’m not made of stone, I reacted to you how any woman would. That’s it. Other than that, my opinion of you is very low. Now let go of me.”

For one frightening moment, he looked as if he was going to refuse. His dark eyes bored into hers, his long, lean body pressed against hers, making her acutely

aware of him. She was about to beg him to let her go when his arm loosened from around her waist. Stepping back, he gave a curt nod before turning on his heels and walking away.

She fled. She had no idea what it looked like, but she didn't care. Making her way through the throng of people, she hurried to her office, not stopping until she'd entered and closed the doors behind her.

Her chest was heaving, and her skin was hot. Going behind her desk, she sank down and kicked off her shoes, curling her feet beneath her. So, she wanted him. She was smart enough to face facts.

Hopefully, she'd insulted him enough for him to stay away from her. She couldn't afford to get involved with someone like him. Caleb was right. He had a lot of complications going on in his life, and, for Christ's sake, he was Kenji Lee.

He wasn't her type, and she wasn't his. He'd almost created a scene out there on the dancefloor, and she

wasn't sure the many reporters there hadn't captured the entertainment. He'd looked as if he would have gladly mowed Caleb down.

He was entitled and spoiled, used to getting his own way. He'd decided that he wanted to have sex with her and was annoyed that she was putting up resistance. Men like him always get what they want. Closing her eyes, she leaned back and took a deep breath.

He had spoiled it for her, damn him. This was supposed to be her night. She'd been working fiendishly ever since she came on board to make a success of this evening, and everything had been going so well, until he decided to spoil it.

She was determined not to cry. She'd take a moment to compose herself and then go back out. She was required to be out there, and all she had to do was just ignore him. The place was large enough for her to accomplish that.

“It’s quite a success.” Kelly swayed in her husband’s arms, loving the feel of his lean muscled body against hers. It still marveled her that this complex and beautiful man belonged to her.

She’d fought to get him to admit that the feeling was mutual, and even when he had, and he’d taken her to his bed, he didn’t want to get married, at least not to her. Now they were joined forever, and, despite their different interests and their hectic lifestyle, the bond was there.

“It is.” Bending his head, he brushed his lips against hers, ignoring the eyes staring at them. His eyes scanned the crowd to latch onto his cousin, who was guzzling champagne.

“I think he might be getting drunk.”

She didn’t have to turn her head to see who he was referring to. “I should go and dance with him.”

“He’s ignoring his date.” Kane sighed softly. “I thought I was going to have to break up a fight between him and that Caleb guy.”

“He’s very territorial. I’ve never seen him like that before. Very sexy.”

“Kindly remember who you belong to.”

“You are also territorial, and that makes me hot.” She touched the back of his neck intimately. “I belong to you alone. Chantelle is back.”

“How does she look?”

“Like a brave soul. I think Kenji managed to shake her up somewhat.” She kissed him on the mouth. “Let me see what I can find out.”

“Darling, go and find something to eat. You look like you’re starving.” Kelly’s golden-brown eyes had the blonde scurrying away.

“You’re very scary,” Kenji told her with a lopsided smile.
“Why did you chase her away?”

“Because I want to dance with you, of course.” She tucked her hand through his arm.

“I’m not in the mood.” He was about to snag another glass of champagne when she turned him towards the dance floor.

“The fight with Chantelle’s date has you riled up?”

He gave her a mild look as he started to move in tune with the music. “I don’t want any trouble, and I’m done with her.”

“Are you?” She touched his cheek lightly. “From what I, and everyone else who was watching, saw, it looks like you’re far from finished.”

“She isn’t interested. Let’s just leave it at that. It might be for the best anyway.”

Kelly turned her head to look at the stunning woman making the rounds. She was quite good at her job, with a smile that drew you in. Kelly liked her and would love to see things progress between her and Kenji. “Perhaps you’re not trying hard enough.”

His eyebrows raised as he, too, stared out over to where she was holding court with several people. His heart was aching, and that wasn’t the only part of him that was. He’d held her in his arms, and the scent of her perfume was still clinging to his clothes.

“Is that so?”

“Hmm. When I was pursuing your cousin, I’d never allow anything to stand in my way. Unless, of course, this is just a tumble in the hay for you.”

“What if it is?” He challenged.

“Then I’d advise you to find someone else to tumble with. I happen to like her.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he told her dryly.

Chapter 6

The opening was a tremendous success, so there was that. The critics were raving at the newest addition to 'classic elegant eateries' from Kane. She was referred to as gracious, beautiful, and personable. That was something as well. Chantelle had spent the rest of the night avoiding Kenji.

If she wasn't making her rounds as the manager/hostess, she was glued to Caleb, who'd somehow garnered his own fan club from the socialites who'd noticed him. He lavished her with attention, making it clear they were together.

There was also mention of him in the papers as a cop-turned-bestseller author whose series had been picked up by a major network.

It didn't matter. She was all the way across the room from him; she could still feel his presence as if he was standing next to her. His hand on her bare skin, the scent of his cologne, and the intensity of his dark eyes.

She'd felt him watching her. Once or twice, she'd met his eyes and was jolted at the smoldering look he'd given her. It'd shaken her to the core. She didn't make the mistake of going back to her office in case he came to find her. She'd spoken to Kane at length and accepted Kelly's compliments regarding the evening.

She'd also noticed the man's obvious adoration of his wife and told herself that she wasn't jealous. Several other wives had been there as well. Leesa, along with her extremely attractive husband, Bradley Wellington, Monique with Leonardo, Liam with his lovely wife, Armani, and Adam and Amber.

They'd formed a sort of clique and stayed together, the sounds of their laughter and merriment ringing around the room. Stacy and her outrageously handsome husband, Christian Stone, had arrived much later.

They were photographed, but Chantelle suspected these women take such things in their stride. They

commanded attention and had been written up in several magazines around the world, not just for the fact they were married to wealthy and powerful men but also for the charities they contributed to.

The night had gone out mostly without a hitch. There'd been a tiny moment when someone had gotten drunk and rather loud, but that'd been taken care of very quickly. He'd been hustled out and poured into a cab that had been waiting.

Kane provided for contingencies like these and it would, of course, be put on the man's tab. All in all, it'd been a wonderful evening, and she had to admit it. She rose from her position around the glossy white and brown counter to put the kettle on.

It was another Sunday, and the weather had taken a turn. She hadn't been outside yet but had heard the rain making a noise on the window pane. The sky was a dull, metallic gray, and the temperature had dropped somewhat. She'd contemplated idly about going in to do some paperwork but was going to see how she felt later on.

She hadn't slept much, twisting and turning inside her bed. Caleb was right. She'd never been so out of sorts before. She was twenty-eight and had her share of relationships, well, two to be exact, and she'd been able to walk away without a backward look. No one had ever touched her the way Kenji had, and it frightened the life out of her.

Plunking the kettle down, she turned the flame on and went to get the tea. She'd have a coffee and something to eat later on, but now she was having tea to settle her nerves.

The jealousy had risen up inside her when she caught herself staring at him at one point. He'd been leaning towards the blonde and intimately listening to something she was saying. His arm had been around her waist.

He'd told her he wanted her, and yet he was salivating. No, men like him don't lower themselves to anything so demeaning, she thought with a tinge of bitterness. He'd told her plainly that he wanted her, and yet, there he

was, wrapped up with that bitch. It'd proven her point, but it still stung.

She'd wanted to march over and boot them out, but she didn't have the power. The place belonged to Kane, and, as Kenji reminded her twice, he had a ten percent interest that entitled him to be there.

Closing her eyes wearily, she rose to make her tea and try and settle her nerves.

He was restless and on edge. Last night had been a disaster. Karen had wanted to know if there was a chance there was something going on. "I understand you're going through something right now, and I can honestly tell you that if I come back to your apartment, there'll be no strings attached."

And, by God, he'd been tempted. After spending the entire night watching her with that bastard, he'd been

tempted to take up her no-strings offer and try to get the woman lodged inside his bloodstream. He was smart enough to know he wouldn't be able to be satisfied with anyone but her, and it was frustrating the hell out of him.

So he'd refused the lush and lovely actress to come home alone to his apartment, where he'd stripped and went immediately to his gym to pound the hell out of the bag hanging from the ceiling. He'd punched it until his knuckles were raw and bleeding, and still, it hadn't been enough.

He could go to her home as he knew where she lived. If her guy was there, then there'd be a confrontation, and he wanted to avoid that for now. He was angry and sexually frustrated enough to cause some serious damage to his pretty face.

Moving towards the coffee pot, he poured a second cup and took it with him to his home office. He'd introduced a charter service to the board, one that he was interested in acquiring.

He was a licensed pilot himself and had a helicopter at his disposal. He also had a speed bike and a speed boat he'd take out every now and then. His therapist had told him that his need for speed was him compensating for a lack of stability in his life. He'd laughed at that and told the man he could've come up with that diagnosis on his own.

Going around his desk, he took his seat and booted up his laptop. The prospectus was there, he had the financial statements for the past ten years, and he'd done his research. He'd also run it by Kane.

The man was a financial genius and would know a good deal with just a glance. His cousin had been sold on the idea of acquiring the company, and that was enough for him. Drawing his cup towards him, he settled into work, determined to get her off his mind.

She ended up going in. The restaurant was closed to the public for today, but later tonight, there'd be a private

party, some sort of wedding celebration, in one of the large conference rooms.

She wasn't required to be here for the event because they'd be taking care of everything. They just rented out the venue and hired the chef for the evening.

She was going to sit quietly in her office and do some paperwork. There was a CFO and a team of accountants to take care of the business side, but she was in charge of everything else. The place was practically empty, with just the cleaning crew finishing up and the security at the gate.

Caleb was busy working on his next novel and had only grunted when she called him earlier.

“Why are you up so early?”

“It's after twelve.”

“Christ! I have work, a draft to prepare, and a shit load of things to do. Drop by later for supper and bring something – Mexican will do.”

“You’re going to have to cook sometime.”

“But not now, and you owe me.”

She’d dressed casually in leggings and a thick dark-green sweater and was wearing tennis shoes. Her hair was scooped back into a ponytail, and she wasn’t wearing makeup.

Taking up the phone, she called the kitchen and requested a Cobb salad and a bottle of water. She hadn’t bothered with breakfast because she’d been so upset.

She wasn’t going to think about him. She’d already made her mind up about that. He wasn’t worth a minute of her time. After a few minutes, she was immersed in

paperwork, the half-eaten salad to her left. She'd sent out several emails to check the reservations for the coming week.

The week leading up to Thanksgiving Day was filled with different activities. There was going to be a masked dining experience the day before the holiday and two weddings back-to-back. She had to coordinate with the waiters and the chef to see about the menu.

She was ticking off a list when she felt him just inside the doorway. She knew he was there before she lifted her head. It wasn't just his scent but the prickling of awareness along her spine.

Closing her eyes briefly, she lifted her head, her eyes drawn to his intense dark ones. He was wearing a green shirt open at the throat, and over it, he wore a battered brown jacket, opened all the way.

His hair was everywhere, as usual, a lock falling over his forehead.

“It appears that Kane knew what he was doing when he hired you.” His deep voice was amused, his eyes sweeping over the casual style of her hair and the lack of makeup.

“You’re here on what’s supposed to be your day off.”

“The kitchen staff are busy now, but I could call and have them whip something up for you.”

“I’m not interested in food.” He came forward and closed the door with a snap.

“What do you want?” Chantelle had to force herself not to move.

“I think I already told you that.” He eased a hip on her desk, one long denim-clad leg swinging. “What are you

working on?”

“Paperwork.” She said briefly. “I was just about to finish up and go on home. I have a date- “

“Do you?”

“Yes. If you would just go away, I could finish up and get out of here.”

“I’d like us to have lunch together.”

“I already had lunch.” She pointed to the half-eaten salad.

“That’s not lunch.” He scoffed.

“I’m full.”

“I’m starving.” From the sensuous look on his face and the way he was looking at her, she knew he wasn’t talking about food.

“Are you meeting Kane?”

“I think he and his lovely wife are on their way to an award ceremony.”

“Look- “She shoved the chair back when he got to his feet and came towards her. “Please stop.”

“Why?”

“I can’t do this.”

“Do what exactly?” Ignoring her effort to resist him, he simply hauled her up against him.

“Let me go.”

“I tried.” He told her grimly, arms going around her waist and holding her fast. “I told myself last night when I saw you with that guy, I said to hell with her. She isn’t worth the time and effort. Do you know what happened? I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about you.

The taste of your lips, the scent of you-“ He kissed her cheek and moved to her small nose. “Your breath, so sweet, so addictive-“ He was nibbling at the sides of her lips and sending a ball of fire deep into her stomach. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone before.”

He continued. “I shouldn’t want you; Christ knows I’ve tried to resist.” His tongue was tracing the outline of her full bottom lip. “I can’t stay from you. Isn’t that a kicker?”

He asked grimly. "I want you so much I can't think." Her lips had parted, but he was still busy tasting her lip. "I can't work. I have to have you."

His fingers found the back of her neck and tugged at the ribbon she'd used to tie her hair back. He gripped the thick strands, lifting her head to his. "You want me too." He whispered against her lips.

"You can lie to yourself, but you want me too. Have me. I'm here, and I'm bursting." He finally kissed her. His tongue darted into her mouth, and she could do nothing but sag against him.

Her fingers clutched his jacket as she returned the kiss. She told herself she should push him away, but he was right. She'd wanted him ever since he'd kissed her. The heat started at the core of her and edged up where her breasts were so sensitive the nipples were scraping against the sweater.

Dragging his lips from hers, he breathed through his teeth, dark eyes smoldering. "Come home with me." He

rasped. "I want you in my bed."

"No."

"Dammit," He snapped. "Are you still going to insist that there's nothing between us?"

"Caleb- "

He let her go abruptly, shoving away from her. He paced away from her, his steps jerky. It gave her some time to compose herself a little bit. If he hadn't stopped, she would've allowed him to take her right here, and that horrified her.

"You would bring him into this?" He swept a hand wide. "I had my tongue down your throat. I felt the rapid beating of your heart against my skin. Your nipples are straining against your sweater even now." His eyes glowered. "I don't want to hear about him. Is that clear?"

She bristled, dark brown eyes flashing. “Where’s your date?”

“Why are you asking? Jealous?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“I’m about to do so again.” He walked purposefully toward her, and this time she darted behind the chair. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t be involved with you.”

Her fingers were gripping the leather so tight that it was making an impression.

“Why’s that?”

“You know why.”

“Tell me again.” He stood in front of her chair.

“You’re not my type.”

“He is?”

“Yes.” She had no idea how long she could keep using Caleb as a shield when her response to the man in front of her clearly revealed that she was very attracted.

“Yet you get hot at just a touch of my hands. Tell me-“ He continued conversationally. “Does he know that he is

useless as a lover?”

“How would you know?”

“The way you respond to me.” His eyes lingered on her swollen lips, and he felt himself burning for her. Damn her! He thought viciously. He wasn’t accustomed to being like this, and she was putting him in a position where any minute now, he was going to be begging for scraps.

He kept coming back, even when she rejected him, and it made him angry that he couldn’t stop himself. “You want me just as much as I want you, and, sweetheart, wanting you is consuming my entire life.”

Before she could respond or react, he shoved the chair out of their way and hauled her against him. His expression was feral, dark eyes flashing. “Do you think I’m going to allow you to use that bastard as a shield?”

“Let go of me.” She said quietly. “Please.”

“No. Damn you! Do you think I want to feel this way? I’m going through hell. I have things to do and complications in my life that mean I don’t need this.” He pressed his lips feverishly to her mouth. “Damn me to hell because, for the first time in my life, I want someone so badly I can’t stand it.”

He crushed his lips to hers, and this time, she didn’t resist. She wanted this so much she could hardly bear it. She wanted his hands on her. She wanted him inside her and would think about all the reasons it was a terrible idea later.

Backing her against the doors, he slid the lock to secure it, not that there were many people around to interrupt them anyway. Pressing her against the solid surface, he dragged her sweater up and over her head, ending the kiss long enough to get rid of it before taking her lips again.

His hands went between them to unhook her bra. She wasn't idle, not in the least. The feel of his hands on her bare skin was driving her crazy. Tugging off his jacket, she practically ripped the buttons off his shirt to get to his flesh.

"Wait- Damn it- "Releasing her lips, he lifted her and carried her to the desk, where he dropped down on the chair. "Christ! You're so beautiful." He whispered it reverently. "Your skin." He cupped her breasts. "I feel like I'm burning up."

Lifting her against him, he took a nipple inside his mouth. He wanted to do it properly and show her an experience she'd never forget, but it had to be now. He felt the tremors as he suckled on her flesh. He was hard and aching. He had to get her out of the rest of her clothing.

He solved the problem by setting her on the desk. She watched dazedly as he took off her boots and then her leggings. She was propped onto her desk inside her office, and next came her panties. He opened her thighs, his eyes burning into her. "Go back on your elbows." His

voice was thick with emotion.

She did just that, sucking in her breath when he lifted her left foot. A faint moan escaped her as he kissed the sole of her foot before edging up to her calf. His breath fanned her flesh, giving her goosebumps. He'd reached her inner thigh now, and Chantelle felt as if she was going out of her mind.

"Shh." He whispered, mouth moving further up. "Hush, baby." He nibbled her skin, and she jumped, fingers clenched.

"Kenji- Oh God!" She was too weak, she was going blind, and her body was dissolving. That was before he took her swollen clitoris between his teeth. When he introduced a finger, she erupted, her body vibrating in shock. The climax ripped through her, scraping her like shark teeth. Before she had a chance to recover, he was standing up.

Releasing his aching cock, he lifted her against him, sliding into her, his body shuddering as she wrapped around him tightly. He sucked in a breath and went still, his hands gripping her hips.

Flopping back down in the chair, he wrapped her long slender legs around his waist and started moving. His eyes held hers, and he noticed the wild passion in their depths. Her lips were parted, and her tongue was peeking out.

Lifting her, he took a nipple into his mouth and sucked as if his life depended on it. Her hands reached for his shoulders, fingers digging into the skin. She came again, her head thrown back to reveal her long graceful neck. His hands slid up her ribcage before going back to cup her buttocks. He rotated his hips, plunging deep into her.

He was on the verge of climaxing. He could feel his testicles tightening up, but he wanted it to last. The incredible sensations of her wrapped so tightly around him were more than he would ever be able to explain to anyone.

He couldn't hold back any longer. Releasing her nipple, he seized her lips at the same time he shot his load inside her. She sagged against him, her breathing restricted and her skin dewy with sweat.

Leaning back against the padded seat, he held her against him as he fought to get his breathing under control. He was going to evaluate his feelings at a later time. For now, he just held her as his heart thudded inside his chest.

Chapter 7

Before she could demand that he let go of her, he lifted her and stood her up. "I have somewhere to be." He muttered, avoiding her eyes as he gathered up his shirt and jacket. Chantelle felt the humiliation pouring through her body at his obvious rejection.

He'd gotten what he wanted and had no further use for her. She'd been the fool who had given it to him.

Without a word, she put her clothes on with her back turned to him.

Closing her eyes and refusing to look at him, she pulled the sweater over her head.

He was at the door when he turned to look at her. He had to go. This wasn't something he'd planned, or perhaps it was, but now it had become something so much more.

“Look- “

“Get out.” She told him quietly.

He could have insisted on talking to her, but he didn't know what to say. Taking the coward's way out, he left her standing there and closed the doors behind him.

Chantelle flew to engage the lock, her hands trembling. Sliding down into the chair, she covered her face with her hands, her body trembling. She'd disgraced herself and her position as manager of the restaurant, and if Kane heard about it, she wouldn't blame him if he wanted to send her packing.

She hated him! She thought passionately, her eyes burning with unshed tears. He'd been true to form. He'd stalked her and pursued her until he'd gotten what he wanted, and now he was gone. He hadn't even had the decency to stick around and sell her a story.

Lifting her head, she stared at the place where he'd put her so that he could slide into her.

"Oh, God!" She whispered hoarsely. They hadn't used anything, and she wasn't on any form of contraceptive. How could she have been so stupid and irresponsible? "Don't let there be consequences." She prayed aloud. "Don't let me have to pay for this, please."

Several times after he left, he almost turned right back to go to her. He'd sat out there in the parking lot, staring at nothing in particular. Thinking, feeling, remembering. His body still had the imprint of her; his cock was still soaked with her juices.

It'd taken him completely by surprise and had scared the hell out of him. He should go back and explain, but what would he say? Should he tell her that he was a coward and he was running away from his feelings? Or he

couldn't afford the complications of feeling this way? He couldn't draw her into the drama that was his life.

She was better off with the Caleb guy even though the thought of it was twisting his gut. He couldn't bear to think of her with another man.

She belonged to him. No, he shook his head. He couldn't offer her anything but misery and uncertainty. Even now, the anger was still churning inside him. She'd managed to make him forget for a while, but it would always be there at the back of his mind.

He couldn't in all conscience heap that on her. He couldn't help asking himself, 'Why did you pursue her in the first place?'

"Because I couldn't help myself." He whispered hoarsely. "I had to have her." He knew how that sounded, but it was the truth. Having her and making love to her hadn't solved his problem. It hadn't dulled the yearning; it only made it even more piercing. God help him!

“You’re leaving?” Kane stared at his cousin in shock.
“What the hell for?”

“I don’t have to inform you of my plans.” He hunched his shoulders defensively.

“You bloody well better have.” Kane countered grimly. They were in his office in Midtown, where he had several meetings to attend. Kenji had called and asked his whereabouts and made his way there. Now he was dropping this bombshell on him. “I thought you had the charter thing to deal with.”

“It’s already in the bag. The numbers are solid, and the contract is being drawn up by the lawyers.” Shoving his hands into his pockets, he walked over to the window to stare out at the gathering dark clouds.

He’d spent last night unable to sleep, tossing and turning on his bed. Had she been doing the same? He

wondered. “A team has been assigned to do the overhaul of the company. I’m not needed.”

“You’re aware you’re still in danger, right?”

“Yeah.” He still had his back turned. “No one is going to find me where I’m going. I’ll be careful.”

“I don’t understand this sudden need to leave.”

“I need some closure.” He turned around. “I have to sort things out in my head, and in order to do so, I have to leave.”

“What about Chantelle?”

The question was so sudden and unexpected that it didn’t give him time to check his expression, and for a second, his face mirrored his emotions. “Who?”

“Don’t play with me,” Kane said pleasantly. “It was clear to see that there’s something between you two. You were all over her at the opening.”

“She’s involved with someone.” He muttered.

“You called and asked if she was going to be at the restaurant today. Did you go and see her?”

He hunched his shoulders, and the memories came flooding back. All those feelings coursing through his body! “What if I did?”

“What happened? Or should I guess?”

“Nothing- Look-” He dragged his fingers through his thick dark hair and leaned back against the wall. “I can’t afford to be with her. Getting involved will only make things worse.”

“How involved did you get?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You’re my cousin, and she’s my employee.”

“I thought she was more than that.” He tried for a smile and failed woefully.

“Kenji.”

“It really doesn’t concern you.”

“You slept with her.”

“We didn’t sleep, so that would be a no.”

“You slept with her, and now you’re running away. Did you use her? Was she just a diversion?” The questions were delivered like bullets and pierced his very soul.

“No. God, no.” He closed his eyes briefly. “No. It’s just that I can’t deal with that sort of thing now. I need space.”

“You slept with her and left. What kind of impression is that going to make?”

“I can’t think about that now. I should never have touched her.” He said grimly.

“Yet you did. Dammit, Kenji, what’s the matter with you?”

“I was obsessed. Still am.” A bitter smile touched his lips. “I can’t draw her into my drama.”

“You already did.”

“Yeah. Hence the need to go away.” He looked at his cousin. “I need to do this, Kane. You might not understand the reasons, but that doesn’t matter.

What matters is that I clear my head. I’ve felt for a long time that I’m about to implode. I have to find a way to sort through the things running through my mind.” He spread his hands. “The company is in good hands, and I’ll check in whenever I can.”

“Where are you going?”

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you, I’m afraid.”

“How long?”

“As long as it takes. I’ll be in touch.” He looked at his watch. “I have to go.”

“Kenji- “

“Please don’t say anything else. I -I just have to go.”

She was happy that Caleb was busy and had something to do. She wanted to be alone. She’d finished up at work and left immediately. It’d taken all of her willpower to drive home and not cry. He’d used her. She had to acknowledge and accept that. He’d taken what he wanted and left without a backward look.

She’d been far too easy. She’d barely put up any resistance and had enjoyed every minute of it. She wasn’t hungry.

The salad she'd bought earlier had been dumped into the trash can inside her office. Dragging herself upstairs, she took off her clothes and went into the bathroom. Turning the pipes on, she adjusted them to the temperature she wanted and stepped into the shower.

Her nipples were sore, and there were scrapes and bruises on her chest and a faint mark on her neck where he'd nibbled at her skin. She'd left a few marks on him herself. The bastard! She thought in agony. Standing beneath the spray, she let the water beat down on her as the tears trickled down her cheeks.

"He's gone?" Kelly stared at her husband in shock.
"Where?"

Kane raised his shoulders in a frustrated shrug. "He took the jet to London, but from there, I've no idea where he's headed." He strode over to his side of the closet to drag off his sweater and t-shirt.

Kelly eyed him for a minute, watching the frustration warring with anger on his handsome face.

“That’s not even the worse part.” Kane sat on the padded bench and worked off his boots.

“There’s more?”

“He slept with her. He had his way with that young woman and just left.”

“Oh, good Lord.” Kelly put away the cream she’d been using on her skin and turned to face him. “He told you that?”

“He called to find out if she was at the restaurant-“ He stood up jerkily to get rid of his trousers. Tossing the clothes into the laundry basket, he came towards her.

“After he left the office, I called the restaurant just to find out if Chantelle needed me.” He pulled her up and led her to their big bed.

“I did this, Kel.” He swore furiously. “I was selfish enough to want this for him, and he screwed it up. She sounded as if she was crying.” He sat on the edge of the bed heavily, her hand still clasped in his. “She tried to appear professional, but I could tell.”

“I could strangle him. Do you think I should reach out to her?”

“No.” He shook his head firmly. “They are going to have to sort it out between themselves,” He turned her to face him, a gentle smile touching his lips. “When you were coming after me, did you at any time feel the need to give up?”

Tilting her head to the side, she let her gaze wander over his face. He took her breath away. It didn't matter. Their relationship wasn't new, and they'd had a son. They

were also business partners. She'd hung up her bikinis and quit the modeling scene. Now she was a restaurateur, and it thrilled her.

"You were a pain in the ass, but I could do nothing less than love you." She touched his chin.

"For the first time in my life, I wasn't in control. No matter how despicable you behaved, I couldn't stop loving you. So, no, I couldn't have given up."

He lifted their joined hands and kissed her knuckles. Very soon, he was going to shake off the worry about his cousin and make love to her. She steadied him and made him wild with longing at the same time. It was fascinating and puzzling.

"To my eternal gratitude." He heaved out a sigh. "I could get my investigative team to track him down, but knowing Kenji, he isn't going to make it easy."

“We should leave him be. He’s an adult, and we can’t make him do something he doesn’t want to do. That poor girl.”

“Yes.” Shaking his head, he drew her to him. “Now it’s time to concentrate on my wife.”

“About time.” She murmured.

He knew! The moment she stepped into his office, she realized she hadn’t been spared the second humiliation of her employer finding out about her one-time fling with his cousin. He tried to hide it, but she could see it in the sympathetic way he was looking at her.

She wanted to hide somewhere. She’d spent last night crying herself to sleep and engaging in ‘what ifs’ and ‘if only.’ She’d woken up this morning and resolved to put it all behind her.

“The Masterton wedding as well as the Thanksgiving Day extravaganza. The mask theme is highly appealing and is generating a lot of interest.” She handed him the folders.

“We’re booked solid until next March.” She had to keep herself busy and hoped he wouldn’t bring up any personal matters. Just stick to the salient points, which meant business- only business.

“Thanksgiving is the day after tomorrow.” He reached for the files.

“We’ve taken the children into consideration. There’ll be tricks and treats in the small lounging area. We originally wanted to keep it outdoors in one of the gazebos, but the temperature is going to be a problem.”

“Umm-Hmm.” He scanned the pages in the folder, admiring her attention to detail. He didn’t want to notice the fact that she looked drawn and sad, and it was due to his own flesh and blood. Kenji hadn’t even sent him a

text saying he'd arrived at his destination.

“Very precise.” He looked up at her. “I also see that the cancer society will be meeting here for lunch on Saturday.” He smiled slightly. “My wife’s a member, and it’s usually kept at one of her restaurants. There’s going to be hell to pay when she finds out it won’t be this time around.”

“She’ll get over it.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she clamped her lips shut and stared at the man seated behind the massive desk.

He stared at her for a few pulsing seconds before inclining his head. “Well said.”

“I’m sorry- “

“Please don’t spoil it now.” A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Kelly and I enjoy a healthy and vigorous rivalry in

business, one that has never interfered with our personal life or what we feel for each other. Nothing could ever accomplish that.”

Chantelle felt envy and longing coursing through her body at the confidence of that statement. What it must be like to know that someone loved you so much and that you're loved in return.

“That’s good.” She busied herself with the device on her lap, her tone brisk and business-like. “If that’s all-“

“He’s gone.”

She went still, fingers tightening on the iPad. “Pardon?”

“Kenji.” His intense dark eyes settled on her face and reminded her so much of the man who’d turned her world upside down and left that she felt her insides dissolving.

“Okay.” She was struggling to appear calm and nonchalant. “That’s nice.”

“Chantelle- “

She popped out of the chair so fast that her device thudded to the carpeted floor. “I have some calls to make-“ She picked up the iPad and fought to control her urge to cry. “If you would excuse me.” She bolted out of the room and slammed the doors shut behind her.

“Christ!” Kane muttered. “Damn you, Kenji. What the hell have you done?”

She somehow managed to keep it together for the rest of the afternoon. It helped that she was busy. The planning and meetings for the society wedding kept her on the

phone for several hours. Also, the Thanksgiving deal was in full swing, and she had a lot to see to.

She couldn't afford to think about him or the fact he might have told Kane about what they did. The fact he discussed something so personal and private with his cousin, who happens to be her employer, told her what kind of man he was.

She wasn't going to waste her time crying over him anymore. He wasn't worth it.

To make it even better for her, Kane left shortly after, giving her a break, she needed.

She left at ten that night and stopped at Caleb's place.

"You resurfaced." She murmured as he greeted her at the door and took her coat.

“Yeah.” His blue eyes scanned her face. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks. This reminds me why you’re not my boyfriend.”

“I’m not a boy, and telling you the truth is what a best friend is supposed to do.” Taking her hand, he led her into the comfortable living room, where there was a fire burning inside the hearth.

“Beer?”

“No.” Sinking down into the rocker, she eased out of her boots. “It was so hectic today. It was unbelievable.”

He continued to stare at her and waited for her to get to the point.

“I did something incredibly stupid.”

“You slept with the guy.”

“Yes.” Rubbing her hands over her face, she sank back against the cushions. “And he told Kane.”

Caleb’s eyes glittered. “Why the hell would he do that?”

“Because he’s a dick.” She blew out a breath. “They’re close, and I think Kane suspected there was something between us. Kane was there today and told me that he-Kenji left.”

“Where?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t say, and I didn’t ask. There’s something else.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“I’m in love with him.” The tears came now. “I’m in love with a man who used me and treated me like garbage.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Abandoning his place on the single sofa, he came over and pulled her into his arms. The tight control she’d placed over her emotions dissolved like smoke. Grabbing his shirt in her fist, she allowed the tears to come.

Caleb’s expression was grim, his mouth tight. When he found the little prick, he was going to use his pretty face as a punching bag. The bastard!

“Hey. You’re going to make yourself sick.” He escorted her over to the maroon loveseat and sat with her on his lap.

“I wanted to quit.”

“Then he would have won.” He cupped her tear-stained face between his hands. “I’m going to ask you something very personal.”

She nodded.

“Did he-“ He cleared his throat. “When you were- Shit, this is difficult, so I’m going to come right out and say it. Did he use anything when you were doing it?”

She felt the cramping of her belly at that. She’d spent two nights agonizing over the possible consequences.

“No.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“I’ve already beaten myself up.”

“I wasn’t going to add to it.” He rubbed his thumbs over the wetness on her cheeks. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” He bolstered a smile. “Are you feeling better?”

“After that crying fit? I feel wonderful.”

He laughed softly. “How about that beer? I think you should crash here for the night.”

“If I’m going to be drinking, I think that’s a good idea.”

“Let’s go into the kitchen. I have those drafts that I want you to read. What time do you have to be at the restaurant tomorrow?”

“Around ten. I want to start the decorators setting up for the masked party.” She followed him into the kitchen.
“You’ll be there, right?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Setting her down on one of the stools, he went to get the case of beer from the fridge. “I have some cashew nuts that I picked up from the supermarket.”

“Good.”

She watched as he poured the cashews into a bowl for them to share and then went to get the rough draft he’d been working on. Before long, she realized she was feeling a whole lot better.

Caleb was relieved she looked a lot less stressed than when she’d arrived. He wanted to find the guy and bash his skull in. The bastard had pursued her and taken what

he wanted and then gone about his business. He hoped to God that he was here when he came back from wherever the hell he'd gone to.

Chapter 8

It was good that the restaurant kept her so busy. Unlike her former job, the hours were long and unpredictable. With the Thanksgiving deal coming up, she was swept off her feet and required to deal with a number of things.

She got together with the decorating team and met with the kitchen staff a number of times to see the menu. Then there was the special treat for the children. A trick-or-treat theme, complete with a scary 'haunted house' she'd come up with.

The dazzling white gazebo had been transformed to look like something out of a horror film. She'd been specific about what she wanted the place to look like, and the decorators had come through. Kelly had brought her son along with several of the other wives and their children.

It was done early enough so the children could enjoy the games and other items lined up for them. The chef had prepared several goodies for them to eat as well. It was

a Halloween and Thanksgiving theme rolled into one, and it was a success.

Now it was time for the party, or rather, the masked ball. It'd been three days since Kenji had left, and she was telling herself that she was over him. She might still be in love with him, but she was putting it behind her.

Kane hadn't mentioned him or her indiscretion again. The fact he hadn't fired her was somewhat of a blessing. She'd made a mistake and prayed there wouldn't be any consequences. She wasn't the first woman to fall under a handsome rich man's spell and wouldn't be the last.

She was strong enough to shake it off and continue with her life. It was done. There was no going back to change anything, and frankly, she wasn't sure she would want to. The lovemaking was something she could think about, pull out of her memory box and examine whenever she wanted.

It had been explosive, the passion searing, and she didn't want to forget how he'd made her feel. Unless he'd

been faking it, he'd enjoyed it as well.

“Quite a party.” Caleb took her hand and led her over to the table overflowing with finger foods and selected a plate.

“Thanks.”

“You look like you need something to eat.” He grinned at her, blue eyes searching her face.

“I'm fine,” she assured him.

“Good to know.” He wanted to ask her if she'd heard anything of the guy but didn't want to spoil the mood. Besides, if she had, he would have been the first to know. “What color is the dress?”

She glanced down at the clingy wool she was wearing and smiled slightly. “One of the themes for the party is fall colors. I believe this is russet.”

“Looks more like burnt orange to me.” He handed her a plate. “You’ve been making the rounds, doing the hostess thing, and haven’t touched anything remotely called food. Eat.”

“I see you’ve assigned yourself, my personal keeper.”

“Somebody has to have that job, and it’s not so bad. Pay is lousy, but just being near you is making me look good. I’ve seen several women eyeing me like they want to have me for their next meal.” He grinned at her and grabbed two flutes of champagne from the passing waiter.

“You’re free to mingle and put in your application.”

“Nope. I’m sticking to you like glue.”

Chantelle glanced around the room at the crowd, and it was quite a crowd. She could see several movie stars,

more than a few politicians, lawyers, judges, several famous singers, and a number of powerful members of society.

She wasn't into gawking but had come close to it several times during the night. She'd flitted around, making sure there was an endless supply of food and liquor, and did her best to chat with the customers without showing how intimidated and overwhelmed she was.

She'd watched the 'wives' with their husbands and felt a pang at how happy and in love they were but had shaken it off to do her job. "You don't have to pretend that we're an item." She told him quietly. "He isn't here, remember?"

"Still sticking." He touched her arm lightly. "For support."

"Thanks."

"No sweat. Eat."

“Yes, Mother.”

Across the room, Kelly was watching her unobtrusively. “She’s done an exceptional job.” She murmured to her husband. They’d found a quiet place to sit and eat, away from the crowd who demanded moments of their time.

“She’s a gem.” Kane agreed. He still hadn’t heard anything from Kenji, who hadn’t answered his emails. “She seems to be doing much better.”

His wife cast him a wry look as she popped the caviar into her mouth. “Men!” She snorted.

“What?”

“She’s keeping busy trying to hide the fact she’s seething with anger and pain inside.” Leaning over, she dabbed at his mouth with her napkin. A live band was playing on the dais, and people were already on the dancefloor.

“I remember several times when you rejected me, and I had to pretend like mad that I was fine. Inside I was full of insecurity and pain.”

He looked at her, admiring the classic beauty of her face. She was wearing a clingy dress that looked stunning on her. Diamonds and emeralds glittered at her ears and throat, a recent set he'd bought for her to celebrate her birthday. “I was a jerk.”

“You were a dick.” She gave him a wide smile, kissing him slowly and stirring his blood. “But I couldn't stop loving you, nor did I want to.”

“I'm happy about that.” He returned his gaze to the woman they were discussing. “Kenji has a lot of explaining to do.”

“He does.” Kelly agreed grimly. “Still no word?”

“Nothing. It’s as if he’s dropped off the face of the earth.”
Taking her plate, he put it down and took her hand. “And now I’d like to dance with my wife.”

She’d hoped she would be so exhausted that as soon as her head hit the pillow, she would have gone to sleep, but that didn’t happen. She’d been riding high on the success of the party and the many compliments she’d received, especially the one from Kane in the privacy of his office.

“You deserve a bonus.” He remarked, gesturing for her to have a seat. It was late, and most of the guests had already left. She’d gladly taken the seat because her feet were killing her.

“Are you stating a fact or just saying?”

He'd laughed at that, intense dark eyes studying her. "It's a fact. You've done an exceptional job, Chantelle, and I appreciate your attention to detail."

"I love what I do."

"It shows. My wife is trying to come up with ways to steal you away."

She smiled slightly. "She already tried to poach me."

"I wouldn't expect anything less. What did you tell her?"

"Unfortunately for her, I happen to be loyal, and this place has grown on me."

He'd grinned at that. "Perfect wording. Now, I'd like you to go home, and I'll stay behind. Kelly and I have our own private celebration to attend."

“I could stay-”

“You’re exhausted. We’re closed tomorrow, so take the time to recharge. Do some Black Friday shopping.”

“I never do, but staying in bed seems like a good idea.”

“Chantelle?” He had stopped her as she headed for the door, and for a minute, she wondered if he was going to bring up his name.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

The relief was such that she almost sagged. “You’re welcome.” She managed to say.

Now she was in the darkened room and staring up at the ceiling. The time on the bedside clock was showing it was almost two in the morning. Her body was exhausted, but her mind was running all over the place. She'd managed to keep thoughts of him at bay, but now she was alone; they came tumbling back.

Was he with someone? She'd seen the actress he'd been with at the opening, so she deduced he wasn't with her.

Was he shackled up with some other woman in Europe? The thought of him making love to someone else was like a dagger piercing her heart. She had no rights to him. It'd been just one night of passion, and he'd moved on right after.

He hadn't made any declaration of love, nor had he promised her anything. He'd simply taken what she'd offered so willingly and gone about his business. It was what men in his position did, and she'd fallen for it.

It didn't preclude her from the yearning or wishing things were different, and he was right here in her bed. It didn't stop her from crying for what might have been. Closing her eyes, she tried to force the images that kept coming back to haunt her and tried to get some sleep.

"I know I'm fussing over nothing." Caroline Evers fluttered her delicate white hands vaguely. "Oh, it's so lovely here. This room is divine." She stood looking around the soft blue lounge with the sturdy yet elegant white furnishings. "Thank you for putting up with my eccentricities and demands, my dear. My Millie is still in Paris –"

She sat on the padded chair and stretched her legs out. "I'm standing in for her making sure everything is okay for Saturday. Her fiancée isn't into this sort of thing."

“Ah!” She clapped her hands in delight as the silver tray was wheeled into the room.

“We took the liberty of having the pastry chef put together some samples for you.” Chantelle smiled at the woman as she poured the tea. “Thank you, Jeffery.” She dismissed him with a smile.

“They all look completely delicious.” Caroline reached for the plate and tasted the pink champagne, savoring it as it melted on her tongue. “Some tea to wash it away so that I can taste something else.”

She settled back against the plump cushion with every intention of taking her time. “I also have the final count. I’m afraid the number has gone up to five hundred. I apologize for the inconvenience – I know we’d settled on three fifty.”

“Actually, the number was three hundred.”

The woman smiled prettily, light blue eyes twinkling. “We have lots of friends and wouldn’t want to offend anyone.” Her eyes misted. “Millie is our only daughter, and I have to confess that she’s quite spoiled. You showed us that wonderful ballroom when we were here before.”

“That’s where the reception will be held. We are in dialogue with the wedding planner on the theme for the decoration.”

Caroline nodded, her eyes widening in utter delight. “This is definitely the one.” She said decisively.

“I’ll make a note of that. This is the absolute number?”

“Of course, my dear. I have to tell you I’m so pleased with the wonderful service here.” Her eyes glowed in pleasure. “And you- you’re the best. Kane is fortunate to have you here.”

“I think it works both ways.” She smiled at the woman.
“But thank you for the compliment. Shall we go and take a look at the room again?”

“My son, you’ve been here for the past three weeks and it seems to me you’re digressing instead of progressing.” The lama lowered himself to the simple straw mat and poured some of the flavored tea into two delicate cups. “You’re still restless and haunted, is what I’d call it. What is it you are seeking?”

Kenji accepted the cup and took a sip of the familiar tea. The meditation was done with for the morning, and it was now time for some reflections. He’d been here before when he was a very young boy. His dad had paid a visit here, and he’d found a strange sense of peace here. That’s one of the reasons he’d come back.

“I’m trying to get there.”

The old man smiled gently, dark eyes assessing. “You haven’t opened up about the problems chasing you.” He patted the air. “In order to find peace, one must first let go of the inner turmoil chasing around in the mind.”

“Is that some sort of sage advice?” Kenji asked him mildly. He hadn’t shaved his hair, nor was he wearing the deep red Tibetan Kashaya or robe that was required of the monks. He’d been accepted without question, which was something he needed at the time.

“It is.” Wise eyes wandered over the handsome face. “Here’s another one – running away does not solve any problems. Who is the young lady?”

Kenji grimaced and took another sip. “It’s complicated, and I did something terrible. I left.”

“Ah. You have things to sort out up here.” He touched his shiny bald dome. “Before they can be sorted here.” He placed a hand over where his heart was. “Only then will you find the peace you seek.”

Kenji stared into his cup. He hadn't been sleeping well, as his nights were plagued with memories of her. He should have treated the encounter with more finesse. Certainly, he shouldn't have touched her. Now things were more complicated than ever.

He had sent emails to Kane, assuring him that he was okay and would be in touch whenever he could. He'd deliberately not inquired about her. He was hoping she'd moved on, even if the thought of it made him all twisted up inside. “I need more time.”

“Time isn't the issue here. Your frame of mind is.”

“I still need to be here until I've sorted things out inside my head.”

“You are welcome here for as long as you need to be.”

“It’s a lavish affair,” Kelly murmured, coming to stand next to Chantelle. “Love the outfit.”

“Thank you.” The party was still going on, and the bride and groom were dancing up a storm. “They look happy.”

“They’ll probably be divorced before the ink is dried on the prenup,” Kelly laughed softly at the surprised look on the younger girl’s face. “God, I’m so cynical. My man hates that about me.”

“You don’t think they’ll last?”

“All the money spent on the ceremony. The wedding party consisted of twenty people and the bride’s dress was too elaborate. All that yards of lace.” Her mouth twisted slightly. “Money that could have been used for so much good. There’s a foundation we just picked up homeless children in the Philippines. I looked at all of this-

“She waved a hand at the surroundings, “And I think about those poor children in need of medical attention and who can’t afford clean drinking water.”

She snagged a flute and gulped it down. “My husband would tell me that I’m mad.” She smiled at Chantelle. “I sound preachy.”

“You sound indignant.” Chantelle stared around the room. “I have to agree with you. When I tie the knot, it’s going to be something simple and tasteful.”

“I don’t blame you.” Kelly wanted to bring up the touchy subject but had promised her husband she would stay away from that minefield. “You did a very good job.”

“The mother of the bride and the bride herself expressed their appreciation.”

“As they should. You worked tirelessly on the event.”

“Just doing my job.”

“More than that, I think.” Kelly waved to a few friends. “You’re certainly an asset.”

Chantelle felt the tears gathering at the back of her eyes and willed them away. She’d been getting increasingly emotional, veering from happiness to severe depression and wondering what the hell was going on with her.

“Thanks.”

Kelly shook her head and, taking her arm, led her to one corner of the room. “Kane is going to kill me, but I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t say something. Kenji is- “

“No.” Chantelle gripped her clipboard. “I don’t want to talk about him. Please. Especially now. I thought I was over it, over him, but I’m still-“ Grabbing some tissue from the box on the small table, she blew her nose delicately. “I’m sorry.” Taking a deep breath, she stepped back. “I have to go.”

Kelly cursed silently as she watched the girl hurrying out of the room. “Well, bitch, you’ve done it again.”

Chantelle stared at the sticks, the horror, and despair clouding her vision. She’d suspected for some time she was pregnant. She was carefully making a note of her

period cycle, marking it on the calendar in her bathroom as well as the one tacked to her fridge.

She'd been off for some time now. At first, she'd attributed her crazy mood swings to the fact she was in love with a man who'd used her and dumped her like yesterday's garbage.

Sliding down the tiled wall, she wrapped her hands around her knees and stared at the damning strips. Her prayers hadn't been answered. She was pregnant. The irony of the situation was not lost on her.

Her brother and his wife had been desperately hoping and praying for a child without success. All it had taken was one careless and reckless half-hour inside her office to get pregnant. How unfair life was!

She was tired, her feet were swollen from standing so long, and her boobs were tender. Dropping her head back against the wall, she took a deep breath. Caleb was coming over, and the thought of entertaining him wasn't appealing in the least. Worse, he could read her

like a book. He was going to realize that something was wrong.

Picking up the phone, she started to scroll to find his number when she heard the sound of the door being opened. He was already here.

“Hey. Where are you?”

“Downstairs bathroom. Give me a minute.”

Gathering up the evidence, she put them away inside one of the drawers and washed her face and hands.

“I brought fish and chips. Very oily and completely unhealthy. I figured you wouldn’t have eaten anything much from that fancy wedding-“ His eyes sharpened as he stared at her.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Let’s go into the kitchen- “

“No -uh. Spill. Have you heard from him?”

“No.” She closed her eyes briefly and swayed slightly. The scent of the fish was making her stomach roil. “I can’t eat that. Please excuse me.” Dragging her hand arm away, she raced into the bathroom and made it just in time to empty her stomach. She managed to flush before he came charging in.

“Oh, crap.” Hunkering down, he lifted her chin. “I lost my appetite. Can you stand?”

“In a minute. Can you sit next to me?”

“Sure.” He did, and she placed her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes in despair.

“I guess you know.”

“Hmm.” His arm came around her to bring her closer.

“Are you going to call me an idiot?”

“No.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you have to decide this very minute?”

She shook her head.

“Good. I’m here.” He rubbed her arm and tamped down the rage inside him. God help him when that son of a bitch returns. “How about some tea?”

“You are not going to fuss and hover?”

“Not at all.”

“I miss Tabby.” She murmured, referring to the cat they shared.

“I should bring him over.”

“No. I don’t have the time to take care of him.” A sob escaped her. “I have no idea how I’m going to tell Jason. They’ve been wanting to have children for years, and now- just one time and I’m knocked up by a man who

doesn't give a damn.”

“You're not going to worry about that now.” He told her firmly. “Let's get you into the living room and get some warm tea inside you.”

Chapter 9

“I found some slightly moldy biscuits in the tin. You should go grocery shopping.” He had a tray laid out with a pot of tea and biscuits on a saucer.

“I should.” She watched as he brought the tray over and placed it carefully on the table in front of her. “I should have tried harder to fall in love with you.” She offered with a tremulous smile.

“You should have. I’m quite a catch.” He said lightly, sitting across from her. “Drink up.”

“Perhaps that was the main reason why it never happened between us.” Taking up the cup, she took a tentative sip and made a face.

“What?”

“Your bossiness.”

“My sex appeal and my looks should have overridden that.” His grin was weak. “How’s the stomach?”

“Give me a minute or two.” She sighed woefully. “The good news is I’m financially solvent, and this is a very big house.” She looked around the neat and tidy living room with its throw pillows and colorful rugs. “I can do this. A lot of women have raised children on their own.”

“You’re not alone.” He reminded her brusquely. “I hate to point this out, honey, but the guy who knocked you up is a fricking multi-billionaire. You’re carrying his heir. He isn’t going to sit by and not be involved no matter how much of an asshole he is.”

Her hands trembled slightly as she placed the cup back into the saucer. She’d been wrestling with that since she suspected what was happening. “He might not care.” She murmured half-heartedly.

“He will. Men like that, with all their resources, automatically want an heir.” He watched her closely.

“Maybe he won’t come back.”

His eyebrows lifted. “You don’t believe that.”

“No.” Picking up a biscuit, she examined it before putting it back., dusting off her fingers. “I want to hate him.”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t know how to feel, how to sort out what I’m feeling. I’ve always been so careful and sensible, and now, I –” Taking up the cup, she took a long gulp and ended up burning her tongue.

“Careful.” Reaching over, Caleb took the cup from her.
“That bastard pursued you, and after he got what he wanted, he turned tail and ran. It’s on him.”

“I’m not some mindless bimbo. I’m an intelligent woman and should have told him to go to hell.” She pressed her lips together and sank back against the cushions. “I didn’t, and now I have this complicated situation.

I had it all planned out. I’d meet the right man; we’d date for six months to a year to get to know each other, and then we’d have a quiet ceremony in a church. After two years, we’d have children.”

“Plans change.” His blue eyes twinkled in amusement.
“You really had all that planned out? Did you write it down?”

“Yes,” She rolled her eyes as he laughed. “I have this wedding book.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Only you.” His expression sobered. “It might still work out.”

“You don’t believe that.”

He shrugged. “The guy was clearly into you.”

“True, but now I’m pregnant. He’s going to think I set out to trap him.”

His eyes glittered. “Let those words come out of his mouth and watch me shove them down his throat. He went after you.”

“I posed a challenge to him, one he had to conquer.”

“I don’t know, Chan. The guy seemed pretty riled up at the party. He looked as if he wanted to punch my lights out.”

“Part of the challenge.” She responded bitterly, reaching for the tea again. “I have to find a doctor.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to- “

“I’ll go with you.” His mouth was set in an uncompromising line. “I told you I’m here for you, and that means through the appointments and whatever else you need.”

The tears threatened, and she had to will them away. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll try and put a positive spin on this. You’re twenty-eight-“ He flashed her a grin. “Very soon, that biological clock will start ticking.” He dodged when she threw a biscuit at his head. “You’re cleaning that up.” He was relieved to see the haunted look had disappeared from her beautiful face. “Now, finish eating, and let’s get you back to bed.”

Chantelle tapped her fingers against her thigh as she waited for the doctor’s confirmation. She didn’t get an expert opinion; there was no mistaking she was pregnant.

She’d slept fitfully last night and hadn’t minded that Caleb had insisted on staying the night. She’d also insisted on accompanying her to the doctor they’d found on the internet.

Dr. Olivia Branson was a few years older than her and was a no-nonsense, attractive, black woman with a personable manner.

“I’ve been to several of Kane’s restaurants as well as his wife’s, and I must say that, even though it’s horribly expensive, the service is excellent. I understand that the waiting period to book a reservation at Magnifique is rather long.”

“Whenever you’re ready to have the dining experience, just give me a call.” She told the woman.

“Thank you, honey,” She flashed her a smile. “I wasn’t fishing for a reservation. That young man of yours could have come in with you.”

“I prefer to do this alone.”

“He’s Caleb, the writer. I recognize him. He’s quite the looker, isn’t he?” Chantelle recognized the longing on the woman’s face.

“He’s single.”

That got her a surprised look. “I thought you two- “

“He’s my best friend, and the father isn’t in the picture.”

“I understand.” A smile bloomed. “I’m going to take very good care of both you and the little one growing inside you. You’re very healthy and still young.” The smile came again. “I might add, I hate the fact you have such gorgeous skin and beautiful hair.”

She shook her own head. “I have a feeling we’re going to get very close. Especially if you put in a good word for me with that hot writer.”

“Absolutely.”

“Now.” She stated briskly. “Like I said before, you’re healthy, and I’m going to make an appointment for you to come back and see me after the Christmas holidays. I’m going to give you some vitamins to help with the baby’s development. Your approximate due date will be the last week of August.”

“Imagine that?” Chantelle managed a smile. “My birthday is August eighth.”

“We’ll try and see how near we can get to that.” Her smile faded as she continued to look at the beautiful woman. “I’m not going to ask you what happened and why the guy isn’t around. It’s none of my business.

What I would like you to do for me is to have a positive attitude. It’ll be good for the fetus and for you as well. I’ve had women walk in here, bemoaning the fact they ‘got caught,’ so to speak, but as the pregnancy progressed, the changes were there. It’s going to be the same for you.”

“What do you want to do now?” Caleb asked her quietly as he strapped her in. He’d also insisted on driving her as well.

“Just go and lay down for a bit.” She leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. It felt all too real now. It was now confirmed. She’d come here with the faint hope it was just some anomaly, maybe her system was off due to stress, or the three pregnancy tests had been flawed. “She likes you.”

“The doc? Yeah, I got that.” He glanced over at her in concern.

“You could have told her that we’re involved. Why didn’t you?”

“She’s a doctor, and she likes you.” She glanced over with a smile. “I don’t want you to put your life on hold for me.”

“I never told you I was ready to get out there.”

“Where are we going?”

“To Shell Shack. Remember Brian?”

“Of course. You were cops together. I remember he got shot and almost died.”

“Hence the decision to get the hell out and do something that wouldn’t put him in the line of fire.”

“So he opened a restaurant?”

“It’s not the same as the fancy deal you’re managing, but it’s rustic and has its charm. They also serve the best conch soup I’ve ever tasted.” He swung off the main road and made it onto a narrow dirt road.

“It’s out of the way. How does anyone find the place?”

Caleb grinned. “Word of mouth. It’s mostly used by cops. You’d be surprised at the amount of traffic coming and going.”

He pulled into the parking lot of what was indeed a shack, complete with a thatch roof, a balcony surrounding the building, and chairs placed randomly outside. Even though it was cold, several men were lounging around, slurping soup and shooting the breeze.

They received curious looks and waves as they made their way inside.

“My friend!” Brian, a towering six foot four inches of pure muscle, stepped forward, a soiled green apron tied around his waist. “When I heard you were back, I wondered when you’d drag your tired ass out to see me.”

He grinned at Chantelle and pulled her in for a hug. “You brought the beautiful Chantelle! Darling, you brighten up the place.” His dark brown eyes twinkled. “Let me escort you to a table. We have some rather delicious soup and bottles of beer.”

“Soup for both of us and the beer for me. Good to see you, Bri.” Caleb clapped him on the shoulder.

“Even better to see you.” He gazed at Chantelle as she looked around. “I’ve seen you featured in the magazines managing some fancy restaurants. This place isn’t up to that kind of standard.”

“I happen to think it’s quite charming and cozy.
Something smells delicious.”

He beamed at her. “I won’t keep you waiting. Grub is
coming right up.”

Caleb seated her and pushed in her chair before taking
his seat. “I’m not made of glass.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re treating me as if I’m about to break.”
She told him wryly. “I’m fine.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “You’re my best friend, and you’re upset. What am I supposed to do?”

“Just know that I’m going to be fine. It’s going to take some getting used to.”

“In the meantime, I’m here. So shut up and accept that fact.” He smiled at the busty woman who came forward with their meal. “Hey, Gertrude. When are you going to leave that man of yours and come hook up with me?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “When hell freezes over. I happen to be in love with the guy, and you’re way too pretty for me.”

“Ahh.” Grabbing her hand as she put down the tray, he kissed it lavishly.

“Get off me, you loon.” But she was laughing as she sashayed away.

“Friend of yours?”

“She was also a cop.”

“Was she?”

“Yea. Eat up.”

“Yes, mother.”

“Flying to Paris for a holiday is simply wonderful.” Kelly stretched out her legs and leaned back in the chair with a sigh.

“With the running of the restaurants and the various charities we’ve picked up along the way, Kane and I feel like we’re going through revolving doors. Pile on the mud, darling.” She grinned at the burly man massaging her. “You know you’re wasted being gay, right?”

“As if you would go for me if I wasn’t into men.” Bruno tsked as he rubbed the mixture into her torso. “He has money to burn and a smoldering look that makes anyone quiver.”

“He also has a black belt in Taekwondo.”

“There you go.” He grinned over at the other ladies lined up on the massage tables. “Your drinks will be right here. We’ll leave you to sit and relax. Ring if you need anything.”

“God, I needed this.” Monique stretched luxuriously.

“You’re not supposed to move.” Stacy Stone told her dryly, closing her eyes and resting her head back against the padded rest. “It smells tropical, which reminds me that Christian and I are going to Jamaica for Christmas.”

“A cruise?” Amari reached for the drink that had been brought to them. The tray was placed on the table between them, and the doors were discreetly closed to give them some privacy.

“No. You know how I hate being on a ship for long periods of time. We’re flying out.”

“Any word from Kenji?” Leesa opened one eye to look at Kelly. “It’s been like what? A month?”

“Six weeks, to be precise.” Kelly’s sigh was heavy. “He

left a right mess behind.”

“You mean with Chantelle?” Monique asked. “That poor girl. How’s she taking it?”

“She’s pretending it isn’t tearing her apart. I tried to talk to her about it, and she brushed me off.” Kelly took an appreciative sip of her champagne. “Remember when we were in similar positions? When I didn’t love Kane to death, I was wishing that he was run over by a truck.”

Leesa laughed softly. “My darling husband was determined to avoid me at all costs. He told me to get the hell out of his life.”

“I was stupid and naïve enough to sleep with a handsome stranger, not realizing that he was the Romano.” Monique gave a laugh.

“You’re forgetting the bizarre deal I had with Christian’s wicked family.” Stacy could feel the mixture cleansing her pores. “We almost died, and then I almost lost my husband. This relationship thing isn’t a walk in the park.”

“It’s completely worth it, though,” Kelly murmured.

“Absolutely.” The rest of the women chorused.

“What about Kenji?” Leesa posed the question.

“Kane is trying to get in touch with him. I can tell that he’s worried. Oh, I could just strangle that guy.”

Kane stared at the brief email furiously.

‘Don’t worry about me. I’m sorting things out and will be back in a couple of months; thanks for looking after things for me.

Kenji.’

That was it. No apology, no ‘I’m in the Alps or hanging out in China or Paris for a little bit.’ Nothing like that. He was twenty-eight years old, almost thirty, and it was time he started to act his age.

Pushing away from his desk, he strode over to the window to stare out at the bleak landscape in front of him. He was in his office in Midtown, and as it was almost Christmas, the weather had taken a turn. The clouds were heavy and gray, and the leaves had been stripped bare.

He and his family would be flying off to Paris for the holidays, and it burned him that he had no idea where Kenji was. What the hell was he up to? Would he be back in a couple of months? He’d left his company, although it was a well-oiled machine and could

practically run itself.

The profits from the car dealerships were up, and the charter company he'd acquired single-handedly was being restructured and should be up and running by the end of February. He'd met with the board and had heard that Kenji was on top of things.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he rocked back on his heels. He didn't feel comfortable talking with Chantelle about what happened between her and his cousin. He'd tried, and she'd blocked him. He also felt responsible for trying to play matchmaker. Now he'd done more harm than good.

He had the feeling Chantelle was avoiding him. She'd stay in her office and send him emails and was more out than in. He knew she had a lot to do since it was coming up to the holiday season, and the booking had gone from satisfactory to somewhat crazy.

She'd introduced a 1950s theme for the New Year that had excitement going off the charts.

He didn't want to lose her, and even if he had to increase her pay package again, he would do it. He was giving her a hefty Christmas bonus and a trip to London if she wanted to go away after the holiday rush.

"Dammit, Kenji, what have you done?"

He was relieved to see she was relaxed and laughing at Brian's corny jokes about the good old days, and she'd eaten everything in her bowl. She'd also gone through the rolls and drank the fruit juice.

She looked better than she had since that bastard had rocked her world. Leaning back in his chair, he took a sip of the beer and continued to watch her. She was beautiful, sexy, and delicate, with just the right amount of steel and determination in her.

He loved her. He was an only child and had been drawn to her ever since they were in high school. She was funny and vibrant, something he'd noticed from the beginning.

It hadn't clicked for them romantically. They had a bond that had lasted over the years. He'd crashed at her place more often than he could count and had poured his heart out whenever a relationship had crashed and burned. She was the only constant in his life, and he was fiercely protective of her.

When he'd gotten shot in the line of duty, she'd been at his bedside from the get-go and had left work every evening to come and see to it he was being taken care of. It would've been handy if they could be more to each other, but this was good. He was here and not roaming the world for work. He could be here for her.

"Seconds?" Brian lumbered to his feet and slanted a look between the two of them.

“I’m good.” Caleb lifted a brow at her.

“I’m about to pop out of my clothes.” She told them with a laugh.

“You can’t leave without a slice of our famous blueberry pie.” He kissed his fingertips. “It’s to die for.”

“Bring it on.”

“Two slices coming up and a glass of hot chocolate to go with it. It’s cold as hell out there.”

“Thanks.” She said quietly as soon as he departed.

“For?”

“For the distraction and the delicious meal. I feel so much better.”

“I live to please.” He touched her hand lightly. “You look a lot better.”

“I feel it too. You don’t have to spend the night.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

She gave him an exasperated look. “Caleb, you have work you’ve been neglecting because of me.”

He waited until their desserts were placed in front of them before he answered. “The beauty about working for myself is that I can make my own hours.”

“You’re working on your next book.” She protested, automatically putting the piece of pie into her mouth. Her eyes widened as they melted on her tongue. “My God! This is incredible.”

“What did I tell you?” Brian came up behind them, a huge grin splitting his face. “I thought you’d like it, so I boxed up some slices for you.”

“I’m going to kiss you right now!”

“I want to do the right thing and say that I’m a married man, but look at you.” Bending at the waist, he offered his lips, and she planted a big one on there.

“Ah, that will tide me over for a long time.” Grinning at his friend, he made his way over to the tiny bar.

“I see your appetite is back.” Caleb smiled at her.

“For now.”

Chapter 10

Her stepbrother stared at her in shock. She was heading into three months now and aware she had to tell him and her sister-in-law, as well as Kane. “You’re pregnant. I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

She’d called and asked them to pop by the restaurant. The booth she’d chosen for them to have a meal was private. Besides, at this time of the day, the crowd wasn’t that bad. The holiday rush had bled into Valentine’s Day activities. March had come storming in with bad weather and piles of snow, making the longing for spring all the more potent.

“I wasn’t.” She puffed out a breath and fussed with the table napkin. She was sick most of the time and miserable. The pregnancy wasn’t going very well. There was no way she could put off telling Kane about it.

“It was a stupid indiscretion.”

“We’ve been trying for years, and you have a one-night stand, and now you’re carrying a baby.” Marlene’s tone was bitter, and who could blame her? Life was certainly unfair.

“I’m sorry.”

“Who’s the guy?” Jason demanded.

“I’d prefer not to say.”

“So, he’s married?”

“No!” Lifting her hands, she pressed them to her face and felt the headache brewing. Her life had gone from normal to chaotic in an instant. It took everything in her to get out of bed in the morning, and she wasn’t sleeping well. “No. It’s just complicated. Look, I know how this looks-”

“It looks as if you weren’t even trying, and now you’re pregnant.”

“Marlene.” Jason placed a hand over his wife’s and squeezed.

“She is entitled to her opinion,” Chantelle said with a shrug. “I’m trying to adjust to everything. I just wanted to tell you even though I dreaded doing so.”

“We shouldn’t project our disappointment on you.” Jason reached forward with his free hand to comfort her.

“This should be a happy moment. We have some news of our own.” He glanced at his wife, and she nodded. “We’re in the process of adopting. There’s a young woman who’s almost due. She’s having a boy and has chosen us to be the parents.”

“Oh, honey, that’s wonderful.” She felt like weeping. “I’m so happy for you. When is she due?”

“End of March, so a couple of weeks away.” He stared at her in concern. “You shouldn’t have been afraid to come to us, Chan. I’m your brother, and if you need anything-”

“No.” The tears clogged her throat. “I’m fine. Caleb has been a tower of strength.”

“I’m sorry I jumped down your throat like that,” Marlene murmured. “I had no right to project my disappointment on you, and, as Jason said, we’re finally getting some good news.”

“We haven’t asked how you’re feeling.”

She smiled at her brother. “Sick all the time and extremely tired. I have a good doctor, though, and she is very thorough.”

“Come for dinner on Sunday. We haven’t done that in a long time.”

She told him weakly. "I will be there."

"The guy - is there something I should be doing?"

"Like what?"

Jason shrugged. "Like being a big brother and beating him to a pulp."

She laughed shakily, not bothering to tell him he'd be up against a fighting machine. "No. I'll deal with it. Thanks, guys."

"Are you going to sit down?" Kane asked her mildly, eyes tracking her progress. She'd called and inquired if he was coming by the restaurant as she needed to talk to

him. She'd been inside his office for five minutes and still hadn't said anything.

"I'm too nervous to sit. I hope I'm not disturbing you." Her hands fluttered as she turned to face him.

"Not at all. Does this have anything to do with the March Madness party?"

"No. Everything is in place." She finally sat on one of the padded chairs in front of his desk. "I did something foolish."

His intense dark eyes made her want to squirm.

"I'm sure it's not as bad as you think it is."

"It's worse." Taking a deep breath, she pressed her hands against her stomach. She'd decided that it was

time to spill everything. Caleb had agreed with her.

“You’re feeling sick almost every morning, and I think it may start to affect your job performance.”

“I-I- “She swallowed the lump inside her throat. “I’m just going to come right out and say it.”

“That would be the best option.”

“I’m pregnant.”

Kane started in surprise. He’d noticed her solitude and the fact she’d been doing her best to avoid him and had been bracing for her resignation letter.

“Congratulations. Is it Kenji’s?”

“What do you think?” She snapped it out, drawing in a breath as she realized how she sounded. “God. I’m so sorry.” She rubbed her hands over her navy-blue dress pants, her shoulders slumping. “I’m just-“ She blew out a breath.

“Overwhelmed.”

The sympathy in his deep voice was her undoing, and she felt the tears spilling from her eyes. “Oh, crap. I’m so sorry.” She sniffed and accepted the box of tissue he handed her.

“Hormones and righteous anger. I hate him!” She closed her eyes briefly. “I’m not supposed to be using such negative words in my condition. I’m trying to put a positive spin on the entire thing.” She turned her head to look at Kane, who’d taken a seat next to her. “Have you heard from him?”

“Bits and pieces.” Kane felt responsible. Kenji was his cousin, and this woman was employed by him. How

could he have been so irresponsible?

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It damn well does. If I have to hunt him down and force him to stand up to his responsibility, then that’s what will happen.”

“I don’t need him to come rushing back just because I’m pregnant. When, or if, he does come back, I don’t want to see him.”

“I understand all of that, but you’re carrying his child.”

“He left.” She pressed her lips together. “I need to ask you a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Please don’t tell him.”

“I can’t- “his voice petered off when she held up a hand.

“It’s between us. I want to be the one to tell him; it has to be my decision.”

“I have to ask you something. It’s none of my business, but I have to ask. Are you planning on keeping it?”

Her dark eyes flashed. “It’s not an ‘it.’ I have a baby growing inside me. A flesh and blood person and it doesn’t matter how he or she came about; it matters I’m going to love him or her no matter what.”

“I apologize. I’m afraid I overstepped the mark.”

“No.” She sighed. “For the past three months, it’s been a rollercoaster ride with my emotions swinging one way then the next.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m feeling better now, but most days, it’s a chore to get out of bed.”

“You’re seeing a doctor, of course.”

“Yes. She’s very good.”

He started to reach out a hand but drew back. “If there’s anything- “

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t need anything right now, but I appreciate the gesture.”

“I’m going to strangle him.”

Her sudden laughter turned into a sob that had him reaching out to draw her against his shoulders. “I’m sorry.” She whispered.

“You have no reason to apologize.” He told her grimly, one hand rubbing her back. There was a discreet knock on the door before it was pushed open.

“I was calling-” Kelly took in the scene at a glance as she came into the room.

“I- God, this is so embarrassing.” Chantelle pulled away and got to her feet. “Please feel free to tell her. I – I have to go.” Before they could say anything, she swept out of the room and closed the door behind her.

“If I was an insecure woman, I’d be lashing out now.”
She said teasingly. A frown touched her brow as she watched her husband rise and, without greeting her in his customary manner, went to sit behind his desk.
“What did I interrupt?”

“She’s carrying Kenji’s child.” He told her abruptly, gesturing for her to sit.

“Oh, Lord.” Kelly sank gracefully into the chair. “She’s what? About three months pregnant?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his forehead wearily.

“You have to find him and drag him back.”

He smiled slightly. “I suggested doing something like that, but she made me promise not to say anything. She said she wants to tell him herself.”

“What a damn mess.” Kelly groaned. “What the hell is Kenji thinking?”

“I can’t answer that.” He leaned back in his seat wearily. “We have to be there for her.”

“I agree with you on that.” Rising gracefully, she went around to sit on the edge of his desk, facing him. “You’re upset. Do you feel guilty?”

“He’s my family.” He pointed out grimly.

“He’s a grown-ass man who is responsible for his own actions.” Taking his hand, she sandwiched it between hers. “The guilt is his.”

“I guess.” He didn’t sound convinced. “I gave her my word. I won’t say anything.”

“I never gave her that promise.”

He gave her a look. “Please don’t interfere. They’re going to have to sort things out between themselves. He should be back soon.”

“What if he’s not?”

“I’ll find him and drag him back. He has a child on the way and a company to run.”

Chantelle had to be taken to the emergency room two days later. “You’re suffering from what’s known as

Hyperemesis Gravidarum, severe nausea.” Dr. Olivia Branson told her soberly. “Your blood pressure is also low.

We’re going to be keeping you in until you’re feeling better.” She patted Chantelle’s hand reassuringly. She and Caleb had gone out several times, and it seemed like things were heating up.

“I feel like crap,” Chantelle admitted.

“Some pregnancies are like that. I’m just going to assure Caleb that you are on the mend.” Her eyes sharpened. “If I was an insecure woman, I’d resent you right now. That man dotes on you.”

“We’ve been through some rough times. He’s like a brother to me.”

“He loves you, and for a man like that to show so much devotion, he’s a real guy in my book.” She patted Chantelle’s hand again. “You’ll get through this.”

“Of course. It’s just that I left things up in the air at the restaurant- “

“Kane called and said not to worry about anything. He said something about coming to see you. He and that beautiful wife of his. He’s a stand-up employer.”

She didn’t bother to mention the reason why. “He is. I think I’ve lost about ten pounds, and my stomach feels hollow.”

“That’s expected. Well, honey, let me go get that man before he goes out of his mind.”

She was dozing off when he came into the room. “You’d do anything to get my attention, wouldn’t you?” Pulling up a chair, he scanned her face, his heart fluttering. She

looked so thin and drawn he wanted to gather her into his arms.

“You know me.” She smiled weakly. “You’re making Olivia jealous.”

“She understands you’re my priority.”

“I didn’t want that.” She pressed his hand. “You deserve a life.”

“I have one, and you’re a big part of it.” Lifting her hand, he kissed it gently.

“I’m so tired and scared. I thought I didn’t want this baby, but I did. I keep thinking I’m going to miscarry.”

“You won’t. In the next five months or so, we’re going to be holding the little sucker in our arms. Now, I want you to promise me something.”

“That I won’t throw up on that nice shirt of yours?” She teased.

“That too.” He smiled slightly. “I don’t want you to worry about anything. Absolutely nothing. Just concentrate on getting better.”

“I’m too tired to think anyway.”

“I’ll be back later.”

“You don’t have to- “

Placing a finger over her lips, he stopped her from saying more. “I have to. Sleep tight, sweetheart.” He

watched her eyes flicker shut and waited a few minutes before leaving the room. He found Olivia waiting for him in the lobby. “Walk with me.”

“You’re worried?”

“She looks thin and emaciated. That can’t be good. How is the –“ He gestured with one hand as they made their way out into the parking lot. “How is the baby?”

“Strong heartbeat. I’m more concerned about the mother. She isn’t retaining any nutrients, but the drip should take care of that.” She touched his arm lightly. “I envy her.”

He gave her an incredulous look as he pressed the fob.
“What the hell for?”

“You’re devoted to her.”

“She means the world to me and –“ He broke off with a sigh. “The guy isn’t in the picture, and it makes me so mad that I want to break something, preferably his face.”

“I can see that.”

“Yeah.” He dragged his fingers through his hair. “Look, I’m not thinking straight right now, and I have this meeting with my agent. I’ll see you later-“ He shook his head. “I have to come and see her later. Keep me posted.”

“Caleb?”

“Yeah?” Her voice stopped him while he was getting into the vehicle.

“I really like you.”

“I like you too.” He grinned at her carelessly. “See you soon.”

Olivia stood there in the cold, her white lab coat flapping in the harsh March wind, a frown on her brow.

“You’re back.”

“Late last night. I’ve been flying for what seems like days. Your message sounded urgent, but I was on my way back anyway. Well?”

“Well?” Kane wanted to knock his teeth down his throat. “Is that all you have to say?”

Kenji shrugged and walked over to look out the window. He'd chased Kane down and found him at his Midtown office, which was handy as he didn't want to face her. Not yet.

"I'm here, am I not?" He turned to look at his cousin. It was hard to believe he'd been away a little over three months. He'd like to think he had his head on straight, but he wasn't sure about that. "I've been checking in on the progress of the company, and everything is going well."

"Where the hell were you?"

"Tibet." A smile touched his lips briefly. "From there, I went to the Himalayas and then Jamaica. It was a hell of a journey."

"Aren't you going to ask about her?" Kane demanded.

“Not my place.”

“You were just using her?”

“We used each other.”

“You son of a bitch.”

Kenji’s eyes flared. “Watch it.”

“You left without a word- “

“I didn’t owe her anything. We had a moment, and it’s over.”

“How the hell can you be so cavalier?”

“I wormed myself into her life, and something happened.
She’s seeing someone- “

“She’s in the hospital.” Kane watched with grim
satisfaction as he stiffened.

“What?”

“She’s in the hospital.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s pregnant, and it isn’t going well.”

Kenji felt as if someone had taken a hot iron to his chest. “Ah.” He smiled bitterly. “It doesn’t surprise me that she – it’s for that writer guy. Are they getting married?” He lifted a hand. “It doesn’t matter. It’s none of my concern.”

“I gave her my word. I wouldn’t say anything to you.” Kane pushed back from his desk. “The baby is yours. She and Caleb are just friends and have been since they were children.’

“No.” he shook his head as he swayed. “That can’t be right.”

“It’s the truth. She is pregnant with your child, Kenji, and she’s been going through hell.”

“She – you -How long have you known?”

“A couple of weeks ago.” He dragged his fingers through

his hair. "I think she told me because she started getting ill. Extreme nausea that has her hurling every minute of the day. She can't keep anything down."

"Jesus!" He pulled his hair until it hurt. "What have I done? I need a drink." Walking shakily over to the cabinet, he selected scotch and poured it into the glass with a shaky hand. "I need to see her."

"She doesn't want to see you."

"I have to see her."

"What are you going to say to her?" Kane felt his anger draining away at the haunted look on the younger man's face.

"Damned if I know." He tossed back the liquor, relishing the burning in his gut. "Is she going to be okay?"

“The doctor says she needs fluid. She’s lost an alarming amount of weight pretty quickly. The baby is strong, though.”

“How long has she been there?”

“A week.”

“I have to see her.”

“You’ll have to clear that with her. Kenji, you messed up royally, and I have to ask—“ He met his cousin’s gaze squarely. “Was it just a diversion for you?”

“No.” He went to pour another drink. “I went away hoping I’d get her out of my head.” He groped for the nearest chair and sank down wearily. “It didn’t happen. I thought

she was with him. She told me she was with him. Why the hell would she lie to me?”

“She probably didn’t want to get involved with you.”

“She was right about that.” He said bitterly. “Look what I did to her.”

“I can make a call and –“

“No.” He shook his head. “Which hospital?”

“Hope General.”

Kenji smiled grimly. “We contribute a hell of a lot to the pediatric ward, remember? I’ll just walk in. “

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“Let me make some inquiries as to how she is. I heard something about her being discharged shortly. You going there will upset her, and we don’t want that.”

“Do that.” Kenji had a determined look on his face.

“Whether she likes it or not, I’m going to see her and get her to listen to me.”

“What are your intentions?”

His cousin stared at him and then laughed harshly.

“What the hell are you? Her dad?”

“She’s someone I happen to like and respect, and I feel responsible- “

“Why? Because I’m related to you?” Kenji scoffed. “I’m an adult and responsible for my own actions.”

“What you did was despicable. You used her.” Kane’s eyes flashed fire.

“We were both looking for gratification, and we found it.” He shouted. “Look,” he took a breath.

“I’m not proud of myself, but I had to get away, or I felt like I was about to explode. I didn’t need the complication of a relationship. I went with my heart and not my head, and afterward, I couldn’t deal with it.”

He tossed back the rest of the drink and slammed the glass down on the glossy side table. “I never meant to

hurt her, and I know it's going to take some time for her to trust me, but I'm willing to wait. You asked me about my intentions, and I don't know what to tell you. I have feelings for her.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her, wanting her-" He broke off and closed his eyes. "I don't know what the hell I'm going to do, but I know that I'd like to be with her. I've missed out on three damn months, and I want to make up for it. Is that good enough?"

Kane inclined his head, hiding the smile. "I'm not the one you need to convince."

"I know." Propping his elbows on his thighs, he scrubbed his hands over his face. "I don't know how I'm going to approach her yet."

Chapter 11

“I appreciate the visit.” Chantelle fussed at the pillows behind her head. “You didn’t have to.”

“I’m happy you’re home.” She was painfully thin, and it tugged at his heart to see the ravages on her face. “How are you feeling?”

“A lot better. Caleb, my brother, and sister-in-law have been here for me.” She looked up at the man standing by the window with a smile.

“I brought some of the enormous amounts of flowers home with me and left most at the hospital. Pierre sent over tons of soup.” She added, referring to the chef. “I’ll be back on my feet soon enough to start working-”

“Please, don’t worry about it.” Kane glanced over at Caleb and gave a slight nod which was correctly interpreted.

“I have some calls to make.” Moving towards the sofa, he bent to kiss her on the cheek. “Taking care of you has been messing with my work.”

Before she could respond, he left the room and closed the door.

“How are you really?” Kane had no idea what to say to her. He’d advised Kenji to wait and promised to run interference for him, but the damage had been done.

“My stomach is raw,” She rubbed her chest automatically. “I know I look haggard-”

“You’re still beautiful.”

“I wasn’t fishing for compliments.”

“Still.” He lowered himself into the chair across from her.
“The baby is healthy?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m happy about that.”

“There is something I need to discuss with you.”

“If you’re planning on firing me-”

“No.” He shook his head. Damn, he should have brought his wife with him. “It’s about Kenji.”

He saw when she stiffened. “He’s back.”

She folded the blanket over her and avoided his eyes. “I don’t want to see him.”

“He didn’t know-”

Her eyes flew to his face, and there was a hard, determined light in them. “I don’t want to see him, and if you came here to plead his case, you wasted your time.”

“He said he went away because he wanted to get his head straight.”

“Good for him.”

“He wants to see you-”

“You told him.”

“I did. He has a right to know.”

“In time, I will allow him his so-called rights, but not now. I don’t want him coming around or offering to pay for any expenses. I’m doing fine on my own. He can continue to

stay away like he did before.” She heaved out a breath. “I know he has all this fricking money and can fight me for custody-”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Kane interrupted firmly. “He wants to apologize and explain-”

“No.” She pressed her lips together. “I don’t want to hear anything he has to say. I’m fine without him. We’re fine without him.”

“I understand-”

“Do you?” Her eyes shone with tears. “He pursued me. I told him no, and that didn’t stop him. I was a puzzle he wanted to solve, a challenge he wanted to take on, and he did. Right after he did that, he left without a word. He broke me into pieces, and just when I told myself that I was over him, I found out he’d left something behind.”

She pressed a hand to her stomach. “I’m going to love this baby despite what happened, but I don’t have to talk

to him or have anything to do with him. He can go straight to hell.”

Kane smiled slightly at her fighting spirit. He'd warned Kenji this was going to be difficult, and it was. Rising to his feet, he came forward and took her hand. “Get your rest, get better, all the way better, and come back to managing the restaurant. We won't speak of this again.”

“Thank you.” She squeezed his hand. “I'm sorry you're caught up in this.”

“He's my family, and I wanted to strangle him. He's been through a lot-”

“I don't care.”

“Right.” Letting go of her, he stepped back. “Get well.”

Caleb came into the room a few minutes later with a tray. “I think this is beef broth, and it's delicious as hell. I want

you to scrape the bowl.”

“It was good of Kane to come.” She sat up against the pillows as he placed the tray table over her lap.

“Yeah. The guy is back.”

Her eyes flew to his face. “You heard?”

“Hmm.” he tucked the napkin into the collar of her sweater. “I left the door partially open. So he wants to see you to apologize?”

“Yes.”

“You said no?”

“I did. I hate him.”

He gave her a mild look.

“Well, maybe hate is a strong word.” She tasted the soup and closed her eyes in appreciation. “This is really good.”

“You said you loved him.”

“Now I feel some sort of loathing.” She shook her head. “Maybe loathing is also strong. I resent him.”

“He left you.”

“He did.”

Caleb took a seat next to her. “You led him to believe that we were a thing.”

“That didn’t stop him from coming after me.”

“No. Entitled prick. That said, I have to remind you the guy is worth billions.”

“So?”

“I took the opportunity to look him up, that includes his holdings and assets. Shipping companies, high-end car dealerships, import/export businesses, and apartment buildings, to name a few.” He tapped her flat stomach lightly. “You’re carrying the Lee’s heir.”

“I’m carrying my baby.”

“He’s not only that, and you’re smart enough to know it. He isn’t going to quietly go away into the night. He has pricey lawyers on retainer who will come at you. You’ll be in a fight - a bitter one.”

“What are you trying to do?” She demanded.

“I’m trying to give you a taste of what’s to come.”

“I don’t have to see him.”

“No. You don’t have to, but eventually, you’re going to have to deal with him.”

“I’m not ready.”

“No. Eat up. You don’t have to think about that right now.”

“Too late.” She muttered.

Kenji was waiting for him at the restaurant. “I thought I’d have dinner here. Join me?”

“Why not? I have some things to take care of now that Chantelle isn’t around. The spring looks to be as busy as the winter. Several weddings lined up.” He took a seat across from him and nodded at the hovering waiter.

“How is she?” Kenji took a sip of the wine that had been brought forward, appreciating the texture.

“Pregnancy has done a number on her. She is thin to the point of emaciation.”

Kenji winced, lowering his glass. “You told her I wanted to see her?”

“She said no.”

His eyes flashed. "I have a right—"

"You have no right." Kane snapped. "You put her through hell, and I told you you should give her time."

"She hates me."

"Can you blame her?"

"I screwed up, and I want to make amends."

"She doesn't want to see you. She's still going through a lot, and you must give her time."

"For her to hate me even more?" He felt weary and dejected. "You know what my time away taught me? I'm in love with her. I know I should give her time, but I need to be with her. I'll take anything she dishes out as long as I am with her."

“Kenji-”

“No.” He shook his head. “Dammit, no. I’m not going to stay away from her. She can spew at me all she wants. She can pour water all over me if that is what it’ll take, but I’m going to be there.”

Kane considered him for a few minutes and waited for their meal to be placed before them before responding. “She said you saw her as a challenge, something to conquer. Is that true?”

“At first.” His appetite was shot to hell, but he picked at the lobster swimming in the creamy sauce. “It became much more pretty fast, and I couldn’t deal with the intensity of it.” He laughed moodily. “Why did she tell me she was involved with that guy?”

“Perhaps to put you off.” Kane gave him a pointed look.

“No. I wanted her no matter what. It was like a thorn in my flesh. I wanted her so much I didn’t give a damn that she was involved.” He sighed deeply. “When you told me she was pregnant, I felt my heart plummet when I thought it was his.

When you said it wasn’t, all I felt was a relief and joy so deep that I can’t explain it. I want her and this baby; I want a family. Mine was taken from me and, for a long time, I never thought I’d have this, but now that I do, I’m not going to walk away.”

His eyes hardened. “She can fight like hell, but I’m going to fight harder. I need this. Yes, I screwed up royally, but I’m going to make this right.” Taking up the glass, he took a long, fortifying sip. “I need this.”

Kane believed him and wanted it for him as well. He’d seen the look on Chantelle’s face and knew it wasn’t going to be easy. “You can’t just show up at her place. She won’t let you in, and Caleb is there. He’s like a lion guarding his cub.”

Kenji shrugged, the tense expression on his face belying the careless gesture. “If I have to fight him-”

“You’ll end up alienating her even more.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“She should be back here in a matter of weeks.”

“I can’t wait that long.”

“You waited almost four months.” Ye pointed out, regretting his bluntness when the shadow came over his cousin’s face. “It had to be said.”

“Yes. You’re right.”

“She’ll be here where she won’t be able to avoid you. I’m going to leave it up to you how you bring her around.”

You're going to have to be determined to be in it for the long haul."

"I am."

"Good." Kane picked up his glass. "She is hurting, Kenji. What you did to her has left its mark, and she's still feeling it. She won't want to trust you again."

His expression was bleak. "I know that. I'm not going to give up." He mulled things over inside his head. "I should reach out to the guy, try and get him on my side."

"It'd help if you called him by his name. He happens to be fiercely loyal to her."

"I get that. And he hates me."

"That much is true."

“Yeah.” He gave a hollow laugh. “I’m going to need his number.”

“Kane?”

“Could you come to the restaurant? I need to speak to you.”

“Now?”

“If it’s not too inconvenient. I understand you’re taking care of Chantelle-”

“She’s booting me out tonight. Two days of my hovering, and she’s getting sick of me. Shows that she’s getting stronger.” He said with a laugh. “What’s this about?”

“I’d rather discuss it in person.”

“On my way.”

Kane hung up and gave his cousin a pointed look. “I’ll greet him and bring him back to my office. Please see to it that you don’t break up the place. I love this office.”

“You think he’ll try and come at me.” Kenji shoved his hands into his pockets and prowled the area. “He can try. I’m an expert in self-defense.”

“Please bear that in mind.”

“I’m not going to stand here and allow the guy to throw punches at me without responding,” Kenji told him tightly, his body tensing up.

“Remember, you’re fighting to get him on your side.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Suck up to him.”

“I’m not doing that.”

Kane sighed. “You’re going to have to do something.”

“This is bullshit.” He dragged his fingers through his hair. “I have a right to talk to her, goddammit! She’s carrying my child.” His eyes glowed. “I can force her hand. I have lawyers.”

“Then you would end up alienating her, and I don’t think that’s what you want.”

“Damn it all to hell!” He exploded, slamming a fist into his palm. “I shouldn’t have touched her. I should have just walked away. Now I’m in this mess, and I don’t know what the hell to do.”

“You know what to do,” Kane told him quietly. “You just have to calm down and start thinking rationally. You have to be patient.”

He whirled and strode over to look out the window. “Go and show him in. I’ll do my best to behave.” He said woodenly.

He hunched his shoulders as he heard the door close behind him and felt as if he was in hell. He hadn’t been sleeping much, and the need to be with her was a lot to bear. It was as if he’d swapped one hell for a much hotter one. He stiffened when he heard the door opening and the conversation filtering in.

“Caleb, I’m sure you know who this is.”

“Son of a bitch.”

Kenji turned at the sound of the man’s vicious curse.

“You brought me here under false pretenses?”

“I’m afraid so.” Kane looked over at Kenji. “I’m asking you to hear him out.”

“I don’t want to be in the same room as this sick bastard.”

“The feeling is, of course, mutual.”

“Kenji!”

With a nod to his cousin, he reined in his temper. “We might not like each other-”

“I hate your stinking guts.”

“Be that as it may, we both have someone in common, and I’m sure her happiness is the most important thing to both of us.”

“Is that so?” Caleb asked softly, blue eyes menacing. “Is that what you’re trying to tell yourself, you son of a bitch? You pursued her and then had your way with her. Afterward, you turned tail and ran like the coward you are.”

“Watch it.” The fury was contained, but Kane, who knew his cousin well, saw the warning signs. He’d intended to leave them alone to talk, but that wasn’t a good idea at the moment.

“Gentlemen.” Positioning himself between the two, he held up a hand. “Emotions are high at this point, but we can agree to have a civilized discussion about a woman we all admire and respect.”

“I want to see her.” Kenji began. “I know you don’t think too highly of me, but that’s beside the point. She’s carrying my baby, and I want to be there for her.”

“I’m there for her. So is her brother.”

“I’m the father-”

“Which is an unfortunate detail, but what can we do?”

Kenji’s eyes flashed. “Look, I just need you to pave the way-”

“Not a chance in hell.”

Kenji’s fingers balled, and he could feel the grip he had on his temper easing off. “I don’t need your permission.”

Caleb smiled thinly. “Like hell you don’t. She doesn’t want to have anything to do with you. If you’re thinking of having your fancy lawyers harass her, you can think again. I might not have the money, the power, or the reach you have, but I’m going to stand with her.”

“You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Probably not. Possibly not.” Caleb shrugged. “That would accomplish one thing. She’d hate you even more.”

Kenji turned around and went to stand at the window. “I love her.”

“That’s convenient.” Caleb snorted.

“I thought it was just a fling,” He continued. “I’m in love with her, and I need to be with her. I just want a chance.”

“To hurt her again?”

“No.” He swung around, eyes hollow. “To show her that I’m here and that I will be here.”

“Chantelle is stubborn, and she has her mind made up.”

“You can change it. I’m not accustomed to begging, but here I am. You can ask her to at least see me. You’re her best friend, her confidante, and I need you to ask her to give me a chance.”

“No.”

The resolute tone had Kenji seeing red. “No? Why the hell not?”

“It has to be her choice. You did a number on her, and it’s still costing her. I was there.” His expression hardened. “I was there when she told me you wanted her. I was there when you had your way with her and left.

I was there when she discovered that moment or whatever had consequences, then when she started hurling and couldn't stop, I was also there. I thought we were going to lose her, and I damn well prayed."

His eyes flashed. "So no, I'm not going to intervene for you. If you really mean it that you love her, you'd damn well better fight tooth and nail for her. Because, brother, she isn't going to make it easy on you." With that, he turned and walked out.

"I'm sorry."

Kenji slumped back against the window and closed his eyes. "You tried. We didn't come to blows. That's something, I guess."

"What now?" Kane asked him quietly.

“Back to my original plan or yours. Waiting until she’s back.” he smiled grimly. “Get in her face, constantly. She’s going to have a difficult time ignoring me.”

Caleb drove out of the parking lot and stopped at the park nearby. Spring had finally arrived, and people were taking advantage of the weather. A frown crossed his brow as he stared at the children playing on the swings. Very soon, that would be Chantelle and the baby she was carrying.

He’d stormed out of the restaurant in anger, but the guy was right, and he was not naïve. There were going to be big changes. She was carrying the baby of a very powerful family. It wasn’t going to be easy.

She could resist, but in the end, she wasn’t going to win. As much as Kane Takahashi respected and liked her as an employee, his first loyalty was to his cousin. Both of them were forces to be reckoned with.

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. The bastard had declared his love for her. It could be a ploy to get her to drop her guard so she could fall in line. He shook his head. He could just force her hand; men like him had lawyers on retainer. He could get them to descend on her like a pack of wolves, and she wouldn't stand a chance.

He hoped to God he was telling the truth and not just playing a sick game. If he was telling the truth and he was really in love with Chan, then that was entirely different. Chan was stubborn, and it was going to take a hell of a lot to get her to open herself up again.

Kenji went back and closeted himself inside the large office that had been his dad's. He hadn't made any changes since he'd taken over. What would be the point? He was hardly here anyway, but now things were different.

A path had been chosen for him. He was going to be a father, and the idea of that scared him to death. He was faced with a troubling situation that had eclipsed his former problems.

Kane had asked if he was okay, and he'd said yes. He needed some time to think, but he was furious with himself. He needed her and had to find a way to make that known. He could play hardball and get his lawyers involved. After all, she was carrying the Lee's heir.

He didn't want to go to that extent. She'd hate him, and he wouldn't stand a chance in the long run. He had to find another way. He had to try and convince Chantelle he was sorry, and it would never happen again.

He had no idea how he was going to pull that off, but he was damn well going to try.

Chapter 12

There was a 'Welcome Back' banner inside her office when she returned; the sentiment behind it and the rousing applause from the staff had tears gathering at the back of her eyes. She'd been gone for two weeks, and it felt like two months.

Olivia had cleared her and declared she was doing much better. She still got sick in the mornings, but it was manageable. She'd managed to put back on some of the weight she'd lost. Caleb also told her she didn't look like something the cat dragged in.

"You almost look like you again." he had declared with a grin. "I can't believe you are four months pregnant and not showing."

"That'll soon change."

Now, she was back and ready to roll. She'd been working from home. The weddings were scheduled, and she'd been consulting with the wedding planners and the chef to make sure everything was up to scratch.

Kenji hadn't tried to contact her, which she found very strange. She was hoping he was respecting her wish. She couldn't deal with him now.

She'd told Kane and Caleb that she knew she was going to have to eventually, and she had no intention of cutting him out of the child's life - as if she could! She needed time, and he was damn well going to give it to her.

She'd barely settled in her office when she received the summons. When she came in, Kane hadn't been there, but he must have arrived during the excitement. Closing her eyes briefly and straightening her sweater, she rose to her feet.

The last time they met, it hadn't been particularly pleasant. They'd spoken over the phone several times,

and he'd inquired about her health, but she'd said some harsh words to him.

He was still her employee, and she loved her job. The situation was complicated, and she was very embarrassed that she'd allowed herself to get caught up like this. However, it was done, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Knocking on the door, she waited until he called for her to enter before pushing it open. He was standing behind his desk, staring at something on his laptop.

"Have a seat." He gestured to one of the comfortable chairs and continued to tap on the keys. "I was supposed to have been in a conference meeting. Associates from China and Korea." He made one final tap before turning his attention to her.

Chantelle forced herself not to squirm as those intense eyes studied her face. A pang touched her as she recognized how much he looked like Kenji. The same shape of the face and eyes and the long, lean body. "How are you?"

“I’m fine.” She pressed her lips as she realized how abrupt that sounded. “I’ve been cleared by my doctor to return.”

He nodded. “And emotionally?”

She stiffened at that. “I can assure you I’m perfectly capable of doing my job. I’m pregnant, not dying.”

A slight smile touched his firm lips. “Good enough.”

She shifted in her seat and told herself she shouldn’t be asking. “Is he- Is he still here?”

“Yes.” He told her briefly. “I told him to give you time.”

“I don’t know if I ever want to see him.”

“You’re going to have to.”

“Eventually.”

“Not my place to tell you what to do.”

“No. It’s not.” She lifted a hand. “I apologize.”

“For speaking your mind? Not at all. Now, let’s get down to business.”

He knew she was back but was going to give her a couple of days. He wanted her to think that he’d given up. He’d sent flowers, of course, a huge bouquet of calla lilies, red, white, and yellow roses, and sprigs of parsley.

He hadn't included a card, but she'd figure out who they were from.

He'd asked Kane about her well-being, and his cousin told him she was looking almost like her old self. 'Still a little thin, but that's to be expected.'

"You could order her to go back home for another week. You're her boss."

"Her doctor cleared her, and I need her. She's very good at what she does and was sorely missed."

"I don't want her overworked."

Kane gave him a look. "That high-handed attitude isn't going to get you any brownie points."

"Yeah." He'd agreed. He was trying to dial it down a notch for when he faced her for the first time in over four months. He wanted to be on her good side so he could

accompany her to the next appointment. It was his right, and he was going to be there whether she liked it or not.

He was going to corner the lioness in her den and had no idea how to go about it. He'd chosen the time of day when it was after the rush for the evening meal so she wouldn't be too busy.

He wasn't required to make a reservation as she more or less used Kane's private booth. The staff was aware of who he was, of course. Shedding his jacket, he handed it to the young woman before going inside, eyes scanning the lingering crowd.

She wasn't on the floor, which meant she was either upstairs or in her office. Dismissing the eager Maître d, he made his way back and stood by the door indecisively before knocking.

"Come in."

Her cultured voice had him hesitating a second before pushing it open. “Give me a-” Her voice tailed away when she lifted her head to see him standing there. For a few moments, neither of them said anything.

“I hope I’m not intruding-”

“Get out.”

“Not going to happen.” He closed the door behind him firmly and crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned against the door. “We need to talk.”

“We don’t need to do a damn thing, and this is my office.”

“I’m not leaving until you hear me out.”

“I don’t have time-”

“Make time.”

She bristled as she glared at him. “I don’t have to talk to you.”

“Then you can damn well listen.” His eyes wandered over her face, and he felt the pang at how thin she was. “I’m sorry. I made a huge error in leaving and not getting in touch with you. Kane should have told me-”

“I asked him not to. Your apology is noted and not accepted. Now leave.”

“No. Dammit, Chantelle. I was out of my depth, and I acted in the moment. When we were together, I felt something, and it scared the hell out of me. I ran. I’m not proud of myself for doing so, but I did what I thought was best for me.”

She inclined her head regally. “Noted, again. Now, please leave. I have work.”

“I need another chance.”

“You won’t be getting it.”

“I can force your hand.”

Her eyes blazed. “By wielding your immense power. Please, go right ahead.”

He sighed. It was going badly, and he had no idea what to do. “Look-” He started to walk forward when he saw her swaying. The alarm was immediate and had him rushing the rest of the way. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Just leave me alone.”

“I told Kane it was too soon for you to be back.”

She glared at him. “You were discussing me with Kane?”

“I was asking about your health. Let me get you some water.”

“I can get it myself.”

Ignoring her, he went to the small cabinet and poured a glass, bringing it back to her. “I want to see you and be in your life. When’s your next doctor’s appointment? I want to be there.”

“I don’t want you to. Caleb accompanies me.”

His mouth tightened. “He’s not the father of the baby. I am.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Look, you can fight me all you want, but I’m not going to turn and walk away. I’m staying. Now, drink the water and let me call the kitchen and get you something to eat. Are you taking care of yourself?”

He wasn’t prepared for the cold water as she tossed the contents of the glass in his face, and it left him gasping.

Chantelle stared at him in horrified shock and braced for the explosion. She hadn’t thought, just reacted. She watched as he turned away and went to get some tissues from the box to pat his face dry. His black sweater was wet and clinging to his chest.

“Now that you’ve gotten that out of your system, I suggest we start over.” There was a dangerous glint in his dark eyes that had her trembling slightly.

“If you’re thinking of throwing the glass, I’d advise against it. I’m only prepared to take so much. I’m sticking

around, Chantelle. I know you might not believe it, but I'm here to stay." His hand swept around the room. "I'm thinking of taking permanent residence here."

"I can't stop seeing you as you're related to the owner and have a ten percent interest in the place. This is my domain, and I'd appreciate it if you would stay the hell away from me."

He advanced and had her slinking back. "Is it so bad?" he asked her softly. "We have something-

"That was then."

She could not avoid him as he reached out and hauled her against him. "Perhaps you need a reminder."

"Don't!" She spoke more out of fear than anger. She couldn't resist him, and touching her was going to prove to him that she wasn't over him. Slapping her hands against his chest, she put distance between them.

“I’ve moved on. Yes, I’m carrying your baby inside me, and it kills me. I will love it because that is who I am. Despite the fact that it’s yours, I’ll love it, but I don’t have to put up with you. I’m asking you to have a conscience or try and develop one and leave me alone. I can’t stand to be touched by you.”

His face was rigid with anger, his eyes bright with it. For a few seconds, she thought he was going to ignore her impassioned plea and pull her into his arms. If she did, she wouldn’t stand a chance. His hands tightened on her arms for a minute before he released her and stepped back.

She told herself that it was relief she felt when he did.

“I’ll leave you be for now.” He told her coldly, eyes raking her face. “You’re carrying my baby inside you. I’m going to be here no matter what you say.

I’ve told you I’m sorry and want to make up for the pain I caused you, and you’re not letting me. You should know

something about me, darling-” His smile was menacing. “I don’t give up. I’ll leave you alone for now, but I’m here to stay.” With that, he slammed out of her office.

Chantelle lowered herself into the chair, her entire body trembling. She’d gone a round with him, and she wasn’t sure who was the winner. Pressing her hand against her stomach, she could feel the movements of the baby growing inside her. She wasn’t going to give it up.

She’d gone through the layers of pain and anger at his leaving and was now bonding with her baby. She’d started listening to classical music whenever she was in bed and had bought baby books to read up about what to expect. She was even planning the nursery and the theme even though it was too soon to tell the sex.

He wasn’t going to spoil it for her. Even though she was yearning to feel him against her, she was going to ignore that. Right now, she has work to do.

He hadn't left as she hoped but was ensconced in the privacy booth belonging to Kane, with a drink and some food in front of him. She did her best to ignore him but found it impossible. She'd taken off her heels for comfortable flats as she made her rounds.

At one point, he was joined by a stunning brunette who kept touching his arm. Telling herself it was contempt she felt and not anger and jealousy, she flounced back into her office and slammed the door shut. She didn't have a claim on him and didn't want to. He was free to see whomever he pleased.

It was almost midnight when she finished up and was ready to leave. A peek inside the privacy booth showed he wasn't there, and the relief was palpable. It was her first day back, and perhaps she should have left a little earlier.

Waving to the security, she made her way to her vehicle, jumping slightly as the shadow detached itself from the surrounding palm trees and came towards her.

"I wanted to make sure you're okay."

“Carl.” She tamped down the irritation as she disengaged her alarm. The man had been hitting on her since earlier this evening and refusing to take no for an answer. “You should take a cab home. I’ll get John to call one-”

“I wanted to see you.” Before she could sidestep, he grabbed her arm and boxed her in against the vehicle. His words were slurred, and she could smell the liquor in his breath. He was a burly man topping six feet, and she didn’t stand a chance. If she called out, the security would come running, but she wanted to avoid that.

“Look, you’re drunk-”

“You’re going to want to take your hands off her.”

The silky voice had both of them turning. He hadn’t left, she thought weakly.

“Now. Or I’ll break them out of their sockets. Your choice.”

“He’s just drunk-”

“This is none of your business.” Carl’s fingers tightened on her arms. She was sure that if he hadn’t been as drunk as he was, he wouldn’t have argued.

“It is. Yes, it is.” Flicking away the cigar he’d been smoking, he moved towards them, reminding her of a panther stalking his prey. “I gave you a choice.”

“Now look here-” That was as far as he got. Chantelle stifled a scream as the man landed in the shrubs in a drunken heap. It happened so quickly that she wondered if she was seeing things.

“Oh, God!” Forcing her trembling legs to move, she started forward, only to be stopped as Kenji gripped her arm.

“The security will see to him. I’m sure he’s just unconscious.” He jerked his head as John came running.

“Why the hell weren’t you doing your job? You’re supposed to see her out of the building.”

“I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” Resisting her efforts to get away from him, he guided her to her vehicle.

“Let go of me.”

“What?” He asked her mockingly. “No, ‘thank you for rescuing me’?”

“I don’t need rescuing.” She was still shaken up, her insides trembling.

“I think you do, and I’m going to have words with Kane about your hours.”

She pushed at him, eyes blazing. “You don’t own me, and I can do what I damn well please.”

“The baby you’re carrying says otherwise.” He pressed her back against the vehicle, trapping her body with his. “I have a say in what happens to you. You just got back and should have used commonsense to go home earlier. Now I am going to have to intervene.”

“You bastard.”

“Insults aren’t going to do it, Chantelle. Keep reasonable hours, or I’ll be forced to step in.”

“Now, all of a sudden, you care?” She sneered.

“I always did.” He told her softly. Before she could move, he captured her chin, his fingers like steel. “Now, it’s even more powerful. You said you hated my touch, but that isn’t true, is it?”

“Please-”

“Please, what? ‘Kiss me? Stay away from me?’”

“Stay away from me.”

“Not going to happen, darling.” His head swooped down, and he seized her lips roughly. Her resistance ebbed away, and she found her lips parting. His tongue darted inside her mouth, and he could feel the familiar madness taking over. How he’d longed for this!

The kiss gentled, his hands going around her neck, fingers pressing against her throat in a gentle caress. Her pulse was leaping like a frightened bird cornered by a large and dangerous prey. Her nipples were incredibly sensitive and immediately became as hard as rocks.

Kenji felt himself harden, the blood boiling inside him. He'd been waiting, making sure she was safe. He'd seen the man's hands on her and had felt the violence surfacing. He'd wanted to hurt the guy for daring to touch her. He was going to protect her from everything, no matter her resistance.

Somehow, she found the strength to push him away, her breathing ragged, her body trembling. He'd aroused something fierce inside her, but she couldn't and wouldn't be pulled back in.

"Stay away from me." She whispered.

"Not a chance in hell." He cupped her face, eyes fierce. "You belong to me." With that explosive statement, he kissed her roughly before stepping back. "I'll wait until you leave."

"Go to hell."

“Already there.” He told her grimly.

She slammed into the house and took off her jacket. She was so riled up; she couldn't stand still. How dare he dictate to her. 'You belong to me.' The nerve of the man. Did he think he could just waltz back into her life as if the last four months or so didn't matter? Shaking her head, she made her way upstairs. How dare he kiss her like that!

He was going to talk to Kane about her hours. She wasn't employed by him. Kicking off her shoes, she sat on the edge of the bed, her body vibrating. She wasn't going to start anything with him. She'd made the mistake of allowing him privileges, and look what happened? She'd be a fool to believe he'd changed.

He was just sweetening her up because she was carrying his child. Her stomach jumped as she recalled the scene in the parking lot. He'd been so swift.

One minute, Carl was gripping her arms, and the next, he was sent flying. Carl was bulky, but it was more flesh than muscle. Kenji was lean and toned, and she'd heard he was an expert in martial arts.

"Oh, God." She whispered, pressing her hand against her stomach. "I can't still love him. That would be the height of insanity." Closing her eyes, she flopped back on the bed wearily. He wasn't going to stay away. That much was obvious.

What did she feel about that? He'd made it plain he wanted to be involved, and, in all honesty, she couldn't stop him. She was carrying his child, and he wasn't some ordinary Joe. He was Kenji Lee, heir to a fortune. He belonged to a powerful family, and there was no way she'd ever be able to fight him.

Did she want to? She wondered wearily. Maybe not, but she wasn't going to be dragged back into having anything to do with him physically.

That would be pure lunacy and history repeating itself. Touching a hand to her lips, she felt her body vibrating as the emotions washed through her. One thing was certain, the feelings were still there, and at the touch of his hand, he could turn her into a puddle.

She was going to have to keep him at arm's length from now on. However difficult that might prove to be.

Chapter 13

She knew the moment she was summoned what it was all about.

“Are you okay?” Kane moved from around his desk as soon as she entered.

“I’m fine. It’s no big deal.”

“From what I understand, Carl was out of control.” He sat on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms over his chest.

“He assaulted Carl.”

“Who was assaulting you from what I gathered.”

“He could bring up charges-”

“I’ve already dealt with him. He owes you an apology.”
Kane said dismissively.

“Is he okay?”

“A slight concussion which will remind him not to drink too much. The bartender should have cut him off. I’ll have words with him as well.”

“He had no right-”

“He had every right. Kenji is vested both professionally and personally.” A slight smile touched his lips. “He laid into me pretty hard, and he’s right. I should’ve insisted you leave earlier.”

Her eyes flashed. “Is my work in question?”

“No. You’re doing an excellent job as usual, but you’re pregnant-”

“I will not have him dictating to me.”

“He’s taken a personal interest, and you’re not going to shake him, Chantelle. He wants to make it up to you.”

“He can’t.”

Kane inclined his head, his expression dark. “We’ll see. We have a staff meeting in ten minutes. I’ll let you get back to work.”

Her heart slammed into her chest when she saw him casually leaning against her door. He was wearing his traditional black, this time a thin cashmere sweater that fitted his lean frame like a glove.

“I don’t have time for you.”

“I just came to make sure you’re okay.” He stood where he was enjoying the view. She was wearing a pin-striped suit, her hair in a smooth bun at the nape of her neck. She was wearing big hoop earrings, and he just wanted to kiss her.

“I’m okay. Now please go.”

“I needed to check for myself. Have you eaten?”

Her eyes flashed. “I’ve been taking care of myself for years now and pretty much have a handle on it.”

“Good., Have you eaten?”

She wanted to grind her teeth in frustration. “Yes.”

“What was on the menu?”

“Are we really doing this?”

“It seems we are. What was it?”

Taking deep breaths, she forced herself to be calm. “A vegetable wrap and a pot of tea.”

He nodded in approval. “I need to talk to you.”

“No.”

He stepped aside to let her pass and came in behind her as she was about to close the door.,

“I’m afraid that wasn’t a request.”

“What?”

He smiled at her snarl and came to sit on the edge of the desk, one long denim-clad leg swinging. “I want to absorb all the costs for the doctor’s appointments and everything else.”

“I have excellent insurance. Is that all?”

“No.”

“Look-”

“I want to see you later.”

“You’re seeing me now.”

“I want to have a private moment with you.” He shrugged. “More than a moment, actually. An hour, two

or perhaps the entire night.” His eyes slid over her face slowly. “I want to make love to you properly this time. With your clothes off and your naked body next to mine.”

She ignored the spiking of her blood pressure and the roaring inside her ears.

“Let me think for a second. No.”

“I want you.”

“You had me and now it’s over.”

“Not by a long shot and you want me too.” He was crowding her and she wasn’t going to be able to resist him.

“That might be the case, but I don’t like you.”

“No?” A smile touched his lips as he rose. She started backing away automatically, the chair stopping her progress.

“I have a staff meeting-”

“This won’t take long.” Hauling her against him, he crushed her lips, fingers massaging her neck. His tongue tangled with hers and he could feel the fierce need shuddering through his body. He’d told her he wanted her but that was far from the truth. He needed her and wasn’t going to deny himself any longer.

Dragging his lips from hers, he bent his forehead to hers and took several breaths. “That was me giving you notice.” He told her thickly. “I’m not going away, darling. deal with it.” Letting go of her, he walked out and slammed the door shut.

Sliding into the chair, she felt as if all her whole body had been liquified. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes and fought for control. She had a meeting to attend and was going to have to gather her composure.

He bided his time and waited until the weekend. She had a big wedding to deal with the Saturday and would be off the Sunday and the Monday, which was perfect. He'd take her away Sunday morning, even if he had to kidnap her and put her in the car. He'd waited long enough to be with her and wasn't going to wait any longer.

With that in mind, he called Caleb. "I know you don't think much of me, but I need your help."

"I already told you no."

"Look, I'm planning on taking her away for a couple of days. Somewhere quiet-"

"Where you can seduce her?" He demanded.

“Precisely.” He said without hesitation. “I need her and am tired of this skating around and we’re going to have this out once and for all.”

“How the hell are you going to get her to go with you?”

“If I have to tie her up and put her in the vehicle, that’s what I’ll do.”

“What do you need from me?”

“Pack a bag. I’ll be there on Sunday morning to pick her up.”

“She’s going to resist.”

“Oh, I expect she will but I’m determined to get through to her.”

“It’s a beautiful wedding.” Chantelle started. She’d been so enraptured by the groom’s speech that she’d failed to notice him coming up alongside her. The day was perfect. A clear blue sky, with a few puffy white clouds and the weather cool enough to hold the ceremony in one of the enchanting arbors dotting the grounds.

It’d gone off without a hitch, despite the bride and her interfering mother breathing down her neck. Now, it was over. Or almost.

“You weren’t invited.”

“Wasn’t I?” He raised his eyebrows at her in amusement. “The Sinclair’s and the Dupont’s are friends. You pulled off quite a coup. Millicent Sinclair isn’t an easy woman to please.”

“What do you want?” She hissed rudely.

“Let me see.” He tapped a long finger on his chin and brought her attention to his lips, sending heat to her lower body. “Tine with you.”

“You’re not going to get it.”

“We’ll see.” he murmured mysteriously, intense dark eyes roving over her body as if he had a right to do so. “What’s that color? Lime? Looks good on you.” He settled on her stomach which wasn’t starting to show yet.

“I can’t wait for the world to know that you’re having my child.” His voice had deepened, his expression turning intimate. “I want to feel my baby moving inside you. I want to feel you naked while I explore every inch of your body.”

“Please go away.”

“Am I making you hot, darling? You’re making me hard.”

She almost jumped out of her skin when she heard someone called out her name and realized the bride's mother was bearing down on her. He chuckled softly and earned himself a glare as she turned to meet the woman halfway.

For the next hour, she was caught up with dealing with things like making sure there was enough liquor at the bar and another table was carted out to hold the rest of the wedding gifts.

By the time she was finished he was nowhere to be seen. She told herself she was happy for that but couldn't deny the empty feeling inside her stomach. The bride and groom seemed happy and that might be just for the ceremony and the glitter.

The glow of it would fade after the honeymoon but she wanted something like this. Someone to love and cherish her for the rest of her life.

She found herself looking over the crowd for the familiar dark-haired man who'd turned her life inside out and couldn't find him. Must be off with one of the guests, she thought bitterly. They were welcome to each other and it was none of her concern.

Aside from the baby she was carrying inside her, they had nothing else in common. Taking her mind off him and her problems, she returned to her duties.

"You're here? Why are you here?" She'd just inserted her key into the lock when the door was swung open to reveal Caleb wearing a robe.

"I was waiting for you. You look beat."

"The wedding dragged on." She slipped out of her shoes at the doorway and rubbed a hand over her stomach. She'd started feeling a little queasy this morning and had been afraid the morning sickness was resurfacing.

“I thought you were supposed to be taking it easy.” He led her into the living room where she plopped down on the sofa and wriggled her toes. “It’s after twelve.”

“I know what time it is.” She grumbled. “I’m fine. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. The bride and her parents are big money and are very fussy. I didn’t want complaints.”

“So, you’re working yourself to the bone to please some rich folks.” Pulling up an ottoman, he placed her feet on his lap and started rubbing them.

“It’s my job.” She said defensively. “I’m off tomorrow and Monday. Don’t start. I get enough from-” She clamped her mouth shut.

“The baby daddy?” His brows lifted in amusement. “I happen to agree with him. You’re doing too much. You should go away for a week or two. Unwind and recharge.”

“I was away for three and can’t afford to take more time off.”

“You were bloody ill, almost dying. That wasn’t taking vacation time. Besides,” He moved up to her calves and had her whimpering. “You’re pregnant for a damn billionaire, which means you don’t have to work.”

Her eyes popped open to glare at him. “I don’t want his money.”

“You’re carrying his baby.” He pointed out.

“Well. Still. I hate him.”

Those dark brows lifted again. “Do you?”

“Yes, and I can’t believe you are taking his side. You’re my friend.”

“I hate to see you working so hard.”

“I love what I do. What are you doing here?”

“I’d hate to think I’m no longer welcome.”

“You know you are but you didn’t say anything.” She looked at him suspiciously. “Are you blowing off Olivia? Dammit, Caleb, she’s my OBGYN and if you’re dumping her-”

“We’re fine, oh suspicious friend. I just felt like coming over to check on you. Is that allowed?”

“Of course. How are things with you and her?”

“We’re fine.”

“Just fine?”

“Why is it okay for you to talk about my personal life yet I’m not allowed to ask about yours?”

“I don’t have a personal life.”

He pointed to her belly. “That says otherwise.”

“I was stupid enough to have sex with a rich guy without using anything. That’s not having a personal life.”

“Still-”

“I’m going to bed.”

“I’m staying down here for a few.” He reached for the remote. “Sleep tight.”

She gave a nod and headed out. He blew out a breath as he glanced at the overnight case he had packed. If this went to shit he was going to be on her hitlist for months. Hopefully, it would work and Kenji would find a way to get on her good side.

“What? What time is it?”

“Five.”

“In the morning?”

“Yes. Inspiration hit late last night. I’m going somewhere and I’d like you to come with me. It’s this remote cabin where the scenery is spectacular. I already packed for you. Get up and take a shower.”

“I’m sleeping.”

“You’re awake and you owe me. Go and take a shower and put something warm on. It’s cold out. I made a flask of tea.”

“Caleb-”

“You owe me big time. Now up and about. I’ll be downstairs waiting.” Before she could protest anymore he was gone. Tempted to just turn over and go back to sleep, she stared up at the ceiling and muttered about the price of friendship. Okay, fine. He didn’t ask too much of her and over the past four months, he’d been her rock.

Sighing deeply, she swung her legs off the bed and made her way to the bathroom. Her ankles were slightly swollen and she had to admit that she’d been doing a lot since she got back. She needed a break. Adjusting the

spray, she stepped in and allowed the water to wake her fully.

She was his best friend and if Lee screwed this up, there was going to be hell to pay. He'd seen how exhausted she looked and that had cemented it for him.

“Just get her here. If I come over she isn't going to agree to go anywhere with me and I need to sort things out between us.”

So, last night he'd come up with the brilliant plan to get her to come with him. He felt despicable, but it was for her own good or so he was reminding himself. She needed the time away.

Pressing his lips together, he got the last of his things together. He'd stop on the way to get them breakfast. Lee had given him detailed instructions and he was depending on that and the GPS to get him to the cabin.

“There’s no cell service so you won’t be able to call.”

“Great.” Caleb muttered, turning as he heard her coming down the stairs. She’d donned faded denims and a chunky green and white sweater. Her hair was in a ponytail and she looked so young and innocent that it touched his heart. He was hoping this was going to be her happy ending.

“Ready?”

“No. I don’t see why we have to go anywhere in the middle of the night.”

“It’s early morning and you know how unpredictable us writers are. Come along, honey, like a good girl.” He grinned as she glared at him.

“I have your jacket.”

“Very accommodating of you.” She grumbled.

“That’s me.”

She fell asleep as soon as she was tucked comfortably in the passenger seat. The seat was adjusted and Caleb had thrown a blanket over her. With her sleeping, there’d be less questions as well as giving him time to concentrate on the driving.

“It should take about three and a half hours.” Lee had told him.

Taking a deep breath, he set off glancing at her every now and then to check if she was still asleep. Traffic was light at that time of the morning and he had to admit that cruising on the highway was exhilarating.

Kenji was nervous as hell. Everything was in place. He'd seen to it and had help from Kane and Jackson. The cabin belonged to Jackson and his brother Jason and they'd loaned it out to several friends for one reason or another.

He'd brought food with him for two days and stored them away in the old-fashioned ice box. The fire was blazing in the hearth, Jackson had told him how cold it was because of the mountain air. It felt like the middle of winter even though it was spring. Inside was warm and cozy.

She was going to resist him but he was prepared for that and had made provisions. He was tired of trying to get through to her. This time he was taking matters into his own hands.

She wasn't leaving until he got through to her and that's that. Hunkering down, he gave the wood chips several

pokes, sending flames and sparks shooting upwards. Rising, he turned in a tight circle to look at the room. The thickest blanket he'd ever seen was spread over the soft faded green and white sofa.

Caleb had assured him that they'd stop for breakfast. He'd stopped on his way here to stock up on fresh fruit and loaves of Italian bread. He also brought biscuits and a box of tea. He wasn't sure what brand she liked, but figured he couldn't go wrong with chamomile. He'd also bought honey to go along with it.

Dusting his hands off, he went up the worn stairs to change into jogging clothes. Standing around waiting for her was going to drive him crazy. He had to do something.

"Breakfast. We're a few miles away." He handed her the egg sandwich.

“How long was I out?” She yawned and stretched, taking the sandwich from him.

“Around two and a half hours.”

“We’re not on the main road.” She took a look through her window at the pretty stores and quaint buildings.

“We’re in Nowhereville.” He told her as he bit into his burrito.

“It’s nice.”

“Hmm.” He was busy guzzling coffee and working out in his head what he’d tell her when they got there.

“You said you wanted to write?”

“Yeah.” He hated that he was lying to her but it was for her own good. Or so he hoped. “Inspiration and all that.” He finished his burrito, took a swig of his coffee and started the engine.

Dawn was just breaking over the horizon and the place was washed with several lovely colors. The place was indeed quaint and he was considering staying in one of the little inns and do some work. Killing two birds with one stone.

He was grateful she'd gone back to sleep during the last leg of the journey. She only opened her eyes and stretched when he turned onto the narrow dirt road that led to the simple log cabin.

The only light was from what appeared to be a blazing fire going on in the hearth that could be seen through the dark blue curtains hanging from large bay windows.

Opening his door, he took her case out and placed it on a patch of grass before coming around to help her out.

“I love you. You know that, right?” He asked, placing his hands on her shoulders.

“Of course.” She stared at him with a frown. “What is it?”

“Just want you to remember that.” He turned her just as the man stepped out of the doorway and came towards them.

“What- “

“If you hurt her, I’m going to hire someone to kill you.” Caleb told Kenji grimly.

“Caleb- “

“I have to go. You’ll be fine.” Kissing her on the forehead he jumped back into the vehicle and backed out.

“I’ll get the case.”

“What’s going on?” She refused to move, even though the icy wind was cutting through her clothing.

“I want to talk.”

“I’m not going in there with you.”

Picking up the case, he started to take her hand when she jerked away from him. “I know you want to murder me, but I recommend you do so in the warmth of the cabin.”

She didn’t move, her arms folded at her waist as she glared at him.

“There are bears and coyotes.” He grinned as her eyes darted around. “Just saying.” He started off and was relieved when she followed him.

Chapter 14

“If you want to freshen up, there’s a powder room off the kitchen.” He told her as he got ready to take her case up. “I know you had breakfast but I have soup if you’re interested.”

She didn’t answer but stood in the middle of the living room and stared in front of her.

“I’ll take this up and be right back. In case you’re thinking of trying to find my keys and taking the car, I have the fob right here.” He held it up for her to see. When she only stared and didn’t answer, he sighed and left the room.

Chantelle was so furious at the manipulation she was vibrating from it. Caleb of all people had betrayed her! He was definitely off the best friend list. She couldn’t resist the mesmerizing blaze of the fire and wandered over to sit on the rocker that had been placed in front of it.

She wasn't going to accommodate him and if he expected her to have sex with him, he was in for a big disappointment. He came back in and she couldn't help her heart flutter as she watched him walked lithely into the room.

The man had a cat-like grace that was unmistakable. He was wearing a green turtle neck sweater over faded denims that fitted his long legs perfectly. His black hair was tousled and he looked fit and dangerous.

"You're upset."

"What gave it away?" She asked caustically.

"I had to do something."

“That something was to get me here under false pretenses?”

He shrugged and pulling up an ottoman sat in front of her. “Desperate measures.” His eyes glinted in amusement.

“How did you get Caleb to lie for you?”

“I told him I have your happiness in mind and I do. I want forgiveness and a chance.”

“We can’t all get what we want.”

“What’s it going to take?”

“Nothing. I don’t like you.”

“So you keep saying but we know otherwise, don't we?”

“You think you can charm your way back into my life after what you did?”

“I'm hoping to convince you I'm here to stay.”

“I don't believe you.”

He reached for her hand, gripping it when she started to pull away. “We have two days.”

“I don't want to be here.”

“Or we have two weeks. You choose.”

She blinked at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, darling, that we’re not leaving until I get you to listen to me.”

“You can’t just keep me here. I have work.”

“Kane will understand.” He told her carelessly.

Her eyes blazed. “Is that your approach? You don’t know the meaning of commitment as you’ve proven so clearly before. I happen to value what I do. I don’t have an unlimited supply of resources to my name. I wasn’t born with a gold spoon in my mouth- “

“I think it’s silver.”

“What?”

“You said gold spoon. I do believe it is silver.” He said solemnly.

She stared at him and could feel the smoke coming out of her ears. “I hate you.” Dragging her hand away from his she pushed to her feet and went over to grab her jacket.

“Where are you going?”

“There must be a neighbor somewhere, I can make a call.”

“No cell service for miles and the nearest neighbor is three miles away. Approximately. On top of that, it is cold as ice out there.” He’d risen and stood there watching as she paced the area.

“Hungry?”

“Go to hell.” She blazed at him.

“That’s a no, then. I have hot chocolate in the kitchen with cinnamon and whipped cream. A specialty of mine.”

He waited a beat for her to respond, and when she didn’t, he turned and walked out of the room, leaving her fuming. She was hungry and the egg sandwich she’d eaten earlier felt like a lifetime ago.

Ever since she’d been discharged from the hospital her appetite had increased. Now she could feel her belly rumbling. Placing a hand over her slight bulge, she felt her expression softening.

“Your daddy is an ass, but that doesn’t mean I should take it out on you.” Taking a deep breath, she made her way along the narrow passageway into the very old-fashioned kitchen to see him seated around the roughly hewn dining table, sipping hot chocolate.

“I can get it for you.”

“I can get it for myself.” She went around to an open cupboard and took out a mug. To his amusement, she chose to sit at the shiny black and white counter, which was the only modern addition to the otherwise old-fashioned décor.

“How is it?” He asked after she’d taken a few sips.

“Drinkable.” She said briefly, even though the taste of it had her closing her eyes.

“Ah, you wound me, darling.” He was laughing at her.

“Do you own this place?”

“No.” He cradled the cup between his palms. “Jackson and Jason Colby own it”

“Do they know you’re trespassing?”

“They do and, if that’s the case, then I’m not trespassing. I needed somewhere I can be alone with you.”

“To have sex.”

“To talk and then make love.” His eyes smoldered as he continued to stare at her. “That will be much later unless you want us to go and spend the rest of the afternoon in bed.”

“No.”

He shrugged, the smile tugging at his lips. “Sure?”

“Positive.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Then the alternative is to get you in bed.”

“Is that your grand plan?” Her dark brown eyes sizzled at him. “Keep me in bed until I start to like you?”

His eyes smoldered as It ran over her face and touched on her bosom. “Believe me when I tell you that when I

get you there, you'll change your mind about me.”

Her breathing was constricted and the heat she was feeling wasn't only from the fire in the small fireplace. “Is sex the only thing you can think of?”

“At the moment, yes.” He finished the drink and rose gracefully. Chantelle forced herself not to jump to her feet. “Finished?” He asked her softly as he came to stand next to her.

“No. Just leave me alone.”

“Not going to happen, darling.” He cupped her face, spinning her around so that he was between her thighs. “That was the problem in the first place. I couldn't stay away from you.” One hand dropped to her slight bulge.

His eyes flew to hers when he felt the faint stirring. “That's our baby.” He whispered huskily. He was so

overwhelmed he couldn't stand it. "You tried to keep this – this miracle from me?"

"You did it all by yourself."

"I want to be involved. In every aspect. I want to be there for everything good or bad and I'm not going to let you keep me away. Is that clear?"

"You don't get to—"

"You talk too much." Lifting her chin, he bent his head and brushed her lips with his. "I've changed my mind."

"About what?"

"Talking. I need to feel you."

“No. I- “

“No more talking, darling.” He solved the problem by lifting her effortlessly into his arms. “I have something planned for you- for us.”

He bounded up the stairs, holding her tight against him. Easing the door open with one shoulder, he stepped into the cozy bedroom with the queen-sized bed, the dresser and the tiny closet. There was a fireplace there as well, with the flames simmering.

“Hungry?”

“No.” He stood her next to the bed, hands framing her face.

“I want you full with food before I fill you with me. One last chance.”

“I’m not-“ She closed her eyes briefly. “Look, this is- Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” He was drawing closer to her, his heat swamping her.

“Like that. Like you-“ She shook her head.

“Like I want to devour you?” His hands slipped to her neck where he removed the elastic band from her hair. “Like I want to swallow you whole? That’s because I do.” His hands drifted to her shoulders and down her arms. Lifting the hem of her sweater, he pulled it over her head and dropped it to the floor.

“They’re bigger.” He unclasped the front of her bra and shoved the shoulders off. “I like it.”

“You would.”

“Yes.” He laughed hoarsely. “I have plans for us.” He unhooked her jeans, easing it down. Pushing her back on the bed, he bent to take off her boots before taking off her jeans. He’d told her he had plans for them but first he was going to work on her.

They had all day and he was going to keep her in bed. Getting up only to get some food inside them.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Stepping back, he took off his clothes leaving his underwear on as he went to retrieve the special oil he’d brought with him. The first time he’d been with her it’d been hurried and impulsive. Today it was going to be different.

“I want to give you a massage.” Uncapping the bottle he sniffed the fragrance feeling the headiness getting to

him. Pouring some into his palm, he rubbed his hands together and moved until he was crouched over her.

“I want you to want me the way I want you.” His cock was already bulging but he couldn’t concentrate on that now. This was all about her.

She felt a jolt when he started at her neck, the oil heating her skin and seeping through her pores. He pressed his fingers against the pulse beating madly at her throat before going down to rub her arms.

Taking her hands in his, he put them together as he kissed her knuckles. “I’m going to show you so much pleasure you’re going to feel as if you have been transported to another world.”

“Quite confident of yourself, aren’t you?” She was already breathing too fast, her body moving restlessly.

“Something like that.” Letting go of her hand he reached for the oil and poured some over her breasts. The heat

had her jumping slightly. Her eyes widened as he started to rub the oil into her skin. Her nipples peaked and blossomed when he circled his finger around the buds, his eyes watching her reaction.

He massaged her flesh, slowly rubbing so that the oil was soaking into her skin. It was a special oil guaranteed to enhance the sexual experience and he could see it was working. Her skin was jittering, her heart rapping against her skin like a trapped bird.

“No.” Her fingers were clenched at her sides, fingers bunching the sheets.

“Sure?” His hands made their way down her stomach where he lingered at the slight bump. He paid special attention rubbing and circling her navel. The fluttering of her stomach was driving him wild.

“My sweet.” Sliding down, he ventured further down, pressing a palm over her pussy. Still staring at her, he circled her clitoris and watched as her breath hissed out and her body arched.

“That’s-“ She bit her lip and swallowed the cry.

“Tell me.” He stroked the flesh slowly, his gaze holding hers.

“I can’t-“ One leg lifted restlessly, giving him more access to her. “Please.”

“Tell me, darling.”

“Kenji-“

The sound of her name in that sultry voice of her was enough to light the fuse already burning inside him. “Sweetheart.” He dipped a finger into her and felt the shudder as Chantelle screamed.

“How does it feel?”

“I can’t breathe-“ Her fingers were drawing the sheets up. “I can’t do this.”

“Take more.” He said roughly, sliding deeper inside her. Her eyes wheeled over and her body arched uncontrollably. The climax came immediately, ripping through her like a tumultuous tidal wave. She was swept away on the torrent and her body was wracked with pleasure.

He went wild watching her. The passion had stripped her of her inhibitions and justifiable anger. He waited until she’d finished climaxing before he eased his finger out. He was so aroused he could barely coat his cock with the oil. His body was sheened with sweat, his muscles rippling as he fought for control.

Lowering his body, he guided himself into her. She screamed again as the moisture blended with the oil and created such heat that she was vibrating again.

“I’m dying.” Her fingers dug into his skin scraping him. He didn’t feel the pain, he only felt the incredible pull of her pussy clamping around his cock. Bowing his head to hers, he breathed through his teeth.

“I need a minute. Darling, please-“ He gasped as she stirred frantically beneath him. Taking her lips, he kissed her with a lust that had her swooning. Then she came again. The tears spilled down her cheeks as she clung to him, her body heaving.

He didn’t last long after that. Dragging his lips from hers, he sank his teeth into the side of her neck which brought another tortured cry from her. He exploded inside her, his long, lean body shuddering as he nuzzled her neck.

As soon as he could, he rolled off her, sitting on the side of the bed. Propping his elbows on his thighs, he

combed his fingers through his hair as he fought to get back in control of himself.

Rising unsteadily, he went to the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind him. Reaching for the sheets, Chantelle pulled them over her and turned onto her side. She was still trembling, her body soaked with sweat and her cheeks moist with tears.

The left side of her neck was throbbing from the bite and she didn't know how to act. He'd destroyed her.

She jumped slightly when he came back into the room. He was wearing a towel tied loosely around his trim waist. The glow from the flames enhanced his tanned skin and highlighted the dragon tattoo on his biceps.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he turned her head to the side, clamping down on the hiss of anger as he noticed the big red rash he'd caused. "This is going to sting." He told her roughly. "I don't want it getting infected."

She sucked in a breath as he rubbed antiseptic cream on the wound. Capping the bottle, he rose. "You must be hungry." With that, he left the room and closed the door behind him.

She'd suspected she was still in love with him and this cemented it. Biting down on her lip, she eased the sheets away from her sensitive nipples. Her body was still trembling from the aftermath of something she had no words for.

When she heard the door being pushed open, she pulled the sheets back up and watched as he came into the room bearing a tray with a large bowl and a plate with slices of bread. Placing the tray over her he adjusted the pillows and helped her up. "I'm going for a run."

"What? You're just leaving?"

"You need to eat." There was a detached expression on his face that struck dread inside her heart. "I'll be back."

A frown crossed her brow as he went to the closet to drag out sweatpants and a sweater. He didn't even bother with underwear. Giving her one last look, he hurried out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Was he having regrets? Putting the spoon away, she stared at the space before her. Was this going to be like the first time? She'd be damned if he was going to toss her aside like he did before. He went to all the trouble to get her here; she wasn't going to allow him to do this to her again.

He'd forgotten to put on the jacket and the wind had picked up speed. The cold didn't bother him much and his skin was still sweaty and hot. The thoughts and emotions were still racing through him.

He chose the beaten path that led away from the cabin and into the dense darkness of the woods. It was early

afternoon, but a thin layer of darkness had descended. It looked like it was going to rain he hadn't bothered to look at the forecast.

His legs pumped; his heart started to race as he increased the pace. He was out of his depth and felt like running away again. He'd planned on turning her into a mass of emotion, but the joke was completely on him.

Stopping at the stream he hunkered down to dip his fingers into the icy cold water. He relished the jolt to his senses. He was in love with her, not just love, he acknowledged grimly. What he felt couldn't be summoned up with just that one word and it scared him.

He knew she was wondering if history was about to repeat itself where he was concerned. He couldn't leave her if someone held him at gunpoint. Was this what his cousin feels all the time?

He'd often been amused at how a strong and powerful man like Kane could turn into putty when his wife was

around. He'd also been slightly cynical never thinking for one minute that could happen to him.

Now it had and he had no idea what to do or how to act. His entire family had been taken away from him and he'd vowed never to love enough to be hurt like that. Now, this was even worse. He was going to keep her safe. There was no way he'd allow her to be hurt. He couldn't lose her. He wouldn't survive losing her and their baby.

Rising, he finally felt the cold break through the thinness of his sweater. He was going back to tell her he wanted to make plans for the rest of their lives. She was no longer going to be allowed to work. She didn't need the money. He'd allow her to stay at the restaurant until Kane found a suitable replacement.

He wanted them to get married as soon as possible. He wanted her tied to him legally and bound together irrevocably. He took a breath. Marriage - a big step, but nothing less would do where she was concerned. He wanted her to belong to him in every possible way.

With that in mind, he turned and retraced his steps. The sooner she knew the deal, the better.

Where the hell was he? Chantelle had surprised herself and eaten everything in the bowl. Now she was full and pissed off. He'd been gone for almost an hour and it looked like it was going to rain. Where was he?

She paced to the window to look out at the gathering dark clouds and started worrying. What if something happened to him? What if he was mauled by a bear or had fallen into a ditch? It'd serve him right for leaving her alone like this.

How dare he plan with her best friend to get her here and now he's gone! Well, she wasn't going to stand for it, she decided. He'd brought the case Caleb had packed up. Thoughts of how he'd deceived her had her sizzling with anger. She'd deal with him later.

She'd just lifted the case on the bed and opened it when she heard the front door slam shut. She turned towards the door as he bounded up the stairs. They were going to have it out once and for all.

Chapter 15

He was breathing hard, his sweater clinging to his body from sweat and the fine drizzle that had just started. His intense dark eyes unnerved her and she could feel the tremors starting in her belly. They'd shared something potent earlier something she was finding a difficult time getting a grip on.

As she opened her mouth to speak, he held up a hand. "I want to go first." His deep voice was quiet and there was a sober expression on his handsome face. "I'm in love with you, irrevocably, head over heels, in love with you."

He stood where he was hands shoved into his pockets as he continued to stare at her moodily. "I never expected this and I'm scared to my bones.

What we shared-" His eyes veered to the tangled sheets and he imagined he could still smell the sex and sweat inside the small room. "It's-" He swallowed the lump inside his throat. "I want you to marry me, now. I want you tied to me for the rest of our lives and I'm going to

inform Kane he has to look for someone else. You will stop working-“

“Whoa!” She held up a hand and had to sit on the edge of the bed as her knees buckling.

“That’s a lot of information to process and—“ Her eyes blazed at him. “You haven’t asked if I want to marry you. Another thing, you sure as hell don’t get to run my life.”

He walked into the room and stood in front of her. “Do you love me?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“That is the point. Do you love me?” He persisted.

“Yes. But-“

“Do you want to marry me?”

“I don’t know. It depends.”

“On?”

“It depends on how much you think you’re going to control my life. I’m not giving up my job.”

“I can make you.”

She got to her feet slowly and fisted her hands on her hips. “Try it.”

They stood there glaring at each other. He was the one to back down. “Look, you don’t have to work- “

“I don’t have to work now. I do it because it gives me a sense of satisfaction and independence.”

“I won’t have you working the long hours you’ve been putting in. I’m firm on that.”

“I’ll cut down my hours.”

“Two days a week.”

“Four days.” Their gaze clashed again.

“Three days-“ He held up a hand as she opened her mouth. He finally touched her, cupping her face between his hands. “I love you.” He told her hoarsely. “So much I find it difficult to explain to you just how much.

You and this baby are my family and I’m fierce about protecting my own. I lost my parents and uncle to violence and I thought that was the ultimate in pain when it happened. I wouldn’t be able to come back if I lost you. Is that clear?”

From the very beginning, their encounter had been fraught with explosive emotions. They’d taken an instant dislike to each other which had been a symptom for the attraction between them. When he touched her it turned into something much more for her. Her hands reached up to close around his wrists.

“It’s too much.” She whispered.

“You’re telling me.” A smile crossed his lips. “You thought I was planning on taking off again?”

“The thought crossed my mind. I was coming to find you.”

“Were you?” His eyes went to the bruise at her neck. “I was violent and out of control.”

“So was I.” She stepped closer to him.

“I’m wet.”

“Then you should get out those clothes.”

“If I do that, we’re going to start all over again.”

“I want us to. What was in that oil?”

He helped her take his sweater off. “Something I picked up in Tibet.”

He dropped the sweater on the floor and worked his way out of his jeans after kicking off his boots. Her hands wandered over his muscled chest. He winced at she stroked the marks she’d given him.

“We should put something on that.”

“Not now.” He removed her robe and eased her back on the bed before climbing in next to her. “I had to reason out what I was feeling.” He brushed back her hair. “You didn’t accept my proposal.”

“Was that a proposal?” Her tapered brows lifted. “You came in here and started making demands over my life.”

“Your life belongs to me now and mine belongs to you.”
He kissed her cheek, and moved down to the sides of her lips. “What you do is going to affect me and vice versa.”

“I want to work.”

“For my cousin.”

“Does it matter?” She whispered, fingers brushing over his face. She marveled she was able to touch him like this. First, he’d gotten under her skin with his arrogance and then he’d stormed into her life awaking her to a passion that she never dreamed existed.

“I could buy you several restaurants.” He was nibbling at her bottom lip and sending a fireball in the pit of her stomach.

She laughed shakily, her fingers digging into his hair.

“No.”

“Or anything else you want.” He climbed on top of her. “I hate the idea of you working.”

“I love what I do.” Her hands went around his neck. “My pregnancy is going great now and I promise I’ll take it easy.”

“Marry me. We could have a private ceremony at the restaurant with just a few people. Then we go somewhere for our honeymoon. Where would you like to go?”

“I can’t think-“ He was tracing her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. His erection was sliding between her thighs and making her wet again.

“Marry me.”

“Yes.” She gasped, fingers digging into his shoulders.

“Next week.”

“It’s - that’s not possible-“ Her back arched as he reached between them and guided himself into her.

“Anything’s possible. We could hire a wedding planner. I need you.” He grunted and bowed his back as her pussy wrapped around him like a glove. “Desperately. I need you to need me too.”

“I do.”

“Good.” He drew in a breath, bending his head to kiss her.

For the next few hours, they were lost in a passion that threatened to overwhelm them.

“Food.” She was curled into his arms, his arms wrapped possessively around her body. “I think we’ve worn each other out and you must be starving. It’s dark out.”

“That’s because it’s raining.” She didn’t want to move. She was buzzing and so sexually satisfied she feared she would go into a coma. “Stay.” She had one foot trapped between his legs and her head resting on his chest. He was doing something to her back that was heightening her senses.

“Sweetheart, you must be starving.” He protested. It felt strange. He wasn’t accustomed to cuddling or making love to a woman. “You’re eating for two.”

“The soup you gave me earlier was enough.” She lifted her head to look at him. “You must be starving.”

“Somewhat.” He smiled at her. “I had other things on my mind.”

“I could whip us something up.”

“No.” He told her firmly. “Everything’s already prepared, I just have to pop it into the microwave and heat it up. More soup?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It seems like that’s all I have been eating since I’ve been pregnant. What else is there?”

“Vegetable lasagna and a container of beef stew.”

“The lasagna.” She told him.

“Shall we go on down?”

“Yes. Tell me again.” She whispered.

“What do you want to hear?”

“That you love me. I still can’t believe it.”

“Believe this.” Bringing her face to his, he kissed her with such tenderness he had her drowning. His lips moved over hers with such slow thoroughness she felt the heat spreading throughout her body and warming her heart.

Ending the kiss, he stared at her with fire shooting from his dark eyes. "I adore you." He told her thickly. "You are the beginning and end of everything for me. I'll love you until the day I die." He kissed the tears away and held her tight against him as she sobbed happily.

They spent time downstairs in front of the fire. He made sure she ate everything on her plate. A blanket was spread on the hardwood floor with cushions stacked up so she could elevate her head.

"No nausea?"

She was enjoying the attention. Right now, he was massaging the soles of her feet. "Minimal and nothing since I arrived." The rain was making pitter-patter sounds on the window pane and it felt wonderful being here with him like this. He was working his way up to her calves.

“Any regrets coming here?”

“None. I’m going to have to reconsider kicking Caleb’s butt. How did you get him to agree to this?”

“I threatened him with bodily harm.” He shot her an amused look.

“No doubt. He’s not so bad himself, but not up to your standard. No, seriously, what did you say to him? It had to be something epic for him to agree to it.”

“I told him the truth.” His eyes met hers. “I told him I’m in love with you and I’m pretty sure you feel the same way. I further pressed the point that I need to make up for running away in the first place and I’m going to be spending the rest of my life with you.”

She gazed at him. “Apparently it worked. You could have said that to me in the first place.”

“I tried talking to you and got a face full of cold water.” He reminded her dryly as he capped the bottle.

“You were so arrogant and mean that I wanted to deck you.”

“Deck me?”

“I know I’m not up to taking you on but I wanted to try.” She shook her head, silky dark brown hair spilling over her left shoulder. He’d insisted on them taking off their clothing after they were finished eating.

“You made me so angry I couldn’t stand it.” He admitted ruefully. Scooting forward, he joined her, pulling her against him. He kissed the top of her head. “I’m guessing it had something to do with the fact that you kept ignoring me as if I was invisible.”

“You were a pain in the ass.” She turned to look at him.
“The first time we met you dismissed me as just an employee.”

“You came inside the office, just glided in and completely ignored me. I was admiring you in that black and white pantsuit and you didn’t even look at me. My ego was hurt.”

“I noticed you.” She admitted, toying with the tattoo on his arm. “I was caught up by how handsome you were and I felt like an idiot because I knew who you were. I wanted to make a good impression.” He shuddered slightly when she bent to kiss the bruises she had put there.

She lifted her head to look at him. “I knew there was no way a man like you would ever be interested in me. I’d seen you on the internet with those actresses-“ Her voice tailed off as the memories came back. “I don’t want you to look back and wish you were with one of them. I couldn’t bear it.”

He gripped her chin between his fingers. "I told you I loved you. You've seen that I can't keep my hands off you. I've never been in love before." His expression gentled. "You have nothing to be afraid of. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?" She whispered.

"On my life." He said solemnly.

"I'm going to hold you to it."

"No problem." Hauling her on top of him, he slipped smoothly into her. "Was that all?"

"For now." She murmured as she allowed the sensation to wash over her.

He made the calls Monday night while they were on their way home. "I'm not letting you out of my sight." He warned.

"What about my house? It's big enough for all three of us."

He'd stared at her in contemplation. "You don't want to sell?"

"Not right now."

"We'll decide at a later date what we're going to do. How do you feel about getting married in two weeks?"

“Kenji, there’s no way I can get everything in place in that amount of time.” She protested.

“I’ll hire a wedding planner. All you have to do is show up.”

“You know I’m going to want to get involved.”

“I don’t want you rushed off your feet.” He told her firmly. “Pick out your dress and decide on the kind of cake you prefer and that’s it.”

“Do I have to look forward to you trying to run my life?” She asked.

“Absolutely.” Hauling her up against him he kissed her into submission.

Now, he was back to running things from his phone. As soon as they left the cabin and had gone a few miles, he'd started making calls and his first one was to Caleb. "Just want to say thanks for the favor."

He listened for a minute, turning to look at her curled up in the passenger seat. "It went rather well. Hear for yourself." He pushed the speaker.

"You're lucky it worked out so well." She told him. "It went well enough to ask you to be my attendant for the wedding. Jason will want to give me away, but I want you next to me."

"So in fact, you owe me a favor. I'm happy for you, darling."

"Thanks. We're on our way back now. The wedding is in two weeks?"

“What’s the hurry? Are you knocked up?” His laughter came. “Oh right. Yes, you are.”

“Bite me.”

“I’ll see you when I get back.”

“He loves you.” Kenji murmured, fighting the sliver of jealousy he felt.

Chantelle interpreted it and the look he gave her. “He’s like a brother to me and I love him. We’ve been there for each other for many years.”

“I’m an ass.”

“No.” She reached over and took his hand, linking their fingers. “I understand.”

“Do you?” He asked grimly. “This is new to me and it makes me feel like a fool.”

“I love you so much, Kenji.”

That turned him into a complete puddle. “I love you more.” He told her thickly.

She felt as if she was caught up in a whirlwind. As soon as she said yes to him and they returned home, things started happening. He insisted on meeting her brother Jason and his wife. The shock on their faces couldn't be concealed.

“Is he for real?” Jason asked her as soon as they had some privacy. “This guy is very powerful and wealthy. He

left you before—”

“That won’t happen again.” She assured him. “He’s in love with me.” She added with a smile. “And I’m in love with him. I know who he is, Jason, I know the circumstances of his life and am prepared to accept it. I know it’s huge, but I love him.”

“You couldn’t wait a while for the wedding?”

“He wants to get married as soon as possible and I don’t believe we should wait. I’m just asking you to give me away.”

“I thought that honor belonged to Caleb.” He said dryly. The two men had a long-standing rivalry for her affection and place in her life and nothing she’d tried to do to previously had helped.

“He’s my man of honor.” She touched his arm lightly. “You’re my brother so you get to give me away.”

“In that case, I accept. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

Then she met Kane and Kelly.

“Kenji warned us that you’re not to lift a finger.” Kane said in amusement. “When my cousin decides on something, it’s a done deal. We’ll deal with the planning and getting things together.” He paused briefly. “There’s also the subject of your position here.”

“I’m not giving up my job and I told him that.”

Kane nodded. “You’ll be cutting back though and I agree with that. You’re going to be Kenji’s wife, which means you’ll be family. On top of that, you’re pregnant and the pregnancy took a lot out of you.”

“I’ll agree to do four days a week and nothing less.” She told him stubbornly. “Kenji and I argued about it and I’m standing by my decision.”

“He told me that too.” A smile touched his lips. “My dear, you’re going to be the wife of a very wealthy man, you don’t need the money.”

“I never needed it before and Kelly is the wife of a very wealthy man and she works.”

“Point taken.” He nodded, smile widening. “Welcome to the family. I couldn’t have chosen better for my cousin.”

“I told him if he hurts you, he’s going to answer to me.” Caleb rubbed her arms absently. “I see how happy you are you’re practically glowing.”

“I am happy and I have to thank you for tricking me like that.”

He winced. “That was the most difficult thing I’ve ever done. So, you guys will be living here?”

“Until we decide we want something else. It’s a big house and the neighborhood is nice and peaceful.”

“Where’s Loverboy now?”

“Making arrangements. he doesn’t want me to do anything.” Taking his hand, she led him over to the sofa. “He’s going to be moving his stuff in here and leaving some in his loft.”

“How does it feel?”

“How does what feel?”

“To be marrying a man with so much money?”

“I try not to think about it. You know I don’t care about that sort of thing.” She clasped her hands together. “It’s overwhelming. I never thought something like this would happen to me. It scares me.”

“I’ve seen the way he behaves around you and I swear sparks fly go off when you’re together. He isn’t pretending.”

“No.” She shook her head. “He isn’t easy to live with.”

“In what way?”

“This is new for him, it’s new for me too, but it embarrasses him-” She frowned a little. “Perhaps that’s not the right word. I think he’s uncomfortable at the

intensity of what he feels. He's also scared. You know what happened to his family and he's afraid of losing me."

Caleb nodded. "It sucks."

They both looked up at the sound of the front doors opening.

"That's him."

"Is he going to freak because I'm sitting next to you?"

"He knows how I feel about you."

"Our relationship has been rocky at best. I don't want to cause any trouble."

"You are my best friend-

“He should be, darling. I’m willing to be relegated to second place.”

Kenji stopped just inside the doorway and felt the familiar frisson of jealousy at the sight of the man with his hand clasped in that of his fiancée. Making an effort, he strolled into the room and gave them both a smile. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Not at all.” Caleb leaned over to give her a kiss on the lips before rising. “I was just leaving. I’ll see you tomorrow. As the man of honor, it’s my duty to bring the strippers.” With a careless grin, he left the room.

Kenji took the space he’d left willing the jealousy to go away.

“You’re upset.”

Apparently, he hadn’t worked at it hard enough.

“Just-” He blew out a breath. “He touches you whenever he feels like. I hate the fact that he kisses you.” He closed his eyes briefly. “I sound like a besotted fool.”

Taking his hand in hers she placed it where her heart was beating unsteadily. “I belong to you completely and I’d like you to finally get that.”

His fingers spread over her sweater where the warmth of her skin was spreading to his. “I adore you.” He told her thickly. “I’m asking you to bear with me.”

“I will.” Letting go of his hand, she climbed into his lap. “Now that we’re alone-”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Take a wild guess.”

Chapter 16

The weather co-operated and the afternoon was lovely with clear blue sky and the showers from the day before giving off a fresh aroma from the flowers blooming in the various gardens. The arbor had been decorated and the restaurant had been closed for the ceremony.

The couple were now living together and trying to get used to the adjustment. He was territorial something she was trying to live with. He was accustomed to people picking up after him. She usually had someone coming in once a week, but now they were together, it was going to have to be different.

He had an excellent housekeeper; a no-nonsense woman who'd immediately taken charge of the kitchen. Chantelle insisted on having her lady come in once a week because she didn't want her missing out on the money she needed.

“She doesn’t like me.” She told Kenji that first night after Mrs. Hamilton had been there.

“You’re imagining things. She’s very loyal and doesn’t miss a trick. She also keeps her opinions to herself.”

“She likes you and thinks I’m usurping her role. You should have consulted me-“

“She’s been with my family for years. I inherited her.”

“That’s the problem. She thinks you deserve better.”

“I have better.” He gave her a quizzical glance. “You got all of that from one meeting with her?”

“I’m very perceptive.” She pointed out.

“Can you perceive this?” He’d asked her softly, pulling her into his arms. “How much I want you?”

“Kenji- “

“Shh. I’m busy.”

Then there was the time at the restaurant when one of the customers was hitting on her. He’d stepped over and given the man a look that had him backing off.

“I was handling the situation.” She’d blazed at him later in her office.

“Not quick enough. The asshole was touching your ass.”

“I was handling it. I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t like men touching what’s mine.”

“I’m not some kind of property.”

“You’re mine.” He gritted, dark eyes flashing.

She’d backed down after realizing that this was definitely new for him.

“Do you believe that I love you completely?” She asked him quietly.

“That has nothing to do with-“

“Please answer the question.”

“I do.”

“Then I want you to trust me to take care of myself. You don’t have to stay here and watch over me. I don’t appreciate it.” She’d gone over and into his arms. “I love you, Kenji, and this is new for me too. We’re still trying to get to know each other and figure this thing out. Stop trying to control me.”

He’d sighed and given in. “I’m a jealous prick, but I won’t let another man put their hands on you.”

“I’ll try and stop that from happening. Caleb touches me-
“

“I make allowances because of the relationship.”

“Big of you.” She teased. “I love you.” That had dissolved the last of her anger.

Now they were standing with nature all around them and the few people they invited to share this special occasion with them. Her dress was a deceptively simple champagne colored silk with a fitted bosom and a wide skirt, the swirl enough to hide her slight bump. Her hair and makeup had been done by someone Kelly had sent over.

The thick strands were brushed back in a sleek style from her face to fall like a waterfall around her shoulders. A jaunty hat matching the dress was perched to one side and her bouquet consisted of the various flowers blooming in the gardens.

A carpet had been laid for her to walk on and chairs dotted the green manicured lawn. Standing under the flower-filled arbor, Kenji, wearing dark blue dress pants and baby blue cotton shirt, felt himself going rigid as he watched her walking towards him.

He barely glanced at the man next to her, his eyes returning to her with a fervor that was frightening. He'd refused to spend the night away from her, so they'd spent it together in that big bed of hers but he hadn't touched her.

"I know this is supposed to be the night I leave you alone. I'm willing to make a compromise. We'll just sleep; I just want to hold you in my arms and that's it." He'd kept his promise, however difficult it had been for him.

"Relax." Kane whispered teasingly.

"Yeah. This is ridiculous, but I keep expecting her to disappear."

"She's right here and soon, she'll be your wife."

The very idea of that was making him so nervous he could barely stand still. The ceremony was short and to the point. He wanted it over and done with, so that he'd have her to himself. Within ten minutes, they had repeated their vows and were husband and wife.

The nausea came suddenly. One minute, she was sat at the table enjoying the sumptuous food and the next, she was gripping Kenji's hand.

"What is it?"

"I'm going to be sick." She whispered urgently. "Now."

Pushing back his chair, he lifted her into his arms and rushed inside where they just made it to the small powder room. He knelt behind her rubbing her shoulders and back as she puked everything she'd eaten since the morning.

His expression was grim, his shoulders tense. He hadn't been here for the first four months and had missed the worse of it. Now that she was having a bad moment, he felt the regret pouring through his body as he waited for her to finish.

"Better?" He asked lightly as she sagged back against him.

"I think I've ruined our wedding."

"The only way you could have done that is if you hadn't turned up." Plopping down, he gathered her into his arms to cradle her.

"We should leave."

"No." She shook her head as she curled up against him.

“I’m not letting this make me miss the rest of the ceremony.” She turned her head to look at him. “We haven’t danced yet.”

He pushed back the tendrils of hairs clinging to her moist skin. “You want to dance?”

“I want to eat some more of that delicious champagne cake.”

“You just hurled everything you ate.”

“Precisely. Now I have to fill up again.”

“To risk doing that again?” He teased.

“My stomach is settled. I think it’s the excitement rather than the curried conch.”

“I never noticed.” His expression became sober. “Should I apologize for putting you through it?”

“No.” She leaned into him. “I’m just going to rinse my mouth out and wash my face. Then we’re going back out there and assuring everyone that the bride is going to live.”

“Let me help.”

He watched her carefully. She insisted on making up for the fact that she’d been ill for a few minutes and when they came back outside to the anxious guests, she was determined to assure them that she was fine.

She danced with most of the men and managed to eat some of the food and three slices of cake. Olivia, her doctor, was there and checked her out thoroughly, letting them know she was fine and her blood pressure was a little high due to the excitement.

He was taking her back to the cabin. He'd thought about taking her to Europe, but he was afraid she wasn't well enough for the trip and he wanted to be alone with her.

"He watches you like a hawk. I wonder what he'd do if I kissed you on the lips?" Caleb asked her teasingly as they moved to the music.

"You've kissed me before." She pointed out. "My husband knows where he stands with me."

"I was thinking of introducing tongues."

Her eyes glimmered with mirth. “Please don’t stir up anything.”

“The guy is very possessive.”

“I love him.”

“I feel a little jealous. I’m used to being the one in your life.”

She stared at him for a moment before looking over his shoulder at Olivia who was in deep conversation with Kelly, Leesa and Monique. “How’s it going with Olivia?”

“it’s going.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, my little nosy darling, that this is your wedding day and it’s none of your business. We’re getting along fine.”

“I hope you don’t talk about me when you’re with her.”

“You’re my best friend, so naturally, your name has come up one or two times.” He grinned at her raised eyebrows.
“Well, maybe more than twice.”

“Caleb-“ She broke off as he kissed her full on the lips.

“Don’t look now, but your groom is about to explode.”

“Caleb.”

“Enjoy your honeymoon, darling. She’s all yours. Take care of her or you answer to me.”

“Kenji-“

“I’m fine. Ready?”

“He was just-“

“Trying to get a rise out of me. I owe him for bringing you to me and for being there when I wasn’t.” He cupped her face between his palms. “I know you love him and he loves you. I also know that I have a part of you that’s for me only.”

“You do.” She whispered and melted in his arms.

“Now, let’s go and say our goodbyes and get out of here.”

He adjusted the seat so she could sleep on the journey. The excitement of spending time with her was so much he could barely stand it. He’d endured the goodbyes and well wishes and the arrangements to get the gifts transported to the house, before it was time for them to leave.

He’d wanted to leave earlier and Kane had suggested taking the helicopter, but he couldn’t risk taking her up in the air. He’d been there when she was throwing up and it sounded as if her stomach lining was being destroyed. He wanted to be on the ground just in case he had to rush her to the hospital.

“I can drive part of the way.” She murmured.

“Not a chance and I thought you were sleeping.”

“I’m awake now.” She rubbed her eyes.

“We are almost there. You slept almost the entire journey. You were no company at all.”

“I’m hungry.”

He chuckled, relieved that she was feeling better. “Ten more minutes.” He slid her a glance. “Think you can wait that long?”

“I’ll try.”

He jumped slightly when she placed a hand on his thigh, the heat going straight to his cock.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” His hands tightened on the wheel as he made the turn off. “It’s just-“ He placed a hand over hers and squeezed. “You trigger something that’s hard to explain.” He let out his breath slowly. “I have to remind myself that you’re pregnant.”

They arrived and as he pulled the car into the narrow dirt road, they sat there staring at the ball of fire from the setting sun. Her hand was clasped in his and they both felt a sense of peace.

“It’s times like these I realize how fortunate and blessed I am.” She slid closer to him and his arm came around her

shoulder. "It's so beautiful."

"It is."

"How long are we staying?"

"A month, maybe."

Turning her head, she gave him a wry look. "You're saying that to get a rise out of me."

"What if I wanted a month for us to be alone together? Where we can spend the time here and get to know each other?"

"You'd go out of your mind with worry. My doctor is miles away."

“I’m sure there are other competent doctors in the town we passed on the way in.”

She scoffed. “Yeah, right. I’m starting to know you now. You checked out Olivia thoroughly.”

“You can’t be too careful.” There was a slight tilt to his lips. “I take care of my own.”

“You go overboard.”

“Perhaps.” He turned her to face him. “Does that bother you?”

Lifting a hand, she placed it on his cheek. “I think it’s cute and I love the fact that you want to take care of me.”

“I want to do some of that right now.” Turning his face, he kissed her palm. “Let’s go in, shall we?”

He kept himself under control. He retrieved their cases from the back seat and led her inside where there was a fire flowing in the hearth. He’d sent word ahead to make sure that the place was clean and there was enough firewood to last for the week. He’d also brought enough food so they wouldn’t have to shop.

“Go on upstairs and make yourself comfortable. I’m going to make some tea.”

“And a slice of that cake.” She called down from the third step.

“Haven’t you had enough?”

“Nope.” She told him with a laugh. Sending him a flirtatious look, she went the rest of the way with him staring after her. With a shake of his head, he turned into the kitchen and put the pot on.

Upstairs, Chantelle prepared for the night. She’d brought with her some sexy lingerie Monique had included in the package that’d been sent to her. She hadn’t included them in the case she’d packed, but had placed them into her huge pocketbook.

Going into the bathroom, she washed her face and brushed her teeth. Next, she took off her clothes and folded them neatly in the space saver. She took up the black transparent lace and studied the design for a second before sliding it over her head.

Going to stand in front of the small mirror, she noticed the sharp contrast to her caramel complexion. She’d gotten rid of her panties and could see her flesh clearly through the lace. With a seductive smile, she turned and

headed out, just as she heard him coming into the bedroom.

He stopped abruptly as she stood there framed inside the doorway. The light from the bathroom was glaring and showed that she was completely naked under the lace. He felt the trembling of his hands and, with deliberate movements, went to place the tray next to the bed.

“What do you think?” She asked him sweetly.

“I think the tea and cake will have to wait. Come here.”

She did and was prepared to be hauled into his arms, instead he held her carefully.

“New?”

“Hmm. Part of the honeymoon package.”

“There’s more?”

“A red one and a nude silk.”

“All of them this revealing?”

“This is the most.” She told him.

“I love it. Too bad it’ll have to go.” He slid the thin straps over her shoulders and the material dropped to her feet. “I didn’t carry you across the threshold.”

“You didn’t.”

“Let’s remedy that, shall we?” He lifted her effortlessly and carried her out of the room and crossed the doorway. Winding her arms around his neck she laughed

softly as he walked back in and placed her on the bed.
“I’ll be quick.”

“There’s no hurry.” She murmured as she watched him removed his clothing.

“Oh, but there is.” He finished undressing and kicked them out of the way. “I brought a treat.” He picked up a small black bottle and she felt the simmer of heat rising like a ball inside her stomach.

“The last time-”

“I behaved like an animal. This time, I’ll try and control the urge.” He climbed on top of her.

“I was going to say the last time I couldn’t control myself. I wanted you to tear me apart.” His face was hard and tense with passion. He uncapped the bottle and poured the oil into his palm. He started at her neck and worked the oil into it slowly.

His cock was already hard, but he concentrated on her fiercely as he smoothed his hands down her neck and her collarbone. A gasp escaped her when he cupped her breasts and started on her nipples.

“Is it my imagination or have they increased in size since two nights ago?”

“Imagination.” She whispered. “They’re more sensitive than ever.”

“Are you saying you want my mouth on them?”

She quivered at that. “Need is a better word.”

“Let’s attend to that, shall we?” He slid down and plucked at the nipple before swirling his tongue around the tight bud. She cried out, fingers digging into his thick dark hair. When he drew the nipple into his mouth and started suckling, she was gone.

The sensations hammered her body relentlessly and had her vibrating. He waited a beat before moving off her and turning her so that her back was against him. "I want to try something different." He was fighting for control and his heart was pounding so hard inside his chest it was drowning out everything else.

Using trembling fingers to coat his cock with the oil, he entered her, sliding in smoothly until he was up to his balls. His arms came around her stomach, his body jerking as he felt the movements of his baby inside her.

"I love you." He whispered thickly, holding onto the last vestige of control. "You are my life. The heart of me."

Turning her head, she sought his mouth just as he started moving. That was all it took. She came again as he slid a hand down to press against her pussy. He swallowed her helpless cries which mingled with his tortured groans.

His cock was on fire, the skin seemingly unable to contain the pressure there. He kissed her savagely his fingers stroking her clitoris until she was afraid she was going to combust.

He couldn't hold back anymore. Gripping her hips, he drove into her, the climax so vicious that he felt as if there were nails tearing at his flesh and taking chunks out. She came again, fingers digging into the arm he'd wrapped around her body.

It took several minutes for the storm and trembling to abate. He was still kissing her, but had gentled the kiss, his hands splayed over her bump.

He turned her to face him, his trembling hands cupping her face. "I'll never get used to how much you mean to me."

"The feeling is mutual." She snuggled against him, absorbing the heat of his body. She was flushed and feverish from the intensely powerful lovemaking and felt wonderful. "Thank you."

“For?” He cocked a brow at her.

“For you.”

His eyes brightened. “You’re welcome, darling.”

Their son, Kija Caleb, was born on a bright and sunny afternoon in August after a grueling eight-hour labor which had his usually stoic father fighting to hide his anxiety. The delivery went smoothly and the seven-and-a-half-pound baby was declared healthy and both were allowed to go home after just one night in the hospital.

“He’s finally out for the count.” Kenji looked up as his wife came into the baby blue nursery. Reaching out a

hand, he drew her into his arms as they stood there looking at the miracle they'd created.

"He has your chin." He murmured, kissing the top of her head. The visitors had come by as soon as she was discharged from the hospital, Caleb being the last to leave.

"He's got everything else from you." She snuggled against him and felt the tears clouding her eyes. "It must be unnatural to be so happy."

"I never thought I'd ever be happy again." His hands tightened around her waist. "Not after such a tumultuous life. My love." He turned her to face him and she smiled as he scooped her up into his arms. "You must be exhausted."

"Not very. But I could eat."

“We’ll take care of that, right after I tell you properly how much I love you.”

“I thought we already covered that.”

“Not enough. Not nearly enough.” He made sure he covered it.

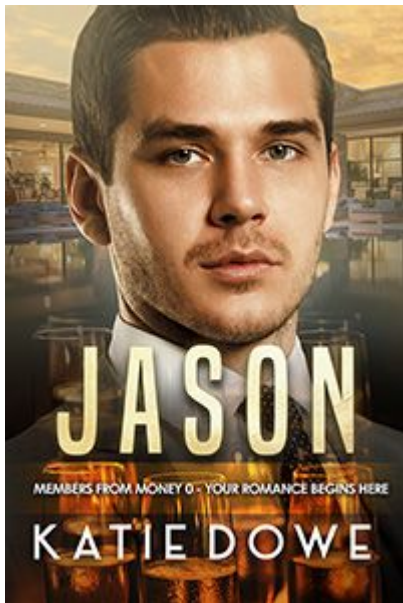
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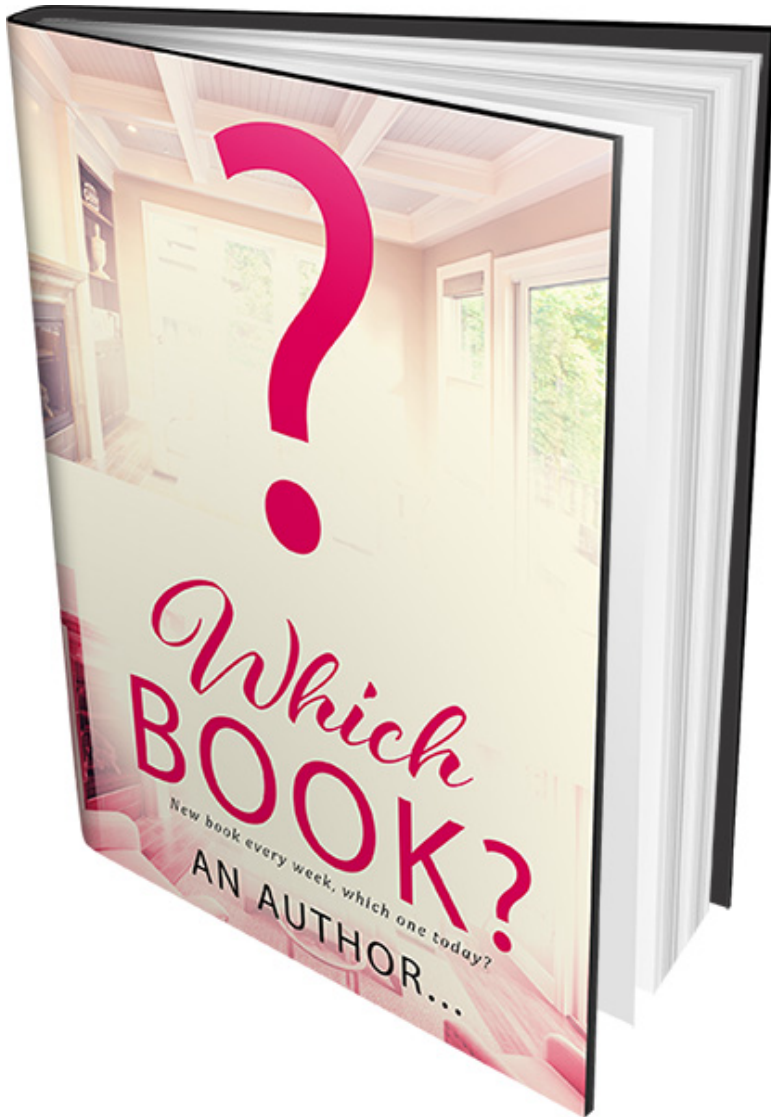


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Also available: [The Love Of His Life](#) by J A Fielding :



Description:

A sexy twins pregnancy romance by J A Fielding of BWWM Club.

When they were younger Alexis Calloway and Zachary Olsen were inseparable.

Yet Zach, the heir to a billion-dollar fortune, broke things off due to family pressure, breaking Alexis's heart!

Now a PR mogul, Alexis finds herself face to face with her past love when he seeks her help, and old feelings begin to rekindle.

Zach is determined to put the past behind him, and in doing so goes behind his family's wishes by getting back together with Alexis.

But they'll soon learn that they can't run away from their past or familial duties for long...

And to complicate things further, Alexis is now pregnant with twins!

Can their love survive the obstacles threatening to tear their relationship apart?

Or will Zach's family find a way to end their relationship for good?

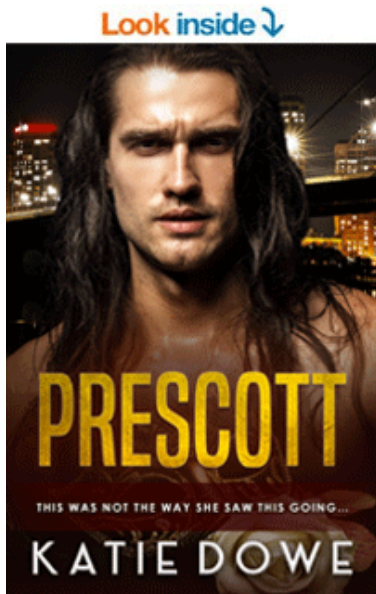
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Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes with a billionaire!

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*

Also available: [Prescott](#) by Katie Dowe:



Description:

A sexy secret identity romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Talia Miller is out for revenge.

The stunningly beautiful African-American woman grew up haunted by the ruthless tale of the Davenport family, who callously acquired her father's company, driving him to the tragic decision of taking his own life...

With her identity concealed, she becomes Prescott Davenport's assistant, fueled by the dual purpose of sabotaging his work and shattering his heart!

But love complicates her plans as she falls for the very man she planned to destroy!

Despite his reputation as a womanizer, Prescott as a rule never dates women he works with...

But with Talia, he had to make an exception, never realizing she had an ulterior motive!

They embark on a passionate romance that exceeds their wildest dreams...

But soon Talia learns that the Davenports are far from what they appear to be!

And neither is Talia!

As the two draw closer together, how will Prescott react when he learns the truth about who she really is?

Will Prescott remain steadfast by her side, or will he leave her in the dust?

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

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Prescott 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: [You Opened My Heart](#) by Alanna Richardson:



Description:

A sexy single parent romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

When lawyer Alicia is summoned to her son's school following a fight with another boy, she prays she'll never encounter the boy's arrogant father, Jeff Cox, again.

However, fate has a different plan in store as he becomes her new boss, forcing them to cross paths daily!

From the moment Jeff lays eyes on the passionate and protective single mother, he becomes determined to make her his own, no matter the obstacles...

And Alicia can't deny the electric chemistry that ignites whenever they're together in the office!

Their intense romance opens their hearts in ways they never anticipated...

Yet, when Alicia's past resurfaces, she begins to question her choices as a mother and the foundation she's built with Jeff...

Leaving Jeff grasping at his chance to be with his one true love!

Will motherhood come before romance?

Or will love find a way to guide Alicia and Jeff towards their happily ever after?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get You Opened My Heart now.](#)

*

Also available: [Kit Coleman](#) by Monica J Charles:



Description:

A sexy cowboy, marriage romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

After a very public breakup with her cheating fiancé, Michelle feels the need to get away from her life for a while.

Her journey takes her on an extended vacation to Texas, where she stays at a guesthouse on a large ranch.

The host – a very attractive and rugged man named Kit Coleman!

Kit has always enjoyed having guests on his property, but when Michelle comes to stay in his guesthouse, it's an experience unlike any other.

Drawn in by her intelligence and humor, he becomes determined to cheer her up in light of her recent relationship issues.

And in the process, he winds up falling in love with her!

But Kit has a secret... he's actually a billionaire member of the Sunrise Society!

How will Michelle react when she finds out he's been hiding this from her?

Will she stay by his side?

Or will the distrust be too much for her to continue their passionate romance?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes with a billionaire!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Kit Coleman now.](#)

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