



MAURICE

SHE'S DETERMINED TO KEEP HIM AT ARM'S
LENGTH, BUT THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS...

KATIEDOWE

Maurice

She's determined to keep him at arm's length, but the heart wants what it wants...

A sexy medical, small-town romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

The quaint, charming town of Mountain Glade was the perfect place for general practitioner Maurice Steadman to start his life over after finally escaping from his soul-sucking father.

Everyone seems happy to have him in town, except for one specific person: pediatrician Mariel James.

After the death of her father, Mariel is still grieving...

And the clinic she and her father ran needs a replacement, and that replacement ends up being Dr. Maurice!

She admits he's handsome, but she remains suspicious of the billionaire's intentions in their small community.

Despite their clashing, Maurice is intrigued by the feisty and beautiful doctor, and little by little Mariel begins to let her guard down.

But neither of them is prepared for the avalanche coming their way!

Amidst town gossip and their own insecurities, can this couple make their relationship work?

Or will Mariel deny what is truly in her heart?

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

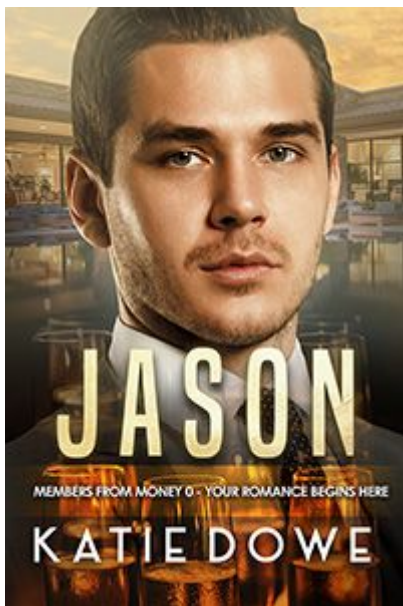
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Chapter 1

Maurice took several sips of the scotch before putting the glass down. Rolling his shoulders, he dragged restless fingers through his thick sable brown hair, his movements restless and jerky.

The surgery had been a dismal failure as he had predicted, but it did not take away from the fact that facing the parents of that teenage boy did not make it any easier.

Standing in front of the family had been the most difficult thing he ever had to do. The mother had broken down completely and dropped to her knees. The father had rushed to her side, sending accusing looks at him, while the rest of the family had formed a protective ring about them.

He admired that. His family had never been so united; the thought had flashed through his mind bitterly as he turned and walked out of the waiting room.

The gunshot had nicked a main artery and nothing he and the others had attempted had worked to stop the bleeding. The boy had bled out on the operating table right in front of them. He had been the one to call it. Now he was at his apartment a few blocks from the hospital, wired and unable to get the sleep his weary body needed.

On top of everything, his father and uncle were at odds again, with his sister caught in the middle. That had cemented his decision to leave. He needed a break - had to go somewhere he was not recognized.

He was Maurice Steadman, son and heir of a pharmaceutical empire, a position he abhorred and wished he could reject. But there was no mistaking who he was or avoiding it. The fact that he did not choose to be part of the company was a constant source of irritation and resentment to his father.

Maximillian Steadman was determined to get him to take his rightful place in the company. But with the steely resolve he had unwittingly inherited from the man

himself, Maurice was steadfast in his determination to make his own way.

He loved saving lives and had not gone to medical school so that he could sit inside a corporate office and play Vice President or whatever the hell other glorified title he would be assuming.

His father had willingly agreed to medical school because as he had put it, it would be an asset to the company. "After medical school, you would be able to fit seamlessly into the management of the company," he had said with satisfaction.

The man had been apoplectic when Maurice had announced to the family that he had been accepted at Hope Memorial to do his residency. "You are a Steadman!" He had roared, wintry gray eyes shooting darts. "Your place is in the company, not at some hospital working for peanuts."

"My mind is made up," he had said firmly. The argument had escalated to the point where his uncle had surprisingly intervened. Maurice had left the manor right

after that and stayed away for weeks. His sister, Marianne, had tried to bring about a truce, without much success.

The tiny, antiquated town of Mountain Glades would do perfectly. He had done the interview with the administrator as well as the board and had been selected.

The question had been asked - why was a person of his caliber willing to settle for a small town like theirs and he had been truthful without going into details. "I need a break from the big city because of personal reasons," he had told them abruptly.

"We want an assurance that you are not going to decide that this is not for you and just up and go."

"You have my word and a binding contract," he had vowed. And he had meant it. He had already told them at the hospital that he was leaving. He had put in his two weeks' notice and would be leaving at the end of June.

A lodging had been provided for him. The only thing he had to do was to pack his personal belongings and be on his way. That only left the part where he was going to have to tell his family of his plans. He knew what to expect and was not looking forward to it.

Marianne was going to be devastated. She was really his half-sister, but he loved her as if she was born to his own beloved mother. The twenty-two-year-old had just finished college and was going to be taking her place at the company.

“Are you certain that this is what you want to do?” He had asked her quietly. She had come by his place to spend the day with him.

“Father and uncle Milton expect me to!”

“It’s your life, Mar. It’s up to you what you want to do with it.”

“And start World War III?” She had asked him with a wry smile. They had both inherited the thick sable brown hair from their dad, but whereas her eyes were the color of sapphires, he had inherited his emerald green eyes from his mother. “You already started it.”

“I don’t want to see you sucked into the family drama,” he had told her grimly.

“You could call a truce and make this family peaceful by agreeing to their terms,” she had pointed out.

“I am my own man and I refuse to be manipulated by them pulling their strings.”

“You are also the heir to the fortune. Uncle Milton cannot produce children....”

“Which makes him as mad as hell.”

“And our father is not about to sire anymore.”

“Much to Glenna’s distress,” he said sardonically. His current stepmother was only thirty-three, making her three years older than he was. The woman had tried to get him into her bed, and he had coldly told her that he was not in the habit of eating his father’s leftovers.

That had turned him into enemy number one as far as she was concerned. He did not doubt that she had repeatedly tried to turn his father against him, but along with the man’s many faults, he was loyal to his children.

She had learned that at an early stage and had stopped trying to come between father and son. They might have their vicious fights, but when it came down to it, they were father and son, and no one was going to come between them.

He had also discovered that the woman was sleeping with his uncle which had made his dislike of her even deeper. She was an opportunist, but she was not his problem. He was bracing himself to face the family and had accepted his father’s invitation to dinner on Sunday.

He hated sitting at the table with that woman and his uncle was not exactly very loving towards him either. He was going to have to psych himself up for the showdown he knew very well was coming.

Maribel stared at the woman in acute dismay.

“I am sorry, my dear, but the decision has been made. Dr. Steadman will be here in the next two weeks. We certainly miss your dear father, but we cannot keep the position open indefinitely.”

“This man is leaving a large thriving hospital in a big city to put down roots here. And you think that he will be staying here? I have read up on the family....”

“We are aware of the facts,” Gertrude Flemings was sympathetic to the young doctor’s plight. She had been

more than colleagues with the girl's dad, and he had been one of the best people she knew, but she and the board had a clinic to run, and they had to put aside sentimentality.

Dr. Maurice Steadman was the ideal candidate and they had made their decision. The doctor was going to bring some added talent to the clinic and that was what was sorely needed. "He has given us his reasons for uprooting, and we have accepted his decision."

"The heir to a fortune is willing to come to our small town and play doctor."

"I would like you to trust us to know what we are doing. Would you like some tea?"

Mariel wanted to lash out at the woman but managed somehow to rein in her temper. It was not her fault that she was still grieving her beloved father, even after six months of his passing.

Going through the small hospital, which was nothing more than a clinic, she could still sense his gentle presence and his amiable temperament. Dr. George Elliot James had been loved by patients and staff alike. And had been a loving dad to her or as long as she could recall.

She had grown up without a mother since she had been taken from her at the very tender age of three years and she could barely remember the woman who had given birth to her.

But her dad had more than made up for the lack of a mother. She had been fascinated by his love for medicine and had followed in his footsteps, something that had pleased him greatly.

He was supposed to grow old and live long enough to see her married and hold his grandchildren on his knees, but now he was gone, and a usurper was taking his place. A man who was not worthy to do so.

“No thank you,” she responded coolly, glancing at her watch, “I have patients to see.”

“Mariel?”

She turned to the door, her hand on the knob. “Yes?”

“We understand that you are grieving, and we cannot imagine what you are going through, but all I am asking is that you give this man a chance.”

“You ask too much,” she told the woman simply, “but I am a professional and this clinic had been the pride and joy of my dad. I will do nothing to change that.”

She closed the door behind her and had to lean on the solid wood while taking several deep breaths to steady herself. She had to compose herself – she had patients to see, and she could not very well afford for them to see her in this disarray. It was Friday and she had a full patient schedule.

Her workload will be much lighter tomorrow. It was summer and the children were off from school. During the summer months, there were different ailments to contend with. She had lost a child from a severe fever last week and was still trying to recover from it. Little Mary-Ann had only been four years old.

“Dr. James?”

“Yes?” She forced a smile on her lips as she looked at the nurse coming towards her.

“Little Johnnie is throwing up in room three.”

“A severe stomach virus.”

“I am afraid so.”

“I will be right there.”

Throwing off her anger and self-pity, she went to see to her patients.

“It’s rather nice of you to grace us with your presence.” The sarcastic comment was made by the latest Mrs. Steadman as they were sitting down to the main course.

“Hush, my dear.” Maximillian was in a rare form this evening, gray eyes flickering over the woman – a warning was clearly evident in them. “My son is here and that is all that matters.”

“Indeed!” Milton Steadman was looking at him with a question in his gray eyes. “I am surprised you are not at your beloved hospital.”

“I am on call,” he said briefly, his eyes going to his sister who was uneasily eyeing him.

“Well then, there it is,” his uncle said sardonically, reaching for his wineglass and leaning back against the chair, “always the doctor.”

“That is who I am, uncle,” he was going to do his best to be civil for as long as he could.

“Instead of taking your rightful place....”

“Enough!” They all jumped as Maximillian slammed his open palm on the table causing everyone seated there to jump in reaction. “We are here to enjoy a meal as a family, and I am certain it is not too much to ask for a pleasant evening!” His words were hard and unyielding and brooked no argument.

Maurice resumed the meal, the veal tasting like sawdust inside his mouth. He had left the manor as soon as he could, hating the stifling atmosphere and the constant arguments between the two brothers.

Marianne's mother had not been too bad, she had only been a woman cowed by a very strong and ruthless man who was determined never to allow anything to stand in his way. He had always wondered if the woman had died of a broken spirit.

His mother had been gentle and kind, but in his way, Maximillian had loved her, perhaps she was the only woman he had ever loved. His other two wives were nothing more than people to warm his bed at night. He was careless with their feelings to the point where he had two mistresses stashed in apartments around town.

Maurice had spent his life watching the man who was his father and had determined that he would not be following in his footsteps. He suspected that was one of the many reasons his father was disappointed in him.

He waited until the meal was finished and they had retired to the elegant living room for after-dinner drinks.

“Thanks,” Maurice accepted the glass of scotch from his uncle and went to stand next to his sister.

“You look anxious, sister,” he murmured softly.

“Can you blame me?” She whispered, her blue eyes going to her stepmother who was in conversation with her uncle. “How can our father not see her for who she is?”

“I suspect he does, but he does not care enough for her to give a damn,” he said sardonically.

“Then why did he marry her?”

Maurice shrugged carelessly. “To have someone warming his bed at night. Or someone to play hostess, pick one.”

Marianne searched his handsome face and felt her heart breaking. “You have become even more cynical if that

was at all possible.”

“I would prefer the word realistic or prudent.”

“You are going to cause further dissent,” she warned him, “and leave me in it.”

“You do not have to stay here,” he said tersely, “even if you insist on being at the company, take one of the apartments the company owns and get your freedom.”

“I am thinking of doing that,” she told him with surprise.

He gave her a sharp look. “Soon enough for me to have a drink with you before I leave?”

“I do not want you to leave.”

“It is what it is!” He took a sip of his drink. I cannot stay here any longer, Mar,” he finished his drink and before she could say anything else to him, he called for everyone’s attention.

“I have an announcement.”

“I hope it is to tell us that you will be dispensing with this nonsense of playing doctor and taking your rightful place in the company,” his father remarked.

“I am afraid I am going to have to disappoint you, father,” Maurice walked over to place the glass down on the mantle, “I am moving away!”

The announcement so stunned the room, that everyone except his sister was silent for a few seconds. Maurice shoved his hands into his pockets and prayed that his pager would go off.

The chaos at the hospital, his hands buried deep into someone’s bowel, the sleeplessness, the bad coffee and

stale donuts were better to him than being surrounded by all this incredible luxury and a family who were not united.

“I forbid it!” His father’s voice was succinct, the authority unmistakable.

Maurice let out a sardonic laugh, genuinely admiring the man’s commanding voice and his indomitable and often overbearing presence. “You are forgetting something.”

“I am not going to stand by and allow you to make an even bigger mess of your life!”

“Come now, father,” he squared off with the older man, “surely you do not want us to go down that road, do you?”

“Maurice...!”

Ignoring his sister's anxious look, he continued. "This is your third marriage and from what I see..." he waved a hand at the woman decked out in garish red, her face artfully made up. "This has been your biggest mistake yet."

"How dare you.... "

"Silence!" Maximillian snapped, before turning back to his son. "You would move away from here – from your home – your legacy? Where the hell are you going?"

"A tiny town by the name of Mountain Glades."

"And where is that?" His uncle spat out the words.

"Somewhere on the outskirts of Virginia. And don't even bother to threaten me with how much you are going to make things uncomfortable for me. Your influences do not extend there, and it is for that very reason that I have chosen to go there."

“You would rather practice medicine in the sticks than stay here with your family?” His father thundered.

“What family?” Maurice’s green eyes flashed. “One where you and your brother fight each other for a position in the company?”

Where you have spent years chasing after unsuitable women, that family? No thank you father, as well you know, I make my own way and as you also know, I don’t give a damn about the money. Even if that was the case, I have my own.”

They stood there glaring at each other until his father turned and went to pour himself another drink. “You would do this to me – to your sister?”

“I am doing this for myself.”

“You are selfish....”

“I suppose I have learned from the best.” His pager went off just then and he could have wept with relief. “Duty calls, I am afraid.” He started for the door and then turned back to look at them individually. “Marianne is an innocent, and I am praying that you will do nothing to change that.” With that, he left the room.

Mariel let herself into the small, but tastefully furnished home where she had lived with her father until six months ago. Each time she stepped through the front door, she expected to hear his cheerful voice bidding her to come on through and join him for a drink in the kitchen before going outside where he had something on the grill.

They had never worked the same hours – she would sometimes make her home visits after she left the clinic and he would be home if he did not have any surgery or administrative duties to perform, waiting for her with a welcoming drink.

She had spent the entire day keeping the tears at bay, but now there was no need for that. She had left her lab coat at the clinic. Dragging the pins from her severe chignon, she shoved her fingers through the thick dark brown strands, the strands tumbling past her shoulders.

Hunching her shoulders, she tried to release the knots of tension. She had dealt with children who had come down with a stomach virus that was going around. Her plea to the parents to make certain the environment was clean and that they washed their hands had gone unheeded.

“Oh, daddy,” she whispered tearfully as she stepped into the cozy living room and stared up at the framed photo of the man laughing into the camera.

She had inherited his dimples and strong chin. He had laughingly told her that it was a blessing that she looked like her mother. “She was such a beauty that I often wondered what on earth she saw in me.”

“A handsome, kind and talented doctor,” she had told him loyally, “why did you have to leave me?” Brushing away the tears, she straightened her shoulders and moved away from the mantle to wander over to the window to look out.

The lawn needed trimming, she thought absently, her fingers curling into fists. It had always been her father’s job to take care of the yard.

She had followed her mother’s tradition by planting flowers and right now the front yard on either side of the steps was ablaze with a mix of red and white roses, daffodils and peonies.

They also need tending to and she was going to have to try and find the time to do so. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and tried to shake the incredible sadness that had come over her.

Someone else was going to be taking his place at the clinic and she was certain that he would never do as good a job as her father had done. A rich man running away from his past. She had investigated and done

some reading on the family and was astounded at the number of times they had been on the news because of underhanded dealings.

This man was part and parcel of that family and even though she had no idea why he would choose to come to such a tiny place like Mountain Glades, she was without a doubt that he was running away from something.

Chapter 2

The small cottage which was only a stone's throw away from the hospital or clinic was precisely what he needed. He had spent the day before saying his goodbyes to friends and associates and realizing that it was not just his name and status that had endeared him to members of staff and patients.

He had been determined to prove himself and over the years had done just that.

He was no longer considered the heir to a pharmaceutical company, but his dedication and no-nonsense manner had proven to his colleagues that he was not just another rich kid playing at being a doctor. That he was the real thing and that he cared about his patients.

Most of the female doctors and nurses had hinted at more than a working relationship, but he had not taken them up on it. His last relationship had turned sour because that particular female had never been able to

understand why he had to work so hard when he did not have to.

“You have wealth!” She cried. “You could be at the company where you belong. Then we could live a normal life - go places and be together more than we are now. I cannot take it anymore. You live in this dump when there are places you could pick and choose from. Why are you trying to punish yourself? To what end?”

“I am a doctor,” he had told her - his tone icy with displeasure. He had explained his position to her from the very start and she had claimed she was okay with it. “I cannot be the man you want, Sheryl, so we should part ways.”

He had cared about her and thought that despite her being a society princess, they could have something together, but she had proven him wrong. After the breakup, he plunged himself into the job.

Now he was here. His father and uncle had tried talking him out of leaving - they had tried persuasion when the

threats had not made a difference, but he had said his goodbyes. His only regret was leaving his little sister.

“Come and visit,” he had told her fondly, wiping the tears from her cheeks, “It’s not like I will be out of the country.”

“You might as well be,” she had sniffed, “oh, Maurice, what am I going to do without you to set me straight?”

“There are cell services there,” he had told her teasingly, “call me when you need to talk,” he had hugged her tight, “and promise me you will not be sucked into the drama.”

“How will I be able to help that?” she had asked wryly. “They are even worse, now that you are leaving.”

He had taken a plane to the nearest airport and had picked up a car that he had leased. The three-hour drive had been pleasant and the closer he came to the town, the more delighted he had been to see the trees giving way to quaint buildings and identical-looking houses. He had arrived on a Sunday in order to get his bearings.

Gertrude Flemings had informed him that she had acquired the services of a local woman to do various items of housework for him. "It's part of the package," she had assured him, "Thelma is a sweet woman - a widow and childless and will be happy for the work."

"As long as she is not underfoot!"

"She will do her work whenever you are at the clinic," the woman had paused, before continuing, "there are several people here who were loyal to Dr. James including his daughter, who is our resident pediatrician, and who has shown a resistance to you taking over from him."

"You are warning me to watch my back?" He had asked her sardonically.

"I am warning you to tread lightly."

“I am here to do my duty, Mrs. Flemings, nothing more and nothing less.”

The little cottage sat on top of a slight crescent and overlooked an area rioting with wildflowers and trees lush with leaves. The sound of birds chirping could be heard, even though the closed windows.

Unlatching it, he shoved it open and breathed in the clean air coming through the mesh. He was going to enjoy being here. It would certainly be a far cry from the big city hospital he was accustomed to, but if he had a hankering for bright lights and the opera, he could hop on a plane and go into the city.

It was no big deal. Right now, he just wanted to get to work and forget the problems he had left back home. Bracing his hands against the windowsill, he took several deeper breaths before slamming the window shut.

“You are getting upset over nothing.”

“I cannot believe you said that!” Mariel paced the length of the porch, her hands shoved into the pockets of her loose lounge pants.

“Look,” Angie put her wineglass onto the table before her and moved forward on the porch swing, her hands clasped in front of her. They had both grown up together, but Angie had gone to nursing school while Mariel had gone on to medical school.

Angie had left for a while for New York where she had met a fast-talking con man who had broken her heart and taken most of her savings. She had returned to Mountain Glades and decided to never leave.

“I miss him too. Your dad became mine when that miserable crap walked out on me, and mom and I mourned him. But you have to be realistic honey. This man might just be the kind of person the clinic needs. We are short staffed and the powers that be waited long enough to find someone. And the man is said to be a very good doctor.”

“One that is as rich as Croesus,” Mariel said bitterly, coming to join her on the swing, her fingers clasped tight. She was barely hanging onto her control.

She had spent yesterday seeing patients and trying not to listen to the nurses and doctors whispering about the celebrity coming into their midst. It had sickened her to hear the whispers and noticed the air of anticipation and excitement.

Apparently, he had already arrived and was staying at the cottage a few blocks away from the hospital. “He is not going to stay here for very long. Remember Dr. Gibbons?”

“Clayton Gibbons was an asshole who was determined to screw all the nurses to satisfy his tremendous ego,” her friend said dryly.

“You managed to stay away from his seemingly immense charms.”

“I saw right through the bastard,” Angie said grimly, “he reminded me of you know who.” She gave her friend a curious look. “He did nothing for you either.”

“I am familiar with his type,” she responded with a shrug.

“Ah, the very little talked about romance in Boston.”

“I would not exactly call it romance. The man was vacuous and vain, which are very dangerous combinations.”

“And you dumped his sorry ass before he could break your heart.”

“He managed to dent it a little bit,” she admitted, “about this doctor”

“We are not going back to that topic. I came here to relax and drink some of this very good wine you bought the last time you were in New York, and I intend to do just that,” her friend said firmly.

Maurice had just arrived at the cottage after taking a long walk on the dirt road leading away from the cottage when he heard a knock on the door.

A frown touched his brow as he wondered who would venture out to see him. It was almost 7:00 pm. and he was thinking of taking a much-needed shower and catching up on some of the files that had been sent to him so that he could familiarize himself with some of the patients.

Pulling the door open, he stopped short as he gazed at the red-haired woman with a basket over one arm.

“Hi. My name is Katherine Heath. My friends call me Kathy and I am your welcome party.” She smiled and extended her hand. Hesitating briefly, he took her hand briefly.

“I thought you would not mind me visiting and bringing my fresh baked pastries.”

“I was just about to take a shower...,” he stopped abruptly as she shouldered her way in.

Biting off the note of impatience at her brazen behavior, he closed the door and followed her as she made her way into the kitchen where she placed the basket on the counter. “I would not say no to a spot of tea.”

“I am afraid that will not be possible or even appropriate,” he told her firmly, “as I said before, I was just about to take a shower. I have an early start to my day tomorrow and I need to prepare for it.”

“I hope you are not one of those stuck-up rich guys who think you are better than us common folks,” she told him primly.

“Right now, I am asking you kindly to leave and allow me to go and take my shower,” his green eyes were icy as he stared at her.

“Okay fine!” She grabbed up the basket. “Just trying to be a friendly neighbor.”

“Next time, call first,” he opened the door and ushered her out.

“I don’t know your number.”

“Good.” Jerking his head, he stepped back and watched as she stepped across the threshold. Slamming and locking the door, he bounded up the stairs and headed to the bathroom.

Maribel jammed her hands into the pockets of her lab coat to hide the tight curling of her fingers. She had spent last night preparing herself for the moment and was determined to be politely courteous, but actually seeing the man who was about to take her dad's place was setting her teeth on edge.

"He is quite handsome," Angie whispered. They were in the conference room where the administrator had asked for a moment of their time so that she could introduce the newest addition to the staff.

"Dr. Steadman, would you like to say a few words?"

"I am afraid it is really going to be just a few words," his green eyes wandered around the room, settling for a few seconds on Maribel who stood there with her chin lifted. "I am new, not only to this beautiful town but also to this clinic."

I know that some or perhaps all of you have doubts about me. You know my history and who I am. But I would like to take this opportunity to ask that you give me a chance to prove myself. I am here to tend to the patients and that is always going to be my first priority. Thank you.”

He stepped back with a nod to a round of applause, noticing that the woman with a cold look on her face was not one of those who applauded.

“Thank you for your time,” Mrs. Flemings told them with a smile, before turning to him, “please allow me to show you around. I do believe you already have patients waiting to see you.”

“Then perhaps the sightseeing will have to wait until later,” he told her, his tone formal, “just point me to where they are.”

“Of course. Glad to have you on board.”

He nodded and preceded her out of the room. The place was small and homely, but the equipment was sterile and modern, indicating that his predecessor or even the woman showing him to the office that was going to be his, had worked hard to get the place up to this standard.

“It belonged to Dr. James,” she told him quietly as she pushed the door open to a simple and utilitarian office with a desk, chair and filing cabinet. A coffee pot stood on a table complete with a tray of cups as well as a canister of cream. “We did some cleaning and cleared his things out. I hope it is to your liking.”

“It’s fine. The waiting room is through there?” He pointed to his left.

“Yes. I will see you later on. We prepare lunch right here on site. I will, of course, send someone to ask you what your preference is.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Flemings. You have been most accommodating.”

“We are grateful to you Dr. Steadman,” she said before turning away.

He closed the door behind her and took a minute to examine the small room. It would suit him fine. As he had told the staff just now, he was here to do one thing - to tend to his patients, but first, he was going to get to know them.

Picking up the charts on the desk, he scanned them quickly before going into the waiting room to greet the three people waiting patiently for him. “Hi, my name is Dr. Maurice Steadman. Let’s see if we cannot get you better, shall we?”

He caught up with her after lunch. He had been so busy with the influx of patients and quite surprised that he had been kept on his feet since he had begun. But it was a pleasant sort of surprise. The people were friendly and spoke to them about the town.

They asked him candid questions about their illnesses and the course of treatment that was right for them. And then of course they spoke about his predecessor, telling him of the man's great kindness and the services he had rendered. And how his daughter was kind herself.

"Dr. James, a moment if you please?"

Mariel was about to refuse and tell him she had patients to see but remembered her decision to be cordial if it kills her. But all that went out the window as soon as she stepped into what had been her dad's office and watched as he stepped behind the desk.

"I see you have made yourself at home!" The sarcasm was apparent in her sultry tone and hearing her speak, jarred him slightly, enough for him to take notice of the prim way she pinned back her thick dark brown hair and the fact that the style, instead of taking away from her beauty, actually highlighted her sharp cheekbones.

Her complexion was a smooth mix of cocoa and heavy cream and was flawless.

“I understand your resentment,” he told her quietly, “I am the guy who has taken over from your dad. I also understand that I have big shoes to fill and even if I do not manage to fill them, I will do my best to somehow be as good a doctor as his patients told me he was. I am just asking that you give me that chance and the benefit of the doubt.”

It was a reasonable request and one that she should have had her moving forward with an outstretched hand to welcome him. She was the only one who had not done so, and it was glaringly obvious.

Her friend Angie was already smitten by the handsome face and thick head of sable brown hair. She was not going to follow suit. She would wait for the day when he had become tired of the small town and leave, and she would politely tell them that she had predicted it.

“Why did you come here? Of all the places in the US, why here? You see, I have read in detail about your family, Dr. Steadman, and know who you are. What I cannot fathom is why you would want to come and join

the staff of this humble clinic, where you will be receiving a drastic cut in salary. it does not make any sense at all.”

His mouth tightened and he had to rein in his temper. He had offered a peace offering that had been thrown back into his face, to hell with her then! “Obviously, I do not need the money,” he told her sardonically, “and I already explained to the board my reasons for being here. I do not owe you an explanation.”

Her shoulders straightened at the insult, and he watched as her dark brown eyes iced over. She was one cold customer, he thought in contempt, “I am just waiting for the day when you decide that this place is not for you.”

“Then you will be waiting for a long time,” he gave her a bored look, “I have patients to see, and I am assuming the same goes for you. Please close the door on your way out.” He stood there and noticed the struggle for her not to lash out at him, actually admiring the control that had her staring down her small nose at him.

Turning around, she marched to the door and pulled it open, slamming it shut behind her. There was fire

beneath all that ice, he thought wryly as he picked up the charts, deliberately turning his thoughts away from her.

Mariel had always prided herself on her self-control. It took a lot for her to get angry and even when she did get angry, she would practice deep breathing to will most of the anger away. She had a temper and had pledged never to allow it to get out of hand. A former boyfriend had called her frigid and she was fine with that.

Work was her panacea, especially since she had lost her beloved dad. But standing in his former office with the usurper behind the desk where he had spent most of his time when not seeing patients had done something to her.

She had enjoyed taking the time in between seeing patients to just go into that office to have a cup of coffee and discuss their work and the best way to offer treatment. Now that was no longer the case. He was gone and there was someone else seated in the worn

leather chair, performing the duties he had performed, and it was killing her.

It was nothing personal or so she was trying to tell herself. Aside from the fact that the man had left a lucrative career to come to their little hospital was something she could not quite accept.

He was handsome and wealthy beyond measure and he was here in their small town - doing what exactly? She had heard Kathy grumbling about how rude he was - that she had taken the time to bake something to bring it to him and he had kicked her out.

She had almost smiled at that and applauded him for doing so. Kathy was the town's most notorious gossip, and she was also always on the lookout for a husband. No doubt the handsome Dr. Steadman was a likely candidate. But poor Kathy should have realized that the man was way out of her league.

"Hi, Ben, how are you this afternoon?" Shrugging away her anger and resentment, she concentrated on the little

boy sitting on the edge of the gurney and swinging his chubby little legs.

“My stomach hurts,” he complained.

“Have you been sneaking into the cookie jar again?” she asked him solemnly, pulling up a chair and lifting his shirt up.

“I think he ate too many candies, doc.,” his anxious mother explained, her hands clasped in front of her. “I am hoping it is not that dreaded stomach virus. My neighbor Janet’s children are all down with it and I cannot bear the thought of my little Ben being so sick.”

“Let’s see what we have here,” she poked at his stomach and watched him wince, “have you been throwing up?”

“Just once.”

“Open wide,” she instructed and peered into his mouth and eyes, “it does appear that he has a slight temperature.”

“What does that mean, doc.?” The mother asked anxiously. “We were planning to take a trip to Virginia Beach to go and see my sister who has taken ill, and I cannot go if my boy is sick.”

“It’s nothing detrimental, Doris. I will give him some antibiotics to clear up the fever and suggest some plain soup. I have a feeling that everything will be okay during the next couple of days,” she said reassuringly.

The woman gave a huge sigh of relief, her eyes dancing. “Thank you, kindly, doc....”

“How long are you planning on staying?” Mariel inquired absently as she finished her examination.

“Maybe a week or a little more than that.”

“Let’s go into my office and I will give you the necessary medication. I am afraid we are out of the antibiotic that I am prescribing.”

“I will pick it up at the pharmacy.”

“Come along, Ben,” Mariel helped him off the gurney and kept his hand in hers while they made their way towards her office.

“I saw that new doctor on my way in here,” the woman murmured.

Keeping her smile in place as she went behind her desk, she quickly wrote the prescription and handed it to her. “The instructions are there, make sure he takes it until it is all gone.”

“Bless you, doc.,” she said gratefully as she took her son’s hand. Mariel waited until they had left to close her

eyes briefly and heaved out a breath.

Chapter 3

Her efforts to avoid him worked for the first few days and after that, she was forced to consult him about a mutual patient.

“I have five minutes to spare,” he told her briefly as he shrugged into his lab coat.

Forcing herself not to react to his abrupt statement, she had to be reminded that she was here on a patient’s behalf.

“It’s about Maria,” she informed him stiffly. He had offered her a seat, but she had refused and was standing in front of the desk.

“I have read her chart.”

“She needs to be airlifted. Her lungs are struggling....”

“I am aware of that, doctor,” he waved an impatient hand, “but like I told the administrator - until we have ruled out all other alternatives, I am not going to sign off on moving her. That is something that will jeopardize her health even more.”

Marisol took a deep breath and reminded herself that this man was also a doctor and should have their patient's best interest at heart.

“Her cancer is spreading.”

“I am also aware of that. I intend to look in on her after I am through with my patients to see what needs to be done. There is an oncologist on staff at the hospital where I used to be, and I am going to do a consult over the phone with him.”

“In the meantime, we are supposed to fold our hands and say a Hail Mary?”

He raked her with his inscrutable green gaze before responding. “If that is your thing, then please don’t let me stop you.”

Mariel bristled at the sarcastic tone in his voice. “Marie is my patient”

“She is our patient, and you are taking this too personally. That is never a good idea.”

“Oh, I am sorry for putting my patient’s needs first and foremost. I suppose the fact that I am a small-town doctor means that is what I do.”

“And putting a patient’s need first is admirable. You are letting your personal feelings and attachment to these people get in the way of your training.”

“These people?” Her dark brown eyes flashed fire and held him enthralled for a minute. “You mean the very

people you came here to take care of?”

“You want to enter into a pissing match with me, Dr. James?” He asked her coldly. The woman was as prickly as a porcupine and her continued resentment of him was wearing on his nerves.

“You are putting words into my mouth. I am simply advising you to take a step back and allow me to handle it. If my consultation with Dr. Goodman does not yield a proper solution, then I will consider your alternative.”

She pursed her lips and straightened her slender shoulders. “I will give you until the end of the day and if nothing happens, I will be going over your head.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Why? Because you are the big man in charge?”

“Precisely!” His deep voice had an edge to it. “Never forget that!”

Sending him a fuming look, she turned and walked out, slamming the door shut behind her.

Sinking into the chair, he propped his elbows onto the scarred desk and rubbed his hands over his face wearily. He had taken lengths to avoid her over the past few days and had seen her from afar. He had also managed to see her at work without her noticing him and had grudgingly admired her rapport with her patients.

She was patient and kind with them, and they all seemed to love her. But for the life of him, he could not understand why she was so resentful of him. He knew that it had something to do with the fact that he had taken over from her deceased dad, but this was getting ridiculous now.

Pushing away from the desk, he gathered up the chart and went to greet his patients.

“Honey, you have to relax,” Angie chided. They were in the small doctors’ lounge having a much-needed cup of coffee. “The man is not that bad. He is politely courteous and has managed to send out the message that he is not available, but he knows his stuff. Old Mr. Elderberry who had been ailing from gout forever is singing his praises.

And Agatha is talking about the treatment he recommended for her chronic RA. And you have to admit that he works very hard. He is the first one here and one of the last people out the door. You cannot fault that.”

“I don’t trust him,” Mariel muttered. Her clash with him this morning was still in her mind and every time she thought about it, she had to force herself not to march into that office and let him have it.

“That’s on you. I think he has proven himself.”

“He has been here for less than a week.”

“And has done the work of ten doctors,” Angie pointed out, “speak of the devil,” she whispered, “and I see Dr. Eileen is trying her best to make him change his mind about dating a staff member.”

“She is welcome to him. He is a despicable person.”

“I don’t know about that honey. He is quite a looker and I have seen the muscles beneath that white lab coat,” Angie said with a grin.

“You are impossible.”

“I am a woman, and it is rather difficult not to notice the new doctor is easy on the eyes.”

“I am sure he thinks he is better than the locals.”

“He is all about work and from what I read about him, that has always been the case.”

“Maybe he is running away from something.”

Angie gave her a wry look. “Still trying to find some skeletons in his closet?”

“I am sure there are plenty.”

A few tables away, Maurice found himself being drawn to the woman who had somehow gotten under his skin. Her hair was in the usual neat chignon at the nape of her neck and her back was turned to him. He had caught her friend looking over at him several times and knew he was the topic of discussion.

“I was thinking we could go together to the bonfire in the park?” The woman across from him was saying as she

gazed at him beneath her lashes. She was not bad looking - with raven black hair and light green eyes, but he was not interested.

“A bonfire in the height of summer?” he asked her mildly.

She laughed softly at that, reaching forward to touch his hand briefly. “It’s a tradition. The children are out for the summer and the parents and local businesses get together to give them a treat.

It has been a tradition for the past hundreds of years, and it is still being continued. Tell me, Dr. Steadman, where have you been since you arrived in our beautiful city?”

“My cottage and here.”

“Exactly. That is not good. We have so much to offer, and I do not want you to think that we are a boring old town with nothing to offer.”

“When is this bonfire?”

Her green eyes lit up as she smelled victory. “Sunday evening. There will be dancing, and a local band will be playing. People will be grilling all sorts of dishes and the food is quite good.”

“I will think about it.”

“Please do.”

He glanced at his watch. “I am afraid I have to go.”

“So, do I. See you at the end of the shift.”

He took one last look at the woman across the room, just as she stood up and turned to leave the room. Their eyes met and held for a fraction of a second before she

looked away. For some reason, she was constantly in his thoughts, which was damned annoying.

“What are you saying, Richard?” Maurice asked his colleague quietly.

“There are clinical trials that can be introduced but in order for me to make my recommendation, I am going to have to fly out there and do a thorough examination.”

Maurice looked over to where Mariel was standing by the patient’s bed.

“How soon would that be?”

“I have a consult in Virginia in the morning. I could make my way there as soon as I am through.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome. Dr. James.” He nodded in her direction before disconnecting the video call.

“Is that satisfactory to you?” He asked her coolly.

“I suppose. May I have a word with you?” She smiled at the little girl and whispered something that made her laugh, before tucking the sheets beneath her. “I will come back to read you that story you asked for.”

Holding the door open, Maurice allowed her to proceed as they went to his office. “What is it?”

“Who is paying for the consult?” she asked without preamble as he closed the door behind them. It was almost 7:00 pm. and the regular staff had already left for the day.

“He owes me a favor.”

“I see. I suppose being as wealthy as you are, has its perks.”

Maurice looked up from the chart he was studying and gave her a look of disbelief. “Is there anything that is going to satisfy you?” He asked her harshly. “I have basically solved the problem of what to do with little Maria and you are here questioning my method? What the hell is your problem?”

“You!” She cried, dark brown eyes flashing. “You march in here as if you own the place and make everyone think you are this genie that will solve all their problems. My dad was a wonderful doctor and the people loved him....”

“But he is no longer here, is he?” He had left his desk and was approaching her.

“How dare you!”

“What? Speak the truth?” He asked her coldly, green eyes glittering. “Is that why you hate me so much, Dr. James, because I am sitting in his office and using his desk? Making coffee from the same pot he used? Do you think the administrators should have left this office as a shrine to him?” His head snapped back as she slapped him hard.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered in horror, “I am sorry....”

“Are you?” His eyes glittered as he crowded her against the door. “Do you think an apology is going to fix things now?”

“Get away from me!”

His hand clamped around her slender throat, his body reacting to the nearness of hers. He should let her go -

reprimand her for her assault and be done with it, but something was edging him to see how far he could go with her. He wanted to get under her skin, the way she had gotten under his.

But first, he was going to take the pins out of her hair. Using his free hand, he plucked them out and watched as the soft dark brown curls tumbled around her face and down her shoulders.

“Let me go.”

“Not damn likely, lady,” he whispered harshly against her mouth, “you have been baiting me since the day I got here, and I want to know why.”

“I hate you!” She whispered.

“Do you?” he asked her silkily. “Well then...,” his head descended, and his mouth touched hers. She tried to avoid the contact, but his hand was wrapped too tight around her throat, hindering her attempt to avoid him.

She clamped her lips together to stop him, but he merely used the tip of his tongue to get her to open her mouth.

But she remained stubbornly resistant until he gently nipped her full bottom lip. The moment her lips parted with a tiny gasp; he used the opportunity to plunge his tongue into the warmth of her mouth.

It had started as a sort of punishment against her, a way to show her who has the upper hand, but the moment his tongue touched hers, it became something else altogether.

Her slender body was molded to his as he pressed her up against the door. And her mouth - sweet Christ! Her mouth was so achingly sweet, so utterly potent that he was soon lost in the enticing taste of her.

He explored her hungrily, his hand leaving her throat to wander over her shoulders and along her rib cage. Her lab coat was in the way and with an impatient flick of his wrists, he shoved it from her shoulders so that he could get access to her body.

A groan escaped him as he felt her small form breasts pressed against his chest. Within minutes he had gone from flaccid to erect, his cock throbbing against the material of his khakis. Her fingers were curled around the lapel of his jacket, and it was as if they were both transported somewhere else.

He dimly heard the phone ringing, but it did not register, and neither did he realize that he was almost making love to her right here in his office, something he had never done before. He swallowed her moans, his hands going upwards to grip strands of her hair so that he could go deeper inside her mouth.

It was the insistent pounding on the door that brought them back to the present and even then, it was like he was being rudely awakened from a very erotic dream.

She was the one who reacted first by pushing him away so hard that he stumbled backwards. "Give me a minute!" He croaked hoarsely, his green eyes going to the woman leaning drunkenly against the door. His heart

skittered inside his chest as he took in the disheveled hair and the swollen lips.

Her dark brown eyes had a strange glow to them, and he could see her nipples distended and clearly evident through the silk blouse she was wearing. Bending sideways, she scooped up her lab coat and stood there as if uncertain about what to do next.

“I will go out and head them off. I suggest you use the bathroom....”

“Go to hell!” She whispered, “and if you ever touch me again, I will....” Without finishing the sentence, she turned and ran towards the bathroom.

It took several minutes for him to get his rampaging desire under control and even then, he had to use his lab coat to hide the evidence of his torrid movements a few minutes ago. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the door open to see the administrator standing there.

“I was consulting with a patient,” he told the woman smoothly.

“I was looking for Dr. James. Have you seen her?”

“No. What is it?”

“One of her patients just came in with an emergency.”

It took almost twenty minutes for her to gather her composure and fix back the hair he had tousled. He had scattered the pins by the door, but she had found several of them inside her blouse, enough to pin her hair back into its usual chignon. Her lips were swollen and there was nothing she could do about it.

Her nipples were aching to the touch, and she had to avoid looking at them as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She could blame him for initiating the contact, but she could not go as far as to place everything on him. She had responded. She felt the shame coursing through her body as she recalled how she had responded to the kiss as if she was starving.

She had done the very thing, she had accused the women at the clinic of doing, only she had done much worse. If someone had not interrupted them, she would have allowed him liberties - she shook her head in despair and turned on the tap, splashed cold water onto her face and blotted it with the towel.

From now on, she was going to avoid him. It was the coward's way out, but there was no way she was going to be able to face him after this. He was experienced enough to realize that his advances had been welcomed by her and nothing she could say to him would ever convince him otherwise.

Her pager went off and she dragged it out of her pocket, realizing that it had to do with one of her patients.

Maurice let himself into the cottage and locked the door, heading straight to the kitchen to pour himself a full glass of scotch. He had fashioned a liquor cabinet and scoured the two liquor stores in town for what he needed. He had also sent for a selection back home and they would be arriving by the weekend.

Taking the drink with him, he went to sit at the counter, cradling the glass in his hands. She had come into the examination room and had avoided looking at him, only speaking to the mother who had brought in the little girl.

She had coolly told him that she had it under control and he was free to leave, but he had stayed, mainly to annoy the hell out of her. They had both examined the child together, each scrupulously avoiding speaking to the other. Then afterwards, he had left her there to go and see a patient of his.

He should not have touched her, he thought grimly as he took a sip of his scotch. That had been entirely foolish and reckless.

He had a very strict rule. He never touched anyone he worked with; he had seen what broken relationships did to couples working together. It made for very strained working relationships, and he had so far managed to stay away from anything like that.

But there was something about her. The icy exterior and the way she was always sniping at him for no apparent reason. He had wanted to take her down a notch and had done more harm than good. He had lifted the glass halfway to his lips when his phone rang.

“Hey!”

“Hey? Is that the way to greet your only sibling?” His sister demanded.

“I just got in from having a very rough day,” a smile touched his lips, “I am happy you called. How are you?”

“Still in one piece,” she told him with a sigh, “our father and uncle are at it again.”

“Same old fight?” He asked with not an ounce of interest.

“A new one this time. Dad has discovered that uncle was sleeping with Glenna.”

He barked out loud laughter, “now that ought to be very interesting.”

“It’s not funny, darling,” she told him with a sigh, “Dad asked me if I knew about it.”

“And you lied, of course.”

“I did. He is planning on calling you.”

“He actually did, but I chose to ignore the call.”

“He is not going to stop until you pick up.”

“I am thinking about changing my number.”

“Please don’t joke about it.”

“What is going to happen to our dear stepmother?”

“He threw her out.”

“And she is going to come up with proof that he has been cheating on her.”

“He is offering her a settlement in order not to go to court.”

“And our uncle?”

“He is holed up in one of the apartments. They are not speaking to each other.”

“Of course not.”

“How is it going there?”

“It’s going,” his mind flitted back to the scene in his office, and he felt his cock hardening again, “you really should come and visit.”

“I might. Just to get away from all this drama.”

“Then you are going to have dear old dad blaming me for enticing you away,” he reminded her dryly, “but do come for a visit.”

“I definitely will. Are all the local women vying for your attention?”

His mouth tightened as he thought about the woman he had kissed so hungrily. “Some! But you know me. I am immune to their charms.”

“You might just find someone there who will do it for you.”

“I am here to work and that’s it.”

“All work and no play....”

“Yes,” he downed the drink, grimacing as it hit the walls of his stomach, “let me know what happens next. I am going to find something to eat and then hit the sack.”

“I love you, darling.”

“Love you, more.” Hanging up from her, he massaged his temples as he felt a headache brewing. So, he had made an error in judgement and allowed his common sense to get away from him. It was never going to happen again.

Chapter 4

Mariel buried her feelings as she was so adept at doing, and that particular skill came in handy after the humiliating lack of control over that hated man inside his office. She went out of her way to avoid him even more than ever.

They would have a meeting twice a week in the conference room, but fortunately, it was with the entire staff, so she could just stand in the back of the room and make copious notes and avoid looking at him. Whenever Angie started to mention his name, she would head off the conversation and introduce another topic.

She had been forced to be in the same room with him when his friend had come by for the consult, but it had been worth the moments of discomfort because the good doctor had told them the good news that he had secured a place for Maria at St. Jude's Hospital.

She had gone home that night and had managed to convince herself that it had been a lapse in judgement.

She had been wound too tight and her emotions were too near to the surface.

She was not over her beloved dad's death and right on top of that, they had replaced him with this horrible man. Her defenses had been down, and she had not been in a relationship in a very long time. That was it and now that it was out of her system, she could brush herself down and get on with her life.

She was a professional and could very well work with the man and ignore him. If they had to consult about a mutual patient, then they would do so and be done with it. And it seems as if the despicable man was getting involved with Eileen, a woman determined to land herself a husband.

Well, good luck to them, it was none of her business if she wanted to throw herself at him. She studiously ignored the dart of pain in her heart at his betrayal. How dare he kiss her like that and was now cavalierly seeing another woman! It just proved to her what kind of a monster he was.

Her fingers tightened around the coffee cup as she watched them seated across from her, drinking coffee and eating donuts. He had been here a week and was already making waves. Not only had he brought in more delicious tasting coffee but had commissioned one of the local delis to provide them with pastries of all descriptions.

He was also doing home visits for patients who could not make it to the clinic. The locals were already singing his praises so much that it was grating on her nerves.

“You look like you are about to go over there and whoop ass!”

She had been so mired down in her hatred for the man that she had not noticed her friend approaching.

“Can they be any more obvious?” she muttered.

“Poor Eileen is trying her best, but the good doctor is not budging. She has gotten him to attend the bonfire with

her tomorrow, but that's as far as he has gone.”

“It's only a matter of time,” lifting her cup, she took a sip of her coffee and tried to ignore the couple across the room, “I had forgotten about the darn thing.”

“Please tell me that you remember that we are supposed to be singing. I already have my guitar primed and ready.”

“Oh, my goodness!” She closed her eyes briefly. “Can we cry off?”

“I am not going to and the powers that be, will not allow us to. What's the matter?” Angie demanded.

“I am not in the mood. The last one, dad was ...,” she shook her head and took a sip of the coffee.

“Oh, honey,” Angie reached over and placed a hand over hers, “how thoughtless of me.”

She shook her head. “But you are right. It’s part of the ceremony and I must prevail!” She forced a smile and wondered at the lie she was telling her friend.

Yes, she was upset about her dad not being present, but more so that the man seated across the room was going to be there looking at her as she makes a spectacle of herself. She did not want him to see that side of her. “I will get my piano out and do some practicing.”

“I will come by in the morning and we can rehearse together.”

“That will be lovely,” her pager went off and she finished her coffee, “see you later.”

Maurice had to force himself not to watch as she exited the room. He had been trying to get her out of his mind

since the episode inside his office without much success. She avoided him like the plague and barely looked at him, which was fine with him. She never came to his office again, which was also good.

But at night, he was tormented by her. He could still feel her slender body pressed against him, still taste her lips and the warm crevices of her mouth. The texture of her thick dark brown hair - the silkiness of the strands against his fingers. And her nipples had burned a path through his chest.

His cock still reacted to the torrid and explosive meeting of their mouths and he could not get her out of his mind. The woman seated at the table with him was trying very hard to get him to notice her, but she was doing nothing for him.

He had thought about taking her to bed, to exorcise the memories of the woman plaguing his sleep but decided against it.

His pager went off just then and he managed to hide his relief. "Duty calls," he said.

“See you around,” Eileen said gaily in a voice that grated on his nerves.

With a brief nod, he strode from the room and pushed back the swing doors. He was halfway down the hall when he collided with her. “Careful!” His arms came up to steady her as she slammed into him.

“Let go of me!” She hissed.

“I should have let you fall,” he said grimly, “and in case you forget, you were the one who collided with me. Next time, watch where you are going.”

She stepped back and gave him a scornful look before turning on her heels and going in the opposite direction. Heaving out a frustrated breath, he went on his way.

He almost decided against going to the stupid bonfire the next day. He knew what Eileen Drummond was hoping for - that after the damn thing, he was going to invite her back to the cottage and they would end up in bed together. But she was going to be very disappointed.

He could not be with her - his emotions, his desire which was constantly betraying him was with that prickly doctor who hated his guts, and he was pretty sure he felt the same way about her, too. He had done nothing to incur her wrath and the contempt she could barely hide, but he had gotten it in spades.

If he had not stuck his tongue down her throat and felt her reaction to his touch, he would have been convinced that she was immune to him. But he knew better. She had been wild in his arms - her heart had been beating like a trapped bird.

And her nipples had shown how aroused she had been. Not to mention her responses to his kisses. If that damn woman had not knocked at the door, he probably would have made love to her right there at the door.

She had been hot for him, the very same way he had been hot for her and still was. It confounded him that she was constantly on his mind. He was aware of her presence each time they were in the same room.

Now he was going to attend a Mountain Glades tradition and would be in close proximity to her. He could not stand it. But he had to go. He was trying to prove himself to the locals who were beginning to look kindly at him, and he had to show them that he was interested in their culture as well.

Well, so be it. What does one wear to such a thing? He wondered as he searched through his closet. He was not big on fashion and even though he had an account at two of the biggest couture houses in the country and possibly the world, he barely used it.

He abhorred shopping and had to force himself to replenish his wardrobe. His father and uncle had no such qualms and would never be seen in the same outfit twice, something he could not comprehend.

Shaking his head, he dragged out a pair of faded denims and a light blue cotton shirt. These will have to do, he decided. And as soon as it was prudent, he would be leaving. He had promised a bedridden patient that he would stop by anyway to check on him.

Mariel told herself that she was simply taking the time and effort for herself. She was not dressing to impress anyone. That she had not shampooed and deep conditioned her thick dark brown hair because of that wretched man.

That she was due the pampering. She worked hard every single day and today being the only time, she had to herself, she deserved special attention. She had thought about going to the salon in town to allow Cynthia to clip off some of it and give her a shampoo but had waited too long.

So, this morning, she had gotten up early and done it herself. It had taken several hours and at one point she had felt frustrated, but she was pleased with the result. Her hair was crackling with a life of its own and she was going to leave it loose around her shoulders.

The jeans and plaid shirt she had picked out to wear were brand new, a set she had picked up from her last visit to Virginia. The cute tan ankle boots were new as well and she was praying they would not pinch her toes.

She had indulged in a very long and relaxing bubble bath and could feel the softness of her skin as she rubbed some special cream into it.

She avoided wearing perfume whenever she was working, because some of her patients suffer from allergies, but now, she picked up the delicate floral scent and sprayed it liberally. Sitting at the vanity mirror, she hesitated before picking up the nude lipstick, but shrugging her shoulders, she applied it carefully.

She might not be interested in him, but she was woman enough to want him to sit up and take notice. And she

was going to be flirting with Ned from the hardware store. He had been trying to get her to notice him for the past two years, but she had kept him firmly at bay. Maybe it was time to start getting out there.

She was too mired down in her work - so much so that the first handsome man - and yes, he was handsome and virile had knocked down her barriers. She had felt the muscles flexing when he....

She closed her eyes and willed the emotions and her yearning away. She was a grown woman and yes, she had been kissed - thoroughly kissed by a man who obviously knew what he was doing.

She was not sophisticated. She had been to Boston where she had attended medical school and she and her father had taken several trips to Europe, where they had enjoyed a wonderful week of wine tasting in Tuscany.

The only relationship she had had was with that wicked guy in college and it had soured her to the point where she had remained single and distrustful of the opposite

sex. Coming back home, she had buried herself in her work and excluded everyone else.

A smile touched her lips as she recalled a conversation with her dad.

“I love you to death my dear, but I am waiting for the day when you bring a suitable young man home to be introduced to me.”

“I noticed you added the word ‘suitable’,” she had said teasingly.

“Of course. No man is ever going to be good enough for you. But I might manage to find some attributes to my liking.”

“I will do my best,” she had informed him with sham solemnity.

She blinked away the tears as she recapped the tube of lipstick and put it away. Taking a deep breath, she reached for the hammered gold loops and slid them through the holes in her lobes.

He saw her the minute she walked into the park on the arm of a plain-looking man with sandy hair and a ruddy complexion. He knew who the guy was and could not help the white-hot dart of jealousy as he stared at them.

She was laughing at something he was saying to her, and he had to squelch the urge to march over there and drag her away from him.

And she was exquisite! He was so used to seeing her in her lab coat with her hair sensibly styled, that seeing her like this was sending blood rushing through his ears. His fingers tightened around the can of beer he was holding, and he had to force himself to concentrate on the woman who had attached herself to him the moment he arrived.

The place was lively. Several people had come over to officially welcome him. Children were laughing and running around the huge bonfire in the middle of the park.

It was a surprisingly cool night, and several tables were already laden with food. He had had a plate pressed into his hands, as soon as he appeared and had eaten most of what was on it.

“You are in for a treat,” Eileen told him gaily. They were seated on one of the benches, near the swings and the noise level was at an all-time high.

“Is that so?” He drawled with little interest as he tried to avoid looking at the woman who was now surrounded by children.

“Mariel and Angie will be performing.”

His eyes sharpened and he gave her his full attention.

“Performing as in?”

Eileen's light green eyes danced. "As in playing the guitar and singing. They are quite good."

"I see. I guess I am going to have to stay back and judge for myself."

"You were planning on leaving?" The disappointment was heavy in her voice.

"I promised Mr. Blake that I would drop by to see him."

"It's your day off!"

"You are a doctor, and you know better than that. We are always on call."

"This is not some big town that you are accustomed to," she pointed out, "Mountain Glades is more relaxed and

less rigid. And I thought ...,” her voice petered off and she looked towards the fire.

“You thought that I was going to invite you back to my place,” he finished for her.

“What’s so wrong about that?”

“Absolutely nothing. You are a beautiful woman and under ordinary circumstances, I would take you up on your offer.

But I never get involved with the people I work with.” The lie hit him, and he found his gaze going to the woman who was now lifting a little girl into her arms. He felt the ache in his crotch and the anger and frustration of not being able to control himself.

“So, I am wasting my time?” Her whispered tone brought his gaze back to her and his expression softened.

“I am afraid so,” he told her with genuine regret.

“Well, it is my time to waste, and I don’t see you with anyone else,” she pointed out.

His eyes inadvertently turned to the woman again and he sat up straight as he saw her going up onto the stage that had been provided for such entertainment. “I think they are about to begin.”

He felt a distinct jolt as she sat on the chair and looped the strap of the instrument over her shoulder, placing the guitar securely onto her lap. Her friend had joined her, but after giving the woman a cursory glance, he trained his gaze on the woman who was occupying his thoughts.

Shaking back her hair, she strummed her fingers over the strings experimentally. They had both been provided with microphones and she spoke into one of them.

“Angie reminded me of my yearly obligation and I have to admit that I was reluctant to do it this year. As you well

know, this was something my dad and I used to do together and being here without him is something I have not yet accepted,” she smiled at the murmurs of sympathy and the shouts of his name.

“Thank you. Okay, enough of the sad moment. Angie and I have decided to perk things up a little. We are going to be doing songs that will get you dancing.”

“So, grab your partners and get ready!” Angie shouted.

Maurice watched in fascination as both women started playing. Mariel was the first one to start the song and he felt the surprise and admiration at the clear and strong seductive sound of a rather lovely voice.

“Shall we?”

He had completely forgotten about the woman seated across from him and had to drag his attention away to look at her.

“Excuse me?”

“Shall we join them?” She nodded at the couples already doing a lively jig.

“If you wish!” Taking her hand, he led her out and allowed her to take the lead as he turned his head to look at the woman singing.

“They are quite talented,” Eileen murmured.

“That they are,” he agreed lightly.

“You are quite the dancer.”

“I think I am taking my cue from you.”

“Nonsense!” She retorted with a smile. “I am pretty sure you took some fancy dancing lessons.

“You are right,” he found himself relaxing as he twirled her around, “my mother insisted that it was a sure way of impressing the ladies.”

“And she was right. I am very impressed.”

“Happy to oblige.”

Maribel tried to ignore him. She had noticed him when he stepped out and started dancing with Eileen and had almost broken her concentration. Then he danced with several of the other women as well. She had done her duty and admitted to Angie that it had not been as bad as she had feared.

She had also made a mistake in inviting Ned to be her date. He was very eager to please her, and his constant hovering was making her weary. His offer to go and get her food was wearing on her nerves and he refused to leave her side.

She felt a jolt as the man she had been avoiding came right over to stand in front of her. After greeting Ned with a curt nod, his green eyes alighted on her face. "I am duty-bound to ask you to dance."

To his surprise, she handed Ned her can of beer and extended a hand. "I am duty-bound to accept."

A live band was playing a soft melody and he carefully pulled her into his arms. "You shocked me back there," he murmured. She was wearing boots with three inches heels but still barely came up to his chest.

"You expected me to refuse."

“Considering that I am public enemy number one, yes, I expected you to refuse.”

She lifted her head to look at him and their eyes connected. “Does Eileen approve of you dancing with me?”

His dark brows lifted in amusement. “Does the very uninteresting Ned approve of you being in my arms?”

“He is not uninteresting.”

“Just dull and very accommodating. He is constantly at your side.”

“I am certain a man like you would not find that commendable,” she retorted.

He chuckled softly. At least they were not sniping at each other. “A man like me?”

“One who is oozing with confidence and has women falling all over him.”

“Including you?”

Her fingers curled into his shirt, and she looked away, focusing on a point over his left shoulder. “I am not an idiot.”

“Are you inferring that the women who are falling all over me are in that category?”

“Possibly,” she gasped softly as he pulled her closer to him.

“What are you doing?” She hissed.

“Trying to get you to loosen up. You are as stiff as a board,” he whispered against her ear. The feel of his breath on her flesh told her that she had done the wrong thing in dancing with him. “That’s it,” he murmured encouragingly, “is this so bad?”

“It’s worse than that!” She endured the closeness for the duration of the dance and escaped as soon as it was over.

Chapter 5

Maurice looked up startled as she came walking into the room. She stopped short just inside the doorway as she saw him sitting there next to the bed. Jacob Blake looked up in delight, a smile creasing his wrinkled face. “My dear! You came.”

“Was there any doubt?” She moved forward with outstretched hands and sat on the edge of the bed. “I said I would, did I not?”

“And like your dear father, you always keep your promise. So, it would appear with the very handsome Dr. Steadman. I am truly blessed to have two beautiful professionals inside my humble home to check on me.”

“I was just telling him his blood pressure is a little too high for my comfort,” Maurice told her, realizing that she was going to continue to pretend he was not in the room. He had left shortly after his dance with her, firmly refusing Eileen’s invitation to her place for a nightcap.

“You promised, or rather Amy promised, she would try to keep it at a comfortable level.” She reminded the man gently.

“He got so excited when he realized that the good doctor was coming for a visit.” His widowed daughter Amy, who was also his caregiver, came walking into the room, bearing a tray.

“I hope we can persuade you to have refreshments with us. You were hopping on that stage, Mariel.” The woman added with a smile as she placed the tray onto the table in the middle of the room.

“Thank you. I am not certain.... “

“We would love to have tea with you and your dad. I also need to examine him further and update his medicine,” Maurice spoke up, realizing that she was trying to find a way to get away.

“Splendid!” Jacob clapped his wrinkled hands in delight. He gave Mariel a fond look. “Your father would do that very thing each time he comes to visit, and I know he was not a tea person.”

“Coffee was his thing,” Mariel mused, “here, let me help you....” She moved forward to ease him up against the pillows, avoiding looking at the man who was helping at the other side.

“Thanks very much. All this attention is bound to go to my head.”

“I will pour the tea Amy,” she told the woman who had moved forward to do just that.

“Thanks, my dear. Dad, you are going to have to be on your best behavior with these two fine young doctors present.”

“I certainly will be....” He accepted the mug of tea with a smile before turning his attention to the man taking his pulse. “Am I still alive, doc?”

“Very much so and we would like to keep you that way for a bit,” Maurice assured him, “we were talking about some extra help for you.” He looked over at Amy who had taken a chair in one corner of the room.

“I know that Amy here is doing her best, but it must be difficult to turn you when there is a need to do so. I know you have the lift to aid you whenever you need to get him out of bed, but we are going to be sending a practice nurse to help you out for three to four days a week and free you up so that you can get some personal time.”

The woman stared at him in surprise, the cup halfway to her lips.

“We cannot afford that.”

“That has been taken care of,” he assured her with a smile, “Mrs. Fleming and the rest of the board have been working on getting the state involved in your care, Mr. Blake.” He looked at the man. “The fact that you are a veteran is a bonus and we are determined to do our best for the men who fought for our country.”

“Oh, praise be to God,” Amy burst out, “for years we have been trying to get those benefits and you are telling me that now it is settled.”

“It is. Starting tomorrow, someone will be coming around to help you. Both of you.”

“Oh, Dr. Steadman, you are a God send,” the woman said earnestly.

“He most certainly is,” her father agreed, “I understand you were in the service as well?”

“A ship’s doctor in the navy,” he said briefly. “For eight years. I went in when I was fresh out of medical school. And I did most of my work on the ship.” Maurice handed him the pills. “This should allow you to get a good night’s sleep.”

“I was surprised to hear that the son of a wealthy man would consider going into service.”

“It was a personal reason, but I enjoyed it!” He turned the conversation to other matters and the time flew by quickly.

“Allow me to walk you home,” he said quietly as they made their way out of the yard.

“I can find my way home.”

Ignoring her prim comment, he fell into step next to her.
“Where is the very attentive Ned?”

“He went home.”

“He did not offer to accompany you?”

“Did Eileen?”

He laughed softly, “she did, but I told her that I would rather go on my own.”

“I am guessing she did not take that very well.”

“She did not...” He took her elbow to guide her over a rough patch of dirt road. A frown touched his brow as he looked up at the sky. A sullen group of angry gray clouds had covered the stars and a strong breeze had sprung up.

“It looks like...,” the words were not fully out of his mouth before the downpour started.

“My cottage is nearer!” He shouted as the rain came down in torrents in a very short time.

“No!” She tried to tug her arm away.

“Don’t be so damned stubborn,” taking her hand, he started sprinting, giving her no choice but to go along.

He opened the door and practically shoved her inside, closing it and locking it behind them. Mariel was shivering, her arms crossed over her breasts, the goosebumps raised on her skin. She was used to these sudden downpours and when they started, they could continue for the entire night.

“Where are you going?”

“We are going upstairs to get you out of those clothes before you catch your death.”

“No. I should”

“I am not going to ravish you, for god’s sake!” Taking her elbow, he marched her up the stairs and into his

bedroom. "Let me get a towel and find you a t-shirt." His eyes raked her sodden clothes before hurrying off into the bathroom. He came back shortly and handed her a towel.

"Let me find a t-shirt." Before she could protest further, he opened the drawer taking a gray t-shirt out. "You may go into the bathroom and change." Taking the shirt from him, she did just that.

Maurice took out some clothing and quickly changed into them. Using the extra towel, he had brought with him, he toweled his hair, placing it along with his soaking wet clothes onto the chair next to the bed.

She was taking an inordinately long time; he thought as he glanced at the closed bathroom door. He stood there for a minute, before leaving the room and going downstairs.

Mariel stared at her reflection in the mirror. She was in his home with all of her clothes off and wearing his T-shirt that smelled enticingly masculine.

He was large, so the shoulders were sagging, and the shirt reached her knees which was a good thing. She had kept on her underwear, even though it was soaking wet. She had used the towel to try and dry it as best as she could.

Her hair was another matter altogether. It was going to take hours for her to dry it without a blow dryer. She was using a towel to get rid of most of the water. She would politely ask him to put her stuff in the dryer and then get dressed and leave. If the rain continued, which she was certain it would, she would ask him to take her home.

She was in his home, the home of a man she despised. She closed her eyes as she recalled the day in his office and what they had done. How he had made her feel. Shaking the disturbing thoughts away, she concentrated fiercely on the task at hand.

Shaking back the still wet heavy hair, she scooped up the towels she had used as well as her clothing and opened the door. He was sitting on the sofa with a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table in front of him.

“I would offer scotch to warm us up, but I am not certain of your taste,” he murmured.

Mariel wanted to cross her hands over her chest as his eyes swept over her. “Could you put these in the dryer?”

“Certainly. Sit.” She bristled at the authority in his voice but complied anyway.

“You can relax, Mariel,” he told her dryly as she settled on the very edge of the sofa.

“I happen to like my women willing.”

Her eyes blazed at that. “Women, as in plural?”

He inclined his head mockingly as he handed her the glass of wine. "There goes your good opinion of me. Oh! I forgot. I am persona non grata as far as you are concerned."

"With good reason!" she said primly, trying not to smile.

"And what reasons are those?" Maurice leaned back against the cushions and stretched his long legs out. It was strange seeing her in the t-shirt that he had worn just a few days ago.

"You know them."

"Actually, I don't, and I would like them itemized to see if I cannot do something about them."

"You took my dad's place."

“I am a usurper, is that the term you used?”

She sent him a sizzling look. “And you do not belong here.”

“Because I am wealthy?”

“Precisely. You are going to get bored and be on your way. I have seen it happen before.”

“And based on that, you are tarring me with the same brush, before getting to know me.”

“You are heir to a fortune.” She reminded him.

“Something I have tried hard to forget,” he said sardonically.

“Why?” she demanded. “There are lots of perks for people with your kind of money.”

“There are,” he agreed, his eyes inscrutable. “And lots of worries to go along with it. I decided a long time ago that I wanted to make a difference - wanted to save lives and do whatever the hell I pleased.

I wanted to practice medicine, so I went to medical school.” He took a sip of the wine, his eyes never leaving hers. “My family life is complicated, to say the least, and I try my best to stay away from the drama.”

“Your pharmaceutical company has been embroiled in several scandals over the years.”

His mouth tightened at that. “So, it was. And I do believe it is my company, is it not? I am the sole heir to the fortune because my uncle cannot produce a child of his own, something that has made him bitter.”

“You are saying that you would happily hand over everything to someone else,” she gave him a skeptical look.

“Hell no,” he told her carelessly. “I would not say everything, because as you pointed out earlier, money has its perks.”

“And yet here you are living in a simple cottage?” She looked around the room with its cheap yet durable furnishings, careful not to look at the bed in the corner.

“You should see my apartment back home.”

“Are you trying to prove a point?”

“What would that be?”

“That you can understand what people with little or no money are going through.”

He studied her for a few seconds, his eyes lingering on her lush lips. The air inside the room had dried her hair somewhat and it was curling down her back with strands clinging to her face.

She was not wearing makeup, something he noticed she did not need. Sitting here in his bedroom, he knew that he had to have her and damn the consequences.

“Let me take those,” he gestured to the clothes she had placed onto the arm of the sofa.

She handed them to him hastily, jarred out of the sense of well-being the warmth of the room and the wine had settled inside her.

“I have to get going. I will come downstairs with you.”

“It is going to take at least thirty or forty-five minutes for these to dry and it is still raining,” he gestured to the

window where the drops were pounding against the glass, “drink some more of the wine....”

“I was thinking I could get a ride home.” She was biting her bottom lip and sending lust straight to his cock.

“Finish the wine!” He told her gruffly, before lunging to his feet and heading out of the room.

Mariel sat back against the cushions; her fingers lightly clasped around the stem of the glass. She should insist on him taking her home. She was inside his bedroom, and this was a small town.

If she was seen coming out of his cottage - the thought horrified her so much that she had to stop it from going further. She had a reputation to uphold. She was Mariel Antoinette James, a certified pediatrician, and daughter of a well-established doctor. Not a hint of scandal had ever touched her.

She had left her home to go to medical school in Boston and had decided to come back here because this was her home and she loved it. She was used to the people, used to leaving her doors unlocked. She was not going anywhere and could not afford to be gossiped about. It would not do.

Finishing the wine, she got to her feet at the same time he opened the door and came striding in.

“I really have to go.”

“Your clothes are in the dryer.”

“I should not be here.”

“What are you afraid of Mariel?”

“I did not give you permission to call me that.”

“What? Mariel?” He was slowly approaching her and the look on his handsome face sent warning bells echoing through her head. “Isn’t that your name?”

“Please don’t come any closer!” She stretched out her hand as if to stop his progress.

“Why not?” Taking her hand, he threaded his fingers through hers. “Because you are afraid of what is about to happen between us?”

“Nothing is going to happen.... What are you doing?” She whispered when he bridged the distance between them and pulled her against his hard body.

“Satisfying a curiosity!” His hands framed her face, fingers threading through her hair. “You are so tiny, yet so fiery.” His eyes were roving over her face hungrily, stopping at her mouth. “You have fought me at every turn. Why is that?”

“I don’t like you!” Her breath was hitching inside her throat, and she could feel the heat permeating her entire body.

“Don’t you? Or were you trying to deny the sexual attraction between us?”

“You flatter yourself.” The words were meant to be condescending but came out as a husky whisper.

“Mariel....” He broke off with a groan and she almost welcomed his lips eagerly. Certainly, she did nothing to stop the descent of his head and actually went on her toes so that she could meet him halfway.

Her lips parted, and her hands, which had been trapped between their bodies, inched up his chest where the muscles were bunching and flexing to find themselves around his neck. With a tortured groan depicting his great need, he plunged his tongue into her mouth and the passion exploded immediately!

His hands roamed restlessly up and down her back, settling for a minute on her bottom, where he squeezed the taut flesh, bringing her even closer to his rigid arousal.

He knew the instant she felt him, the gasp leaving her mouth to be swallowed deep into his throat. His skin was hot, the blood pumping through him with a force that made him faint.

His heart was thundering inside his chest and her nipples were driving him insane. Lifting her, he walked her backwards to the bed and without releasing her lips, pressed her back down and covered her body with his.

She made a token effort to resist, but his mouth was still on hers, kissing her with a thoroughness that was consuming them both. Easing sideways, he wrestled with the shirt she was wearing until he encountered bare flesh.

With impatient fingers, he dragged at the bra and broke the clasp, almost weeping with relief and pleasure as he cupped her small breast. The nipple was already rigid, and his fingers made them even more. He did not want to leave her intoxicating mouth, but he had to get to the rest of her.

Ending the kiss, he sat on his haunches, his knees on either side of her.

“No!” She whispered. Her eyes were bright with the fever of her passion, her lips swollen from his kisses. His cock was throbbing madly in the confines of his pants, and he felt as if he was going mad.

Lifting the hem of the shirt, he pulled it over her head and shoved the pale straps of her ruined bra away. A groan left his throat as he stared at the sheer perfection of her body.

“I can’t....”

“We have to,” he said thickly. He hurriedly took off his shirt and shoved his pants down. A gasp escaped her as she stared at his revealed sex. He had taken off his underwear and had not bothered to replace it and now he was before her nude.

“No....” She whispered again, her body trembling.

“I am not going to hurt you,” he assured her as he covered her body with his again, “I will try not to,” he kissed her cheek and then the tip of her nose, before going to her lips.... “I could do this all night.”

“We should not Oh!” she broke off with a cry as he moved his hips suggestively.

“Because you hate me.” He was kissing her throat and heading to her breasts. Her skin tasted like some sort of exotic body wash.

“Yes.”

“I hate you too,” his mouth had found the nipple and she felt faint with desire. Her fingers tugged at his thick hair, her body arching towards his.

“After this, we can go back to hating each other.” She cried out when his mouth closed around the nipple.

The sensation was incredible! Her body arched as he tugged and teased the tight bud until she was certain she was going to go out of her mind. He jammed a hand between them and pressed his palm down onto her sex before dragging the panties down and feeling the warmth of her flesh.

“Please!” She gasped, her body heaving towards his. He toyed with the sensitive flesh before plunging into the welcoming moistness of her. His fingers stroked her to near madness and before long she was panting, her body moving towards his fingers with an undeniable urgency.

“Not yet!” He whispered thickly, his mouth letting go of her nipple. Leaning on one elbow, he used the slick moisture from her to coat his cock, his body straining from the effort to try and control himself. Covering her body again with his, he edged in slowly, his eyes holding hers.

She smelled musky, the scent filling his nostrils and making him want to taste. He satisfied the craving by putting his fingers into his mouth and sucking hard. The erotic and titillating gesture broke his control and he drove into her hard. “I apologize,” he whispered against her lips as he tried to slow things down.

But she chose that very moment to wrap her slender legs around his trim waist, her body lifting towards his.

With a cry of complete surrender, he took her lips savagely as he started thrusting, his movements increasing until they were both spinning wildly into a volcano that swept them away, taking them to such impossible heights they feared they would never again descend. He swallowed her fevered cries as the climax held her in its powerful grip.

Maurice felt the base of his cock tightening and could have wept with regret. He did not want it to end, this sweet torture, her tightness wrapped around his cock - milking him of his life, his very essence.

He did not want it to! His body stiffened and dragging his lips from hers, he surrendered, his large muscular body shuddering on top of her as he poured his seed and could not stop.

Chapter 6

“I am crushing you,” he whispered against her ear. He was still buried deep inside her and it was a heady feeling, so much so that he did not want it to change.

“Get off me!” Mariel could feel the humiliating tears scorching the back of her eyes. She was going to have to face him at the clinic and even now, she was trying to find a way to leave gracefully without showing how destroyed she was.

She could not lie to him or herself by saying that she had not enjoyed this immensely. And she had carelessly not considered the consequence that could come of this.

She was not on the pills, because she had not been sexually active. She who was always the soul of caution and prudence had gone to bed with a man she not only worked with but who was technically her boss. Not to mention who he was and his reputation.

“You are regretting this?” He was kissing the sides of her mouth and generating more heat.

“What do you think?” She willed herself not to react to his muscular naked body pressed against hers and the fact that he was still buried deep inside her.

“It’s still raining.”

“I will not melt,” she held herself rigidly as he destroyed her control with his lips, “please get off me.”

“Not yet. Spend the night,” he urged thickly, his mouth drifting down to her throat.

“I made a mistake....” Her fingers were clenched into fists on the sheets, curling into the fabric. “And I hope we can be adults about this and not allow this – this lapse to affect our working together.”

She caught her lip between her teeth as he continued to nibble at her flesh. He was heading towards her breasts, and she knew without a doubt if that happened, if his mouth once touched her flesh, she would not be able to resist him.

“You are a sophisticated man of the world, and it was lovely, but I think we should agree to end things right here and now. You are not my type, and I am certain I am not yours. I am going to try and put this behind me and I suggest you do the same.”

He finally lifted his head and she had to stifle a sigh of relief.

“What exactly are you saying?” he asked her quietly.

“I am saying that we should put this behind us.”

“I see,” a shutter came over his face and a sardonic smile touched his lips.

“An error in judgement, is that how you would put it?”

“Yes,” she grabbed for that, “it’s been a while for me and this – you are an attractive man and you obviously have quite a lot of experience. I just want to thank you for sharing it with me.”

She saw when the shutter slipped, and his mouth tightened. “You want to thank me?” His deep voice was ominous and sent shivers along her spine.

“I appreciate.... “

“I get the picture,” he told her coldly. Mariel almost sighed out loud when he rolled off her. “Your stuff should be dry by now.” He reached for his clothes and dragged them on while she averted her head. “You can look now,” he told her sardonically, “the rain has abated somewhat, but I could drop you.... “

“No!” She ameliorated her tone as he stared at her. “I will be fine. It’s not that far.”

“Suit yourself,” he told her in a bored tone, “I will bring your clothes up.” Turning on his heels, he strode from the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Mariel took a moment to wallow in the shame and humiliation of her action before scrambling off the bed and picking up her underwear off the floor. Her bra was ruined, the broken clasp sending memories tumbling around inside her head.

Dragging on her panties, she tugged on the T-shirt he had loaned her. A knock sounded on the door, and she croaked out the command for him to come in. His eyes raked her over as he handed her the clothing.

“I will be downstairs!” He told her briefly before leaving the room. Almost sobbing with relief, she hurriedly got dressed and dragged her fingers through the tangled strands of her hair. She was going to be up almost half the night trying to sort it out. Heaving out a breath, she walked out of the room and down the stairs.

He handed her an umbrella as she came towards him.

“I will get it back to you.... “

“Keep it.’ He told her curtly, stepping aside to allow her to move past him. She had barely cleared the porch steps when he slammed the door behind her.

It was still drizzling heavily, but the umbrella shielded her from most of the water. She was so busy skipping potholes and craters the sudden downpour had caused that she did not think about what had happened at the cottage. Thankfully, it seemed like everyone had taken to the shelter of their home and she was the only one on the street.

She could not bear to think of what a curious neighbor peering through his or her curtain would have to say. She sighed with relief as she came upon her house and jogged the few steps to the porch, shook the umbrella out and let herself in.

She would leave it there until it was appropriate for her to give it back to him. Hurrying into the kitchen, she put the pot on and rummaged through the cupboard for the box of chamomile. It was then that it all came crashing back and she could feel the tears at the back of her eyes.

The man had just come into town, and she had looked on in contempt at the nurses and doctors vying for his attention. She had been very vocal in her condemnation of him and never once entertained the idea of even exchanging a meal, let alone a bed with him.

But she had done just that - not only had she allowed him privileges she should have kept for the man who was to be her husband, but she had also been careless enough to do so without any sort of protection. There could be a child and it would serve her right for not thinking. He was Maurice Steadman, a man of immense means.

She had taken a glimpse of the web page with his family and knew that no matter what he said, he was the heir to a fortune. And heirs have a certain kind of women they

take for wives. Not that she was interested in him that way.

The whistling of the kettle made her jump, and she stood up to go and turn off the flames. She was not going to shed another tear over it.

Hopefully, nothing will come of this lapse, and she would be able to go on with her duties at the clinic as usual. She would ignore him and if she was forced to consult with him, would do so in a polite manner. Firming her lips, she set about making her tea.

Maurice stared at the rumbled sheets for several minutes before walking over to strip the bed. She had put him down, basically letting him know that he was good for one roll in the hay and nothing more. His mouth curled bitterly as her words came crashing into his brain.

She thanked him! Had sounded like a queen bestowing a great privilege onto a lowly serf. They had produced such heat together that he wondered how they had not gone up in flames. And afterwards, she had told him in no uncertain terms that that was it. They were through before they even began.

Sitting down heavily on the side of the bed, he lifted the sheets and closed his eyes as her exotic scent assailed his nostrils. Sweet Christ! How he had reveled in her tightness wrapped around him. The feel of her body against his, her nipples - a groan escaped him, and he flopped back onto the bed, his body shuddering.

He had arrived in town intending to forget his life back home and work to build his name. To assure the locals that he could be trusted. He had not taken into account that something like this was going to happen.

She had taken him by surprise. He closed his eyes briefly and stayed that way for a few minutes. He needed a drink. He was on call early tomorrow, but he was going to have something to take the edge off the desire still raging through his body.

Mariel was definitely on edge. She kept expecting him to appear inside the doorway of her small office and jumped each time a parent appeared with a child.

She knew he was there, because she had seen his vehicle in the parking lot. Last night had been a trial for her as she found herself twisting and turning on the bed and had not closed her eyes until the early hours of the morning.

Forcing a smile on her lips, she greeted her patient and went about doing her examination.

“What is it doc?” Mable asked anxiously. “She has been crying all night last night and she has a temperature.”

“Sally, honey, can you stick out your tongue?” Mariel asked the little girl gently.

“My ear hurts,” she complained.

“Sorry to hear that,” Mariel peered into her throat and saw the redness there.

“Tell me if it hurts when I touch you here,” she gently touched the left temple and the little girl winced.

“A severe ear infection, it’s a wonder she is not screaming the place down. When did she start complaining?”

“While we were at the bonfire. I thought it was just something simple.”

“Next time, please do not delay. An infection like this could cause irreparable damage,” she turned to smile at the little girl, “but, first I am going to give you something for the pain and then antibiotics to clear up that nasty infection.”

“Can I get a lollipop? A red one?”

Mariel laughed softly, getting out her candy jar. “It seems to me that someone is feeling a little better,” she plucked out the sweet, “a red one for a very adorable child.”

“Thank you, doctor,” her mother said fervently.

“Eileen is at it again,” Angie murmured as she sipped her coffee, “I feel sorry for her. She was heard telling someone that the handsome doctor refused to invite her back to his cottage for a drink. And there she is hanging all over him today.”

Mariel had to force herself not to turn around and look at the topic of her friend’s gossip. It was the middle of the afternoon and so far, she had managed not to come in contact with him.

She was tired and confused, at odd times finding herself thinking back to what had happened between them last night. But no doubt, he had bounced back quite quickly and without looking back. Was he going to take Eileen back to his place? She found herself wondering wistfully.

“Can we please talk about something else? Anything else?”

“You are prickly today,” Angie gave her a curious look, “where did you disappear to after you left the park?”

“I went to see Jacob.”

“How is he?”

“As sprightly as usual,” a smile touched her lips.

“Eileen also said the good doctor went to visit him as well. Did you see him there?”

Marisol stirred the straw into her coffee to keep herself occupied. “As a matter of fact, I did. He was just leaving when I got there.” She was hoping the lie would not come back to bite her. “He set up a home care program for Jacob.”

Angie nodded. “So, I heard. He is doing some real good here, honey. I cannot for the life of me fathom why you dislike him so much.”

I don't dislike him, she thought despondently. One does not have torrid and uninhibited sex with someone that they dislike. One does not respond with such eagerness to a person they dislike. Or yearns to feel the touch of his lips on hers.

“I just do not trust him,” she said instead, “and I thought we were going to change the subject.”

“I don’t think he is interested in poor Eileen.”

Her senses perked up. “What makes you say that?”

“He is hardly listening to a word she is saying.”

Mariel’s pager went off just then. “Duty calls.” She got up and tossed the cup into the recycle bin, scrupulously avoiding looking in the couple’s direction as she headed out.

“Can’t we ask Dr. Steadman’s opinion?” The woman asked her sharply, her hands clasped in front of her. “The last time we were here, he was in on the discussion and made some very good suggestions.

The last thing I want is for my five-year-old daughter to go under the knife. You said it was just a chest cold, Dr.

James, and it has been almost a week now and it is not getting any better.”

“We will do an x-ray of the chest and see what pops up.”

“I still want Dr. Steadman to be in on the consult,” the woman said stubbornly, “I have known you for a very long time, Dr. James, and know you have Macy’s best interest at heart, but Dr. Steadman has more experience.”

Mariel hid her resentment and reminded herself that as a parent, the woman has a right to be scared.

“Will you get Dr. Steadman and ask him to come to the examination room, please?” She asked the nurse politely.

“Thank you,” Janet heaved a grateful sigh, “I hope you know it is no reflection on your skills as a doctor.”

“I understand!” She managed to keep her smile in place even when the man she had been avoiding for the entire day strode in.

“Dr. Steadman!” Janet jumped to her feet and greeted him with a wide smile.

“Janet, what brings you and the adorable Macy here today?” He greeted her with a charming smile, completely ignoring Mariel.

“Mrs. Lakewood would like a second opinion,” she informed him coolly.

“May I see her chart?”

She handed him her tablet without touching him. He gave her a glance before scrolling down to quickly read her notes. “You have set her up for a chest x-ray?” He asked her briefly.

“Yes.”

He nodded and started reading again. “What do you say, Macy?” He handed her back the device and walked over to where the little girl was sitting on the gurney and swinging her legs. “My chest hurts really bad,” she ended with a cough.

“We are going to see what is going on,” he pulled up the sliding stool and took off his stethoscope, “I am going to take a listen. Is that okay?”

She nodded solemnly. He gave her his reassuring smile as he listened to her chest carefully. “Take one deep breath for me. Ah, very good. Another?” He listened again.

“Thank you, Macy,” he told the little girl with a smile.

“Am I going to die?”

“Not if we can help it. Why don’t you go with Dr. James to the x-ray room while I talk with your mommy?”

She nodded, laughing in delight when he hoisted her off the bed and put her down in front of Mariel.

“Shall we, Janet?”

“Bronchitis,” he said promptly, examining the x-ray.

“It’s what I was thinking too,” Mariel responded coolly.

“We can set her on a course of treatments. Have you told the mother?”

“I thought that since she asked specifically for you, you should be the one to tell her the news,” she told him

stiffly. She did not want to be alone with him, but the technician had given them the room.

He eyed her for a minute before putting away the film.
“We are doctors, and our skin is supposed to be thick. We should also know better than to be offended because a person asks for a second opinion. We are dealing with people who are afraid of the unknown....”

“I do not need a lecture,” she flared at him.

“Of course not,” he retorted sardonically, “you do not need anything, do you? It must have burned you a hell of a lot when she asked for me. I am just surprised you sent to get me.”

“I am a doctor and no matter what my contempt is about you, I am a professional.”

“Contempt?” Maurice could feel the blood rushing into his ears and the anger racing through his body. He had

bloody well put up with her insults and rejection of him, but this was going too far!

“It was certainly not contempt I felt coming from you when you begged me to bring you release, last night, was it?” He asked her cruelly.

Her eyes flared and he saw when she sucked in her breath. “You absolute bastard!”

“This is neither the time nor the place,” he told her coldly, reining in his temper, “we have a parent and her sick child outside these doors waiting to be told of the child’s condition. You were the one who promised that we could work together without last night coming between us. Am I correct?”

Taking a deep breath, she bit back the words she wanted to hurl at him and nodded.

“Good. Let’s go and be doctors....” With that, he brushed past her and out the door.

She reached the graveside and was grateful that the quaint area with its arched gateway with angels and doves depicting heaven and flowers growing in wild abundance was empty of visitors.

The path leading to where her dad was buried next to her mom was a little muddy from the previous rain. Opening the trunk of her car, she hauled out her rain boots and took off the flats she had worn to the clinic this morning.

Putting them on, she walked forward and knelt in front of the one with her father's information written in a few words. Beloved husband, father, doctor, friend and a great lover of people. The year of his birth and death was also there.

A few words about a man who had been larger than life, she thought sadly as she placed the bunch of peonies and daisies on the grave.

She had also brought roses for her mother, a woman who had been taken before she even got a chance to know her. Her dad had spoken of her often and with love. "I have no idea what she saw in me," he would often say with a laugh.

"Oh dad, what would you think of me now?" She wondered aloud, brushing her fingers over the headstone. "I have made such a mess of things. Got myself involved with a man I am not certain you would approve of.

Slept with him after just a week of meeting him. Even now, I fear that I might be compromised. I have always been so careful, making sure that you were proud of me, always did everything right and now all that I have worked for will be gone if I"

She blinked back the tears, reluctant to speak the rest of it. She had no idea why Maurice Steadman brought out the worst in her. She had always been calm and collected, going about her duties with the professionalism that was required.

But ever since he came, he had stirred something inside her and each time, she felt like a volcano about to erupt. She hated him with a virulence that was shocking and yet, when he touched her, she had gone up in flames. Even inside the x-ray room, she had wanted to pounce on him and lash out and had been horrified at her lack of control.

“Oh, daddy. What am I going to do? How am I going to work with someone like him? He is a good doctor; I must admit, one of the best I have ever seen. He is thorough and fair and really loves his patients.

He is also committed to his work, but I cannot stand him. I really do not know what to do.” She sat there with her knees brought up to her chin as she stared across at the rows of graves and finally gave into the tears she had been keeping at bay since this afternoon.

Afterwards, she felt a cleansing and peace inside her. A smile touched her lips as she realized that the man who had been her rock had always been instrumental in making that happen. Getting to her feet, she touched the

grave again before walking over to pay her respects to her mother.

Chapter 7

He was gone the next day and Mariel realized she had mixed feelings. The announcement was made by Mrs. Flemings that they were going to have to do without the services of Dr. Steadman for now, because his uncle had a heart attack and was in the hospital.

“Maybe he is not coming back.”

“Don’t sound so hopeful honey,” Angie retorted as they made their way back from the conference room, “his things are still in the cottage and in his office,” she glanced at her friend and shook her head, “I mean your dad’s office.”

Mariel touched her hand briefly. “It’s his office now. I am beginning to accept that.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. From now on I am going to do my best to get on with him. Dad is gone and I have selfishly expected everyone to think of him still being here.”

“That’s only natural and he was a sweetheart.”

Maribel nodded. “He would have wanted us to find a replacement as soon as possible. He was that kind of person.”

“Only you do not approve of the replacement,” her friend stated shrewdly.

“He is doing well so far if he does come back.”

“He will,” Angie told her confidently, “Eileen was at his place last night.”

Mariel felt as if something had died inside her. The man moved fast! But what did she expect from someone like him? “Oh?” They were approaching her office where she had patients waiting, but she wanted to hear the rest of it, even if it kills her.

“She went to help him pack,” Angie said with a grin, “maybe she managed to persuade him to take her to his bed.”

“Angie, that’s”

“Being brutally honest?” Her friend wriggled her thinly shaped brows. “Face it, honey, the woman has been working overtime to get inside his cottage and now that has been accomplished.

I am pretty sure she did not leave him with a peck on the cheek. See you later.” With a desultory wave of one hand, she was gone, completely oblivious to the turmoil she had left behind.

Mariel made her way into the office woodenly, her heart hammering inside her chest. So, she had just been someone to have sex with until he was certain of Eileen. The humiliation of being just a notch on his belt was unbearable.

She had kept herself pure - having only one relationship that had ended in disaster and had made the mistake of sleeping with a man who wanted nothing more than one night. But you were the one who told him you wanted nothing more, remember? The voice taunted her.

“It does not matter....” She whispered hoarsely. Straightening her shoulders, she shook off the despair and smiled at the mother and son in her office.

Maurice could feel the weariness pervading every inch of his body. He had been driving for what seemed like forever and the plane ride had been a little bumpy.

He had received the news last night and his father had demanded that he come back in case that was the last time he would see his uncle alive. He had managed to consult with the doctor in charge and received an update.

“Possibly a heart transplant,” he had been told gravely.

He had not gotten along with the man, but he was his uncle and he had to be there. He hated leaving the clinic in the lurch, but the administrator had been sympathetic and had told him that, of course, he had to go.

“We will manage somehow.” His mouth tightened when he recalled how Eileen had come knocking just as he arrived home, insisting on helping him with the packing.

“I am fine. Thanks.”

“I insist!” She had barged in, and he had had no choice but to let her in. She had gone upstairs to pick things out

for him, and he had deliberately stayed downstairs in the kitchen.

He had offered her something to drink, ignoring the open invitation in her eyes and the disappointment when she had been ushered out. "I have an early flight and need to get some sleep," he had told her briefly.

His mind had strayed to the spitfire he was unable to get out of his mind. If it had been her that turned up at his door, he would have locked it and taken her upstairs, keeping her up until he was ready to leave this morning.

Shaking his head, he forced himself to stop thinking about her. What they had was over and he was going to have to try and forget her, however difficult that might prove to be.

He was met at the airfield by his sister and immediately, his weariness and troubled thoughts disappeared as soon as he saw her alight from the car. "What a welcome sight!" He opened his arms and she rushed into them. "You could have told me you were the one picking me

up. My journey would have been so much more pleasant.”

“I wanted to surprise you,” she hugged him tight and pressed her face into his chest, “oh Maurice, I am so happy you are here!”

“That bad, huh?”

“You have no idea. I am to take you straight to the hospital of course.”

“I need to stop at the apartment and freshen up a little.” he said firmly, “I am pretty sure that Uncle’s condition will remain unchanged for a few minutes yet.”

“You called the hospital?” Letting go of his hand, she went around to open her door.

“Naturally.” He glanced over at her and felt the fondness taking over. “They are talking about a transplant.”

His sister nodded as she backed out. “Dad is freaking out. I have never seen him like this before.”

“What happened?”

“They were having their usual shouting match when Uncle Milton suddenly grabbed his chest and then collapsed.”

“No doubt he feels responsible,” Maurice said sardonically.

She glanced at him before turning her attention back to the road.

“What?”

“I am hoping that you will be nice.”

“So, in other words, I should keep my opinions to myself.”

“Precisely.”

He chuckled and pressed the button so that he could lay back. “Wake me when we get there,” he told her as he closed his eyes.

But sleep would not come. He had tried that on the plane, but it had been a dismal failure. He had not been thinking about his uncle at all.

He knew the man was in very good hands. He had been thinking about her - his fingers clenched into fists as he recalled how passionate she had been - how unbelievably tight she was and how he had felt as if he was drowning in a pit of pleasure so intense that he could still feel it.

And how much he wanted it back. He had gone from not giving a rat's ass about a relationship to wishing that he could feel her in his arms again.

It was killing him to be in the same building with her and to be forced to stay away and not have anything to do with her.

She had made it abundantly plain that what they had was just a one-time thing. She told him that all she felt for him was contempt. But that was not true, and he knew it. She had felt something - the body does not lie, and he had felt the movements of her body, the frenzy and the panting coming from her parted lips.

She had responded to him with an urgency that had taken his breath away. And the orgasm had not been faked. She had cried out in her release, her fingers digging into his flesh. He wanted that again, so much that he could barely stand it.

“We are here.”

His eyes snapped open, and he had to shake his head to get rid of the erotic thoughts. “So, we are.”

“You took your sweet time.” Maximillian Steadman greeted his son with a growl. “The damn doctors are not telling me anything. Even after I reminded them that my company – our company is responsible for the state-of-the-art hybrid emergency room and the pediatric ward that is now housing several hundred sick children.”

“The doctors here tend to be all about the job and try not to be browbeaten by rich impatient old men,” Maurice told him dryly. The man had not hugged him or greeted him in a friendly manner, but he had not expected anything like that. “I had to make a stop and wash the travel off. I will go and see what I can find out.”

“I hope you are not planning on running back to that god-forsaken hole you have been at for the past two weeks.”

Maurice gave him a cool stare, taking into account that he was scared and trying to cover it with bravado. "I am going to be here for my uncle as best as I can and after that, I am leaving."

"Your family needs you!"

"Now is not the time or the place. Please excuse me."

"Stubborn fool!" Maximillian muttered as he sank back into the chair. "What?" He snapped at his daughter.

"You are very good at driving people away, aren't you?" She said quietly as she took a seat across from him.

"He is my only son!" He passed a hand over his forehead wearily. "A man expects his son and heir to be interested in the company that has been passed down from father to son for years."

"And my brother is determined to chart his own path."

He glared at her – eyes shooting fire. “You sound as if you admire him.”

“I do,” Marianne told him firmly, lifting her chin.

“He was the one who convinced you to move out of the manor.”

“And I am happy that I did,” she leaned forward, her expression pleading, “dad, you and Uncle Milton have been fighting ever since I can remember. You are always competing with each other. It has to stop.”

“He slept with my goddamned wife!” He hissed.

“A wife you barely acknowledged. Not to mention the fact that you have not one but two mistresses. I do not like her, but I can understand how neglected she must have felt.”

He glowered at her for a minute before looking away. "It was not a love match," he admitted gruffly.

"You never loved anyone the way you loved Maurice's mom, and my mother knew it."

He stared at her curiously as if noticing her for the first time. "You are in the legal department, is that where you feel most comfortable?"

If she was surprised by the unexpected question, she did not show it. "I am."

He nodded and muttered. "Good." Before settling back in the chair. "Go see what's keeping that brother of yours and grab me a cup of their god-awful coffee."

“You came!” Milton rasped as soon as he opened his eyes and saw his nephew seated there.

“I am here. How do you feel?”

“Like a damn baby,” he grumbled. “I am not doing the blasted surgery so if that is why you came, you wasted a trip.”

“I am going to ask you to take a breath and calm down. Your heart is laboring and settling down is a very good idea. If not the surgery, then your lifestyle is going to have to change drastically. You are staring death in the face.”

“You were never one to mince words.”

“You know me too well,” Maurice studied his chart, “all that drinking, and the red meat will have to go as well as the bedroom antics.”

His gray eyes flared. "Then I might as well be dead."

"You don't mean that. And your tastes in women leave a lot to be desired. The fighting with dad and the heavy competition will have to come to a halt. Am I clear?"

"Who do you think you are talking to?" His uncle bristled.

"A sick old man who refuses to act his age."

"If I was not in the bed with tubes coming out of my ass, I would be whipping yours."

"You are as weak as a day-old baby and even if that was not the case, I have youth and good health on my side!" Maurice put the chart away and took notice of the ashen and pasty color of his skin. "Dad is in the waiting room, chomping at the bits. If I allow him to come in for a visit, will you both be civil?"

"Send him in and you can play referee," he said gruffly.

“I would like you to be cognizant of the fact that you are more dead than alive.”

“Your bedside manner sucks.”

Maurice grinned at him, “I reserve these tough talks for family and friends. I am a pussycat with my patients.”

His uncle eyed him balefully. “Thinking of running back to that hell hole you retreated to?”

“Right after I am convinced that you are following doctor’s orders.”

“He misses you,” he said quietly, “he might behave as if he is independent and does not need anyone, but it is a damned lie.”

“He has you,” Maurice pointed out.

“I am no substitute for his only son,” he plucked at the hospital gown, “when the doctors told me that I would never be able to produce a child, that by some fluke, my sperms were not viable, I wanted to curl up and die.

Every male in our family has been able to produce, except me. I was bitter and angry, and it just ate at me.” He gave a harsh sigh. “I am afraid I have allowed all of that to get under my skin and control my life.”

“And now you have a second chance to get it right.”

“Yeah!” There was a disconsolate look on his face. “Get my brother in here. We need to have a chat.”

“I cannot believe they actually had a civil conversation,” Marianne handed him the beer before plopping down at

the opposite end of the sofa and stretching her legs out across his lap. "What did you say to uncle?"

"I warned him that his life was going to hell, and he needs to alter the way he does things."

Maurice hunched his shoulders to get the kinks out. He had made a few calls to the clinic to find out how things were going and had been told that they were doing okay. He had hung up each time, barely managing to stop from asking after her.

"When are you going back?"

"As soon as I know he is out of danger."

"Dad wants you to stay," she offered quietly.

He sent her a quizzical look. "Here to plead his case?"

“I told him that you have to do your own thing.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“He accused me of being on your team,” she sipped some of the wine, “he sounded mellow.”

“Mellow?”

Marianne shrugged and slid deeper into the cushions. “Maybe mellow is not the word I am looking for. He sounds as if he is tired. He did admit that your mother was the love of his life.”

He barked out some laughter. “That’s because mother did not take any crap from him.” He sent her a sober look. “Your mother was not that bad for a stepmother, but she was very intimidated by him and with Maximillian Steadman, you have to show force and let him know you are willing to give as much as you get.”

“What was she like?”

Maurice took a long swallow of the beer and turned his thoughts inwards.

“Tough and fair and beautiful. She was also full of life. I lost her when I was only six, but I can still recall her lilting voice whenever she tucked me in.”

“You miss her.”

“I miss her,” he acknowledged, “she was gone too soon – an aneurysm and that was the end of her.”

“That was the reason you decided you wanted to save lives.”

“Part of it. The next part was a very great need to piss off the old man.”

“But you love it.”

He nodded with a whimsical smile. “There is nothing I would rather be doing.” He massaged her toes. “Have you found your niche in the company yet?”

“I have. I am not settled yet, not quite. But I love the mechanism and the dynamics of a multi-billion-dollar company. I am just getting my footing and I am enjoying every minute of it.”

“I am happy about that.”

She was silent for a minute before she spoke again. “Are you coming back?”

“Hopefully not right now.”

“You love it there.”

“It’s different,” he admitted, “the people are incredibly friendly and open with their affection,” he smiled at her, “and they offer a lot of baked goods. I am in danger of getting fat.”

“Any special woman caught your eye?”

He raised the bottle to his lips and concentrated on swallowing it. “No,” he told her abruptly. His phone rang just then, and he noticed that it was the hospital. “I have to take this.”

Mariel wanted to scratch the woman’s eyes out. Eileen was seated at the table and was delighted to let them know she had heard from Maurice as she referred to him. She had no idea why the woman had joined her and

Angie and wanted to tell her to get the hell away from their table.

“The poor dear sounded so tired,” she chirped, eyes dancing as she looked at them, “I had to tell him firmly to go and get some sleep. But he told me he was going to his club tomorrow. Apparently, they are having some big to do there and he wants to be part of it.”

“I am surprised he has not invited you,” Angie said sarcastically.

The sarcasm went right over Eileen’s head, and she was quick to tell them that he insisted she stayed here. “I am looking forward to his return. There is so much I have to discuss with him. You do know that I went over there to help him pack?”

“So, you told us several times.”

“How is his uncle?”

“Coming along. With all that money, they are going to be doing all they can to ensure his recovery. I am thinking of stopping by his cottage to make sure everything is straightened up for his return.”

“And when will that be?” Mariel asked, almost grinding her teeth at the woman’s constant inference at the nature of her relationship with the hated man.

“He is not quite certain yet.”

“And he left you, his key?”

They both saw when she floundered and realized that he had done no such thing.

“He left a key with his housekeeper.”

“So, in other words, you are going to hijack the poor woman and demand that she hands you the key.”

Eileen gave Angie a baleful look before glancing at her timepiece. “I have to go. Duty calls.”

“Lying bitch,” Angie muttered as soon as she was out of earshot.

“She sounds as if she has heard from him,” Mariel pointed out.

“Only because she probably did the calling. The man must be sick and tired of her about now.”

“We do not know the nature of their relationship. She did go over to pack for him. She might have spent the night.”

“Not a chance. I heard it from a very good source that she left ten minutes after arriving. The good doctor booted her out.”

For some reason, that made Mariel feel as if a weight had been lifted from her chest. She had spent last night crying and feeling sorry for herself that she had allowed him to touch her in that way. “I think she really likes him, and he might be open to a relationship with her.”

“Fat chance about that,” Angie finished her coffee and stood up, “I have to run in to change Manuel’s dressing and when he gets to talking, there is no stopping him.”

“Has he proposed again?” Mariel asked in amusement.

“Three times since this morning. The man can barely lift his head from the pillow but is promising heaven on earth.”

“He just might be able to deliver,” Mariel told her with a laugh.

“Bite your tongue. See you later. Are we still on for movies and popcorn?”

“I set up the projector on the deck.”

“Great. I could use the mindless distraction.”

“So could I,” Mariel said quietly.

She waved a hand as her friend hurried away, the dejection settling over her. She was discontented and for the life of her, she had no idea why.

Chapter 8

“Your fever has gone down,” Mariel told him in relief.
“Your blood pressure is a little high, but it is not worrisome.”

“It was good of you to take the time to come out, my dear,” Jacob told her warmly, “I know how busy you doctors are. Speaking of which, when is Dr. Steadman coming back?”

Mariel gave a slight start at the sound of his name. He had been gone a week now and she was convinced he would not return. She had read about his uncle’s rehabilitation and heard from Mrs. Flemings that the man was progressing. “I am not certain.”

“Could you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“I would like to speak to him.”

“I will give Amy his number”

“Could you, do it?” He pleaded. “Amy is a dear but she can barely see the screen. I would like what your young people call, a face time with him.”

“You would like me to video call him?” Mariel was not certain she wanted to see his face. It would remind her that she had been thinking of him and was unable to forget the night they had spent together.

“Would you?”

“What time is it?” She hedged as she glanced at her watch. “It’s after eight, I am not certain....”

I am pretty sure he is still up.”

Stifling a sigh of irritation, she reached into her pocketbook for her phone and dialed his number, hoping that he would not pick up. But he did on the second ring. The sight of his larger-than-life face filling up the screen sent her heart racing.

“There is someone who wants to speak with you.”

“Good night to you, too,” his deep voice sent shivers along her spine.

“Here you are Jacob,” she handed the man the phone and stepped back to put away her instruments. She tried not to listen to the conversation but found herself doing so anyway.

“You will be coming back soon? I have to admit that you have pretty much grown on me, and I look forward to your visit.”

“I will be back by Saturday night.”

“That is wonderful news. It looks like you have some sort of festivity going on.”

“I am at my club, and we are hosting a charity function to raise awareness for breast cancer. Hence the noise.”

“I will not keep you any longer. My dear Dr. James is about to leave now, and I have to allow her to get her beauty sleep. I will see you when you get back.”

“Of course.”

Jacob handed the phone to her, and she was about to hang up when he spoke. “May I have a word with you?”

She nodded. “Jacob, I will see you soon.”

“Thank you, my dear.”

She left the room and went along the passageway to the front door where Amy was just coming in.

“How is the old codger?”

“Doing well now. Just give him some tea. I already gave him his medicine.”

“Thanks, doc. Drive safe.”

She waited until she had gotten into her car before she turned her attention to him.

“What is it?”

“Is that any sort of greeting for a man you have not spoken to in a week?” The teasing note in his voice irritated her.

“We are not friends.”

“We are more than that. Miss me?”

Her eyes flashed. “Not at all. I was hoping you had come to your senses and decided to stay home.”

“Mountain Glades is my home. Shall I tell you how much I miss you?”

Her heart knocked at her ribs, and she had to force herself not to take him at his word. Just then a beautiful African American woman wearing a tight-fitting red dress came into her line of vision. “Darling, you are needed in the card room,” she told him, touching him with a familiarity that sent a strange pang through her heart.

“I will be right there. Where were we?”

“I was just about to hang up,” she told him coldly, “I am certain whoever that was, has a need for your attention.”

He frowned at her for a second and then his brow cleared. “No need for jealousy, darling. That was the wife of one of the members and believe me, if I even looked at her twice, he would rearrange my face. And I am not into married women.”

She told herself that the feeling rushing through her body was not relief. “It’s none of my business.”

“Is it not?” He asked her softly. “I have been trying to get you out of my head, but it’s not working. Will you be at the cottage when I arrive?”

“Absolutely not!” She felt a rush of heat at his words.

“Why not?”

“I am pretty sure that Eileen would be more than willing to be there for you.”

“I want you. Can you honestly tell me that what we did, what we shared that night is not still lingering in your thoughts?”

“It’s not.”

“I said honestly, Mariel. And you have a very expressive face. I know you are lying.”

“So, it was memorable. It does not mean I would like a repeat performance.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I have a reputation to uphold,” she told him stiffly.

“So, do I. But the fact of the matter is, I want to taste you again, to feel your slender curves against mine. Besides we did not use anything. There might be consequences....”

“I am safe!” She rushed on breathlessly, her body burning up with embarrassment. He would never know how disappointed she had been when she felt the pain in her abdomen and saw the evidence on the seat of her underwear that nothing had come from their one night of passion. “I - my - er - my monthly came.”

“Good,” he nodded, “I would not want to introduce a child into the relationship at this point. I want us to get to know each other first.”

“We are not in a relationship.”

“Are we not?” His green gaze was sending heat radiating throughout her body. “I would like to see you when I arrive Mariel. If you do not come to me, I am afraid I will be coming to you.”

“You would not dare.”

“Try me,” he said softly, “see you on Saturday,” he hung up before she could say anything else. Leaning back, she closed her eyes and pressed a hand against her stomach. Of course, she was not going to go to his place. She would be a fool to even entertain the thought.

“You look like a man with a lot on his mind. And you did not do justice to the very lively card game we had going on. Scotch, neat for me, Fred.” He told the bartender.

“Coming right up, Dr. Alek.”

“Can you afford to lose so much at the tables?” Alek continued in amusement. “And I see you have been nursing that drink for the past fifteen minutes.”

“I am pretty certain you have something better to do than to watch me drink.”

“Not at this moment, no.”

“Where is your lovely wife?”

“At work. She just called to check on me.”

“So, in other words, you are well and truly whipped.”

“And loving every minute of it.” Alek accepted his drink and turned his dark eyes to the man hunched over on the stool. “You look troubled. I thought Milton was over the worst.”

“He is and is as irascible as usual. Which means he is almost back to his old self.”

“But not the same bad habits that got him into that position?”

Maurice shook his head. “He is ordered to be on bed rest and he and dad seem to be trying their best to get along and not kill each other.”

“And yet here you are looking as if someone killed your dog,” Alek said mildly, “how is the small town?”

“Grateful for my expertise,” he smiled mirthlessly, “I have gotten more than I bargained for.”

“A female, I take it?”

“What else?” he asked sardonically. “A doctor who thinks I am lower than pond scum.”

“And pray tell my friend, what did you do to piss her off?”

“Nothing. She thinks I am not good enough to step into her dad’s hallowed shoes. I have to admit the guy was the very pillar of the community and people speak highly of him.”

“You like her.”

“I did not want to. She pisses me off at every turn.”

“Sounds very much like what I had with my wife,” he smiled whimsically; dark eyes gentling, “she would get up in my face and for such a small thing, she packs quite a punch. I often felt like strangling her.”

Maurice gave the man an amused stare. “And now you are head over heels in love with her.”

“I adore her,” he admitted ruefully, “we still get into massive fights, mostly because she thinks she is

supposed to be the man in the relationship, but the makeup sex is quite intense.” A smile touched his lips as he stared at his friend. “You are thinking that you have found such a woman.”

“I was not looking for anything like that and her opinion of me stinks. She thinks I am this rich guy who is out for a fling.”

“But that is not the case.”

Maurice shook his head. “It is much more than that and it is going to take some convincing on my part to get her to let me in.”

Alek slapped him on the back. “If you need some advice, you know who to call.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“You are not supposed to be drinking,” Maximillian pointed out as his brother poured himself a stiff drink.

“Are you the alcohol police?” He growled, hobbling over to sit on one of the comfortable sofas in the blue and white sitting room.

“No, but I am!” Maurice marched in firmly and took the glass away from him, taking a sip from it before going to sit across from the two men. “You are supposed to be monitoring him.” He pointed the glass at his dad.

“Try reasoning with him. He is as stubborn as hell,” his father grumbled, “where did you come from?”

“I am just now getting back from the club and my timing is perfect.” He sent his uncle a hard look. “You are on powerful antibiotics and mixing it with alcohol is asking for problems.”

“The pills make my dick limp.”

“Then it is a good thing you are not supposed to be using it.”

“I do not want to lose it.”

“You would prefer to lose your life,” he looked at his dad,
“I thought he was the smart one.”

“Now you know better.” Maximillian shoved to his feet and went to pour himself a glass of bourbon, taking perverse delight at the look of longing on his brother’s face.

“You are enjoying my incapacitation, aren’t you?” he asked darkly.

“No brother, I feel for you. I am actually drinking this for both of us.”

“You are an unfeeling bastard.”

“Children!” Maurice called out mildly, stretching his long legs out. “I am here to say my goodbyes.”

Both men trained identical gray eyes at him.

“You would leave in our time of need?”

“You are under the best care that money can buy, and I have every confidence in the doctors monitoring your recovery.

It’s up to you and you ...,” he shot a glance at his father, “to see that you follow orders. You have to decide here and now if you want to live to see another week. I cannot stress enough what your body and especially your heart went through.

No more arguments to elevate your stress level. And this ...,” he lifted the glass, “is not medicine, it will actually serve to weaken your heart even more. Stick to mild liquids and keep up to date on your medication. And stay away from the females. You are not as young as you would like to believe.”

“You are just as cold a bastard as he is,” his uncle grumbled, throwing a glare at his brother.

“You are a pain in the ass, but I for one, would like to see you survive,” his brother told him soberly, “I have already forgiven you for sleeping with that – that woman I made the mistake of marrying.” He stared hard at his brother. “Were you in love with her?”

“No,” he responded abruptly, “I wanted to piss you off as usual and I felt sorry for her. You did leave her to her own devices a hell of a lot.”

“And you took it upon yourself to play Sir Galahad. Nice.”

“It did not faze you one bit, did it?” His brother asked him dryly. “You were more upset that I had betrayed you.”

Maximillian grunted at that. Maurice had been watching the interplay between the two men and trying to hide his amusement. It seemed his uncle’s sudden illness had managed to bridge the gap between the two men.

“It seems my work here is done.”

He was about to finish his drink and get ready to leave when his father waved him back.

“You are not going to change my mind,” he warned.

“I am aware of that,” the man said with a sigh, “you are as stubborn as they come. But you do have a point.”

“And that is?”

“All of this ...,” he waved a hand to encompass them both. “Your heart attack and you leaving,” he nodded to his son, “it has me thinking and I am about to have a meeting with the PR team to try and get our image the way it should be. Your sister actually has some ideas on how to get that going. She is quite the smart young lady.”

“I already knew that.”

“Are you happy at that place?” His father asked him quietly.

“I love it there,” he admitted reflectively, “it’s quiet and peaceful and I like how different it is. I needed to get away.”

Both men nodded.

“I will be calling for regular updates.”

“And you will come and visit?” His uncle asked him gruffly.

“Whenever I get a chance. There is a tennis tournament in October at the club and I have committed myself to play.”

“We have not been close ...,” his father began.

“And no doubt we will never be,” Maurice ended with a slight smile, “but we are family and I have a healthy respect for such. I am only a phone call away and you can always send the jet for me.”

“It’s a company plane and you are not part of the damn company.”

“You are right,” he replied with a careless grin. He said his goodbyes and left the two men talking amiably.

Mariel had no idea how she managed to make it through the rest of the week. By the time Saturday came around, she was a nervous wreck. How dare he put her in this position! she thought angrily.

And after issuing that edict, he had not bothered to call her. No doubt he was just teasing, trying to get a rise out of her. Well, he was going to be extremely disappointed. She was a grown-ass woman who was not going to allow a man like him to get under her skin.

With that in mind, she went about her duties at the clinic with a smile on her lips, even though the constant reminder from Eileen that he was coming back tonight made her want to grind her teeth in frustration.

Let the woman go and greet him, she did not care. She only knew she was not going to be the one to do so. And when she saw him on Monday, she was going to be very professional and not let him get under her skin.

She would chalk the time she had spent with him as a moment of insanity, never to be repeated. And she was mature enough to move on from that mistake. Straightening her shoulders, she went into the room to see her patients.

“You promised you would come and visit,” he reminded her. She had spent the night at his old apartment and helped him pack. He would have preferred being alone for the night to reflect, but this was his sister, and he loved her company. It did not matter that he was eight years her senior and they were from different mothers.

“I will find the time,” she folded his shirt neatly and put it away, “I wish you would stay longer,” she added wistfully.

“You know I cannot. I have already stayed longer than I anticipated!” Taking her hand, he led her to the sofa. “I have exactly fifteen minutes before I have to catch my flight.”

“I cannot believe you are flying commercial.”

“I refused the use of the jet for obvious reasons. The people or some of the people in that town think I am just a rich boy trying to get away from his problems,” he tugged at a thick sable brown lock of hair. “I am determined to prove that I am not.”

“You will be coming home sometime, will you not?”

“Honestly, I do not know,” he told her soberly, “I love it there, Mar. It’s peaceful and there is no pressure.

Dad and Uncle Milton are getting along better now, but there are still some awful memories that I cannot get rid of,” he took her hand in his, “any time night or day if you ever need to talk or bounce ideas around, give me a call. I will always pick up.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He gave her a sharp look. “Unless there is something else.”

“It’s just...,” she shrugged and stared at their joined hands. “There is someone.”

“You are too young....”

“You sound like dad.”

“God forbid,” he muttered, “who is this someone and do they know who you are?”

“He works in the finance department.”

He stared at her with a frown. “You already know how that is going to play out.”

“Yes!” She shook her head dejectedly. “I really like him.”

“And he is probably thinking that you are his meal ticket to a promotion,” he shook his head at the look on her lovely face. “You are a Steadman, and you happen to be gorgeous. You are also educated and have everything going for you. Don’t be so quick as to want to rush into a relationship.”

“I am not talking about marriage.”

“I should hope not.”

“Please don’t go all big brother on me.”

“I happen to be your big brother and am here to warn you of the pitfalls of being who we are,” he told her grimly, “check the guy out and be cautious. You are not merely an employee at the company. You are a Steadman and people will always be reminded of that.”

What is he telling you? That he is not into you for your money?"

"He is intimidated by my name and the fact that we cannot simply go out and have a cup of coffee," she said angrily. "I want a life - something where I am not reminded every single time that I am Maximillian Steadman's daughter."

"I can relate to that," he squeezed her hand gently, "but take it slow. I have seen women coming at me because of what I can do for them. I do not want you to get hurt."

"I cannot exist in a bubble, Maurice."

"I am aware of that," he got to his feet and pulled her up with him, "take it slow and if this guy is the real thing, he will respect that. I would hate to have to come back here and beat the crap out of him."

She shook her head at him. "Between you, dad and uncle Milton, I am going to remain single until I die."

“You are too beautiful for that,” he kissed her cheek, “now I really have to run. The car should be downstairs waiting.”

“I would have happily taken you to the airport!” She murmured, linking her hand through his arm as they made their way out of the bedroom and along the passageway and down the stairs.

“I know. But I also know you are going into the office shortly,” he kissed her on the cheek, “please take care of yourself and I need updates.”

“I miss you already,” she hugged him tight as they reached outside where the Uber was waiting.

“I will call you as soon as I get there!” He hugged her again, before stowing his case into the back and getting into the back. Waving at her as the driver made his way out of the parking lot, he settled back and closed his eyes briefly. He was looking forward to his return.

Chapter 9

She was dozing in and out when she heard the pounding on her front door. Even though she had told herself that she was definitely going to ignore what he had said to her about coming to her place if she was not at the cottage, she had stayed inside the living room instead of going upstairs to her bed.

The pounding on her door had her starting, her heart hammering inside her chest. For a fleeting moment, she thought about leaving him out on her front porch and simply going up to bed.

Her next-door neighbor was not that near and old Mr. Elderberry was deaf and would certainly not hear the ruckus he was creating. But others might pass and see him standing on her porch.

With an irritated sigh, she got up and tightened the sash around her robe, regretting that she had chosen to put on a black lace one, that she had previously bought

online. No doubt with his massive ego, he was going to think it was for his benefit.

Peering through the peephole, she opened the door just as he raised his fist to pound on it again.

“Did I wake you?” His green eyes wandered over her sleepy face and settled on the delightfully tousled hair.

“What do you think?” she asked rudely, blocking the entrance and ignoring the windblown hair and how the casual baby blue shirt fitted his muscular frame. “You were making enough noise to raise the dead.”

“Just you and you can just imagine my acute disappointment when I stopped at the cottage, and you were not there. Aren’t you going to let me in?”

“It’s late...,” she broke off with a gasp when he shouldered his way in and closed the door shut. “I did not say you could come in!”

“You did not say I couldn’t,” he pointed out, “now how about a proper greeting? I have been traveling for hours and am dead on my feet.”

“Perhaps you should go home and get some sleep.”

“Sleep is not what I have in mind.” He hauled her into his arms, wrapping his arms around her neck to hold her fast against his body.

“You smell nice. ” His mouth had drifted to her cheek when she turned her head away. She knew she had made a mistake when he zeroed in on her exposed neck and started nibbling. “Like something to eat and savor. And I intend to do both.”

“You have some nerve!” She was trying to fight the heat pouring through her body at his touch but was rapidly failing. “You went away without a word and spent time with God knows who and you expect me to just open my legs-”

“And your heart,” he was pushing away the shoulders of the robe, “and you know damn well why I did not say anything to you about leaving. You were not speaking to me.” She broke off a squeal when he hoisted her into his arms.

“Put me down!” She thumped at his chest, her eyes blazing at his arrogant dismissal of her puny strength against his. “I am sure if you called Eileen....”

“I did!” He was bounding up the stairs easily. “I told her definitively that I was not interested, and she should not bother coming to the cottage.” He spied an open door and assumed correctly that it was hers.

A glimpse of cool green and yellow decor met his eyes as he walked in and sat on the edge of the bed with her on his lap. “I wanted to tell her that my interest lies with a certain prickly pediatrician who has stirred my senses since I got here.”

Her heart slowed down and then picked up speed at that. “We hate each other.”

“Do we?” Turning aside, he dumped her onto the bed and trapped her body with his. “Or was all that anger and resentment leading to this?” He touched his lips to hers and she was lost. But she made one last effort, pushing at his chest.

“I don’t want to be in anything with you.”

“Prove it.”

“I just said it.”

“You are going to have to do better than that darling,” his deep voice was laced with amusement, “your tight little nipples are saying otherwise.”

“A natural body’s reaction to sexual stimulation,” she retorted.

“Leave it up to me to have the hots for a woman who knows her anatomy, inside out,” he murmured with a chuckle, “be scientific all you want, darling, but it does not change the facts.”

“And those are?”

“We are burning up for each other. Right now, without even checking, I can guarantee that you are wet.”

“You are disgusting,” but the heat was almost swamping her.

“I am going to be even more so,” she stiffened and let out a moan when he jammed a hand between their bodies.

His eyebrows shot up when he encountered bare skin, “you were waiting for me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she breathed. “I just took a shower and decided not to ...,” she bit her lip to stop crying out as his fingers found the kernel of swollen flesh.

“Why don’t I believe you?” He whispered hoarsely, his fingers slick and slippery from the evidence of her desire.

“Because of your massive ego. Please stop.”

“You are primed and ready sweetheart,” he dove in even deeper, his cock reacting as she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

“I am just Oh!” She rolled her head, her hands reaching up to grab his shoulders. “Damn you.”

His head descended and her lips parted eagerly. She could not deny it any longer. She wanted to feel him against her, inside her.

“Tell me you want me.” he urged against her lips.

“No.”

“Tell me.”

“No! Oh please!” She was almost sobbing as he increased the pressure, ruthlessly milking her.

“Tell me!” He demanded harshly, green eyes glittering.

“Tell me!”

He was slowly taking his fingers out and she almost cried and lashed out at him not to take the pleasure away.

“I want you!” She sobbed.

“Very well.” He plunged into her so deep that her body arched and trembled. But he did not want her to come yet. Not until he was deep inside her and he was still fully clothed.

He wanted to feel her flawless skin against his, wanted to do it just right. He had spent the duration of the trip just dreaming about this very moment and he wanted the chance to savor it.

“I need to get these clothes off.”

“This is”

“No!” Getting on his knees, he hastily pulled at the buttons, destroying some of them. But he did not care. He knew exactly what she had been about to say and realized that if he once removed himself from her, she was going to do her best to fight what she was feeling, and he could not let her.

“I have protection,” he added thickly. He was burning up, the yearning to possess her was so intense that he was almost incoherent. “Don’t deny us.” Swinging his legs off, he hastily pulled his denims and underwear off, coming back to straddle her.

“Want to do the honors, darling?” He tore at the plastic wrap to get to the thin rubber.

“No....” Her voice was a thin whisper.

“Sure?” He peeled the rubber over his throbbing cock, his eyes locking with hers.

“Yes.”

“Next time then.” He lowered himself and covered her body with his. “I have longed for this.” His mouth was busy at her neck. “I was impatient to get back to you, to this”

“I am sure there are hundreds of women Oh, please!” Her body arched as his lips seized her already tortured nipple and suckled ruthlessly. “I cannot...,” her fingers found his thick hair and dug in, her body arching towards his. The heat was incredible! She felt as if she was melting from the inside out!

A cry escaped her when he shoved a hand between them to toy with the swollen flesh that had become sensitive beyond belief.

“Not yet, sweetheart,” he grunted, releasing the soaking wet nipple, “I want us to come together. I want to feel you wrapped tight around my cock.” His fingers were trembling as he guided himself into her entrance. “Tell me you want that too.”

“Just....” Biting her lip, she turned her head away and blinked at the tears. She could not believe this was her. She was behaving like an animal in heat. She had never lost control before and now she was in danger of begging him to take her.

“Just what?” He was now fully sheathed, and the feel of her tightness wrapped around him was making him dizzy with need.

“Just do it already.” She whispered.

“Not the most romantic entreaty, but good enough,” his hands framed her face and his head lowered. “You feel wonderful. Tight and sweet.” His breath stirred her lips and made her faint.

“I want this to last the night into the morning. I want to screw you until you are weak with need. I want to taste every inch of your delectable body until I know what you taste like - every inch of your body and you are going to let me. Is that understood?”

“I hate you,” she whispered raggedly, her fingers digging into his chest where the furrows of hairs grazed her skin.

“You don’t hate me, sweetheart. Your body says differently!” He traced the outline of her full bottom lip and felt her tremors. A cry escaped her as he bit down hard, sucking the flesh into his mouth.

Her body lifted towards his and forced him to do the same even though he was not ready. He knew instinctively that as soon as he started to move, it would be all over for him, and he wanted it to last. He had not said anything to her, but he was staying the night and it did not matter what she said.

His body surged into hers with a force that shoved her against the padded headboard. He seized her lips in a kiss that had her clinging to him, her hands racing up and down the corded muscles of his back as she lifted her body to meet his - the frenzy evident in her movement.

He jerked slightly when she dug her blunt fingernails into his shoulders, and he knew what was coming. The powerful climax had her eyes widening. She fought him to release her lips, her cries echoing around the room, her slender body shaking uncontrollably.

Easing out of her slightly, he tried to slow things down for himself. But it was a failed effort. The base of his cock was tight, and his heart was hammering so hard against his ribs that he felt faint. Bowing his body, he drove into her, fingers gripping her hips as the climax shuddered through him, leaving him weak and spent.

“Don’t move,” he ordered thickly, “not yet.” His lips were busy at her neck, taking little love bites. She was still trembling, her fingers still clutching at him.

“Get off me!” She whispered.

“Not a chance darling,” he blazed a trail along her neck until he reached her throat.

“I would like to get up.”

“Hmm....” He was swirling his tongue into the hollow of her throat.

“Maurice....”

His head jerked up, green eyes glittering as he stared at her. “Say it again.”

“What?”

“My name. That’s the first time you ever said it and it sounds wonderful.”

“You are a moron.”

“Perhaps,” he smiled at her whimsically.

“This does not mean anything.”

“On the contrary, it means everything.”

“What do you mean by that?” She had stopped fighting him and a glorious lassitude was stealing over her.

“You do not get to snipe at me and pretend you hate me.”

“I do hate you.”

His eyebrows arched and she pursed her lips in a way that made him want to devour them.

“I do not like you,” she amended, glowering at him, “I suppose you are privately gloating.”

“At?”

“The fact that you got me to ...,” she dropped the hands that were still clutching his chest, “I refuse to be another

notch on your belt.”

“There are not that many,” he trailed a finger down her cheek and along her bottom lip.

“Well, I am not going to be one in your long list of women.”

“Okay. What if I say it stops with you?”

Her eyes flared at that, and she snorted. “Then I would be a damn fool if I believed you.”

“Shall I prove it to you?” He asked her softly.

She was not liking the lazy gleam in his emerald-colored eyes.

“Nothing you say....”

“I was going to do a show and tell.”

She watched in alarm as he eased out of her and reached between them to get rid of the sodden condom, dumping it carelessly onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” She squeaked.

“Showing you how much you excite me.” He started with the tip of her nose and then her chin.

“Look, I really think you should Oh, damn you! Will you stop?”

“Not yet. I am about to prove my point.”

“You don’t have to,” she pushed at him desperately as he kissed the top of one breast, “I believe you.”

“I am afraid I cannot take your word for it,” he murmured before swirling his tongue over the raised flesh.

“Maurice”

“Love it when you call my name,” he was toying with the nipple and sending white hot darts shooting throughout her body. “Say it again!” He tugged at the nipple and suckled gently. Mariel could feel it in her stomach and her sex was reacting alarmingly. “Say my name, darling,” he begged, nibbling away and then soothing the little bites.

“Maurice...,” she clutched at his shoulders, her body arching towards his.

“That’s it, sweetness,” his voice had thickened. Mariel lifted her head to watch with dazed eyes as he nibbled his way down her quivering stomach. When he kissed the triangle of curls covering her sex, she arched forward in shock. Gripping his hair, she tried to dissuade him from his determined path.

“No!” She whispered.

“You are going to love it,” he promised hoarsely.

“I have never....”

“I know, darling,” he kissed the swollen flesh and she fell back against the pillows, her hands covering her face. When he bit the flesh gently and then pulled it between his teeth, she thought she was going insane. Sensation after sensation hit her all at once and she could not contain herself.

“Don’t!” She sobbed, her fists beating against the sheets. Ignoring her, he raised her blood pressure even more by plunging his tongue into her. She screamed - long and loud, her body convulsing.

Maurice did not let up. Using his hands to cup her buttocks, he plunged his tongue deep inside her,

tonguing her rapidly until she was a writhing mass of undiluted passion and fire against him. She came, the climax was so powerful that it lifted her clear of the bed.

Even when she was at the end of it, her body still trembling, he was still tasting her, savoring the musky scent of her inside his mouth. Letting go of her, he moved to cover her body with his, easing himself into her, his expression tender as he gazed at the tear-stained cheeks and the widened eyes.

“Hush, baby,” he soothed her with his mouth, hands framing her face and brushing the tendrils of hairs that were clinging to her moist cheeks. He rocked his hips slowly, his eyes locking with hers.

He was not in any hurry; this was calm after the incredible storm, and he knew that her emotions were raw and exposed. His heart was feeling battered and torn and he knew without a doubt what he was feeling. She would fight him of course, but he was not going to allow her to push him away.

“My sweet,” he whispered against her lips, tasting, his lips barely brushing against hers. She was clinging to him, a confused look on her exquisite face as if she was wondering what was happening to her. He would tell her soon, perhaps not now, but further down.

She had not noticed that he was inside her skin to skin, but after disposing of the used condom, he had just wanted to feel her against him. He wanted nothing between them.

“I can’t,” she whispered huskily.

“Let go,” he told her gruffly, “we will do it together darling,” his tongue plunged into her mouth and swallowed her mewling cries as the climax spun them around in a lazy vortex of passion.

“You cannot stay the night.” Things had quieted down finally, and he had reluctantly shifted off her and was holding her in his arms.

“Hmm.”

“Did you hear me?” she demanded.

“I think your next-door neighbor heard you,” he told her lazily, resisting her effort to move out of his arms, “I was thinking we could go for a drive in the morning after you feed me breakfast.”

She blinked at him, not really amazed at his temerity. “I am not fixing you breakfast.”

“I guess I can manage to make toast and scrambled eggs.”

“Maurice,” her voice turned pleading, “you have to realize that people will talk if they see you coming out of my house.”

“And?”

“You were just courting Eileen!”

His eyes flashed at that. “I was not courting her, and you damn well know that.”

“Everyone at the clinic thinks you are an item.”

“Why? Because I sat with her a few times?”

“She was at your place. She told us that she helped you pack.”

“And you believed her?”

“Why should I not believe her? You encouraged her.”

“She would not take no for an answer even when I told her that I was not interested.”

“I am not going to be fodder for gossip. This is a small town and people are going to talk.”

“Let them.”

She pushed at him in frustration. “Damn you! It might not matter to you what people say, but it does to me. I happen to live here. While you”

“Say it,” he said coolly.

“You are just passing through.”

“And I am collecting women as I go along, is that what you are trying to say?” He demanded.

“I don’t know what you are doing, but I am not going to be part of it.”

“You already are,” he jerked her chin up, his eyes sizzling, “we have participated in the most intimate act possible.

My tongue was deep inside you, going where my cock was. I am very, very familiar with this delectable body of yours and in my estimation, I am the first man who has ever gone down on you. So don’t you lie here and tell me that it means nothing.”

“When you leave....”

“I am not leaving!” He said heatedly, cursing her contrariness to perdition. “I know your opinion of me is for shit, but I would like you to take my word that this is not some fling for me. I am not here playing games. I am not that kind of guy,” he kissed her roughly, bruising her lips. “I am here to stay!”

“I cannot take that chance,” she whispered shakily, “we are from different worlds and your world is high finance, wealth that I cannot comprehend....” She blinked back tears. “I swore to myself that the next man I allowed this privilege was my husband and now....”

“And you have done so,” he told her softly, “stop judging me by what you think you know and really get to know me. Like I want to know you.”

“It will never work!” she said stubbornly, even though her heart had quickened at his words.

“You do not know that.”

“I cannot afford to be hurt....”

“I will not hurt you intentionally,” he threw one powerful leg over both of hers, effectively trapping her.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to go to sleep,” he yawned and gave her an amused look, “I suggest you do the same. As soon as I get some shut eye, I will be keeping you up again.”

“You have a nerve....”

“Shh, darling,” he took her lips in a kiss so soft and sweet that she could not help but cling to him and returned it with a passion that shook them to the core.

“Christ!” He whispered against her mouth as he gathered her against his chest. “Give me a couple of minutes darling- perhaps thirty...,” he kissed her forehead and tugged her against his chest, his eyes drifting shut.

Before long, Mariel heard his even breathing indicating that he had fallen asleep. After struggling with her thoughts, she eventually succumbed to the drowsiness that came over her.

Chapter 10

She woke up slowly, in stages, her eyes flickering open as the sun streamed through the lime green curtains and connected with her face, bathing it in its brilliance. She felt sore all over, especially her nipples and her pubic area.

A frown touched her brow as she wondered.... Jerking up as the memories came clamoring, she was now wide awake. "Oh, God!" She whispered as every intimate detail came crashing back.

No wonder she was so sore! After he had slept for some time, he had woken her up with his mouth on her body taking her to dizzying and spectacular heights again. They had finally gone back to sleep in the early hours of the morning.

No wonder she felt so sore and was aching all over. He had been true to his promise to keep her up, her body was still tingling deliciously. The heat pervaded her as

she thought back on the intimacy that had been between them.

“You taste like fine wine,” he had murmured as he nibbled his way down her body, “I am addicted.”

“I am sure you say that to all the women,” she had been determined not to be swayed by any such talk from him. She was not going to allow herself to fall for his pretty speeches and his handsome face and then be left with a broken heart when he left.

“Just you, sweetheart,” he had told her patiently, “only you.”

But she could not afford to fall for that. And it needed to stop now. Maybe he had left, but the scent of coffee permeating the room and tantalizing her taste buds said otherwise.

Swinging her legs off the bed, she rushed into the bathroom to relieve herself. A glimpse of herself in the

mirror caught her attention and she stood there in shock, staring at her reflection.

Her hair was all over the place and her face had the sleepy satisfaction of a woman who had been thoroughly loved. And there were marks all over her neck and chest from where he had used his teeth on her. She was going to have to apply foundation to hide them or wear a turtleneck in the height of summer. Damn him! She thought heatedly.

Pulling the robe tight around her, she tied the sash, a militant look on her face as she left the bathroom and marched downstairs where she could hear him moving around in the kitchen.

Her heart stuttered when she reached the open doorway and saw him at the counter. His hair was tousled, and she recalled dragging feverish fingers through the thick strands and marveling at the texture. His shirt was open all the way, exposing a magnificent, tanned chest, sprinkled liberally with dark brown hairs.

“Ah, you are up. I was just about to come up and see what’s taking you so long.”

“You did not allow me to sleep.”

“I did not,” his green eyes wandered over her tousled hair and sleep-creased face, “you look adorable.”

“You have made yourself comfortable, I see.”

“I just made coffee. And I am cursing my lack of insight for not coming straight here instead of swinging by my place to put away my case. Now I have nothing to wear, and I ruined the shirt in my haste to get to your body.”

“Which is all the more reason for you to go.” She was still standing inside the doorway; not sure she should go anywhere near him. She had to be firm.

“Come and have some coffee and we can figure out together what we want to eat.”

She almost stamped her foot in frustration. “You are not listening to me. What if a neighbor sees you?”

“I think the one across from you was walking her dog and definitely peering through the window.” He was amused at how flustered she was and how enticing she looked the morning after. He was definitely going to be making love to her again. Possibly keep her in bed for most of the day.

He bit his lip to stop laughing out loud as she raced to the window to draw the curtain.

“It’s not funny!” She blazed at him. “My friend Angie usually drops by unannounced and if she sees you here
....”

“The cute little nurse with the braids?” he asked innocently. “As a matter of fact, she did stop by.”

“What?” The agonized look on her face made him want to haul her into his arms and bury his lips in hers. “Angie saw you?” She dropped down onto one of the stools in despair. “Then it is all over. She is my friend, but she is also the biggest gossip in town.” She gave him an accusing glare. “What did you say to her?”

“I just told her that we needed some alone time, and she should come back at a more convenient time.” He went to pour her some coffee and missed the daggers she threw at him.

“I would like you to leave. Now.”

“No!” He handed her the cup and when she did not take it, placed it in front of her. “Relax darling. Your friend did stop by, but I hid while she peered through the window. When she realized that you were not up, she left. She does not have a key?”

“She does.” The relief was so great that she was sagging from it. “But if she knows I am still asleep, she would not come by and my phone - it was on vibrate.”

“Crisis averted,” he said lightly, “but good to know how you feel about anyone finding out about us.”

“What do you expect?” She asked him angrily. “That I would announce in the town square that I am sleeping with my boss? This cannot continue....” She let out a startled squeal when he spun the stool around and hauled her up against him. “What are you doing?”

“Showing you why this will continue.” He told her grimly. His arms were like steel bands around her waist, and she could not move an inch.

“Please let me go,” she said frostily, even though her heart was beating madly inside her chest.

“You did not give me a proper greeting. Is this what I have to look forward to each morning when we wake up?” He was kissing her cheek and heading to her neck.

“We are not going to be spending mornings together,” she closed her eyes as he nuzzled her throat.

“You have marks on beautiful skin,” he said mournfully. “I branded you.”

“And I will have to cover them up with makeup.”

“You branded me as well darling and you don’t see me complaining,” he was licking the hollow of her throat and starting a slow burn inside her.

“Maurice....”

“My name on your lips makes my cock react. Feel!” He pressed her bottom half closer to him to prove it.

“I..., what are you doing?” She squeaked.

“Getting a proper greeting,” he pushed off her robe, grunting as he encountered bare flesh, “I see you are prepared.”

“We are in the kitchen.... Oh, my God!” She curled her fingers into his chest when he sought and found the kernel of sensitive flesh. “Maurice....”

“Hush, baby,” he said thickly. Removing his fingers, he fumbled at his zipper and took out his aching cock.

“Wrap your legs around my waist. We are in for a rocky ride,” he entered her swiftly and backed her against the wall, “you are going to be the death of me!”

He lifted her high and took a nipple inside his mouth, suckling hungrily. Mariel slowly fragmented. She felt as if a match had been lit inside her and was burning out of control. Her fingers clutched at him, her body heaving towards his as he drove into her. She was having sex in her kitchen.

The pretty yellow and blue curtains had been drawn, but still - she was a sensible practical professional and had never done anything like this before. The only

relationship she had engaged in never came close to this. The guy had accused her of being cold and unresponsive.

Now he was proven wrong. This heat was incredible! The cries coming from her were unbelievably loud, but she could not help it. He was doing things to her that she never thought possible. She came violently, her body convulsing as the climax crashed through her, leaving her out of breath and unable to focus on anything.

Maurice poured himself into her, his body surging into hers, fingers making grooves into her skin. Her almost lifeless limbs slid from around his waist as she leaned into him weakly. She buried her face into his neck and closed her eyes, her body still trembling. "We could go out for breakfast," he whispered against her hair.

"No. I will prepare us something," she mumbled.

A smile touched his lips. "Good."

“I cannot stay in bed all day,” she fretted, “I have things to do.”

“Like what?” He was enjoying running his hands over her body. They had enjoyed breakfast of a Spanish omelet and wheat toast and tons of coffee, and he had insisted on them coming back upstairs. He could not keep his hands off her and it amazed him.

“Laundry....” Her hands landed on top of his to stop his exploring. She was pleasantly exhausted and could not believe this was her. She had called back Angie to let her know she was tired and feeling a little cold coming on.

She had lied to her best friend and when the girl had offered to come over, she had told her an emphatic no. “If it is a virus, I do not want to pass it on.” She was in bed with a man for the entire night going into the next day and this was not her. “And housework. I do not have a maid.”

“I could help,” shaking off her hands, he continued with his exploration, “you have a mole right here.”

“It’s my body....”

“I am beginning to know it very well.”

“You want to help me with laundry?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how to work a washer and dryer?”

His head lifted as he gave her an amused stare. “I left my family’s home when I decided to go my own way and I had to learn to do everything. Besides, everything comes with an instruction manual, and I happen to be very literate.”

“You are being sarcastic.”

“Am I?” His hand lifted to cup her breast, thumbs grazing the tight bud. “These fascinate me. It rises so proudly to my touch.”

“It does not mean you are special.”

“If you say so,” his head descended, and she moved forward eagerly. She could not resist him. Her resolve had crumbled earlier in the day or was it last night? She had no idea what had become of her determination to get him to leave or her hatred and contempt where he was concerned.

“Shall we?”

“Shall we what?” She opened her eyes and stared at him dazedly, wondering why he had stopped.

“Go and do some laundry?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.”

“We could stay awhile and do this,” he covered her body with his swiftly. “Would you prefer that sweetheart?”

“Yes.” She moaned, her hands going around his neck.

He watched in amused wonder as she separated her delicates, shoving them into a laundry bag quickly and turning her back. “I could hand wash those for you.”

“No thank you,” she muttered, “and you do not have to help. I thought you were going home.”

“Eventually. We could spend the night at my place for a change.”

“We are not in a relationship.”

He jerked his head at the cozy scene. “This says otherwise.”

“I cannot be in a relationship with you,” she told him stubbornly.

“Are you always this delusional?” He asked her mildly as he handed items of clothing to her. “We have been in bed for almost twenty-four hours - don’t tell me you do this with random men.”

“I have never...,” she turned away to punch the button.

“Precisely!” He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “You cannot deny that we are.”

“Okay fine,” she pushed him away from her and turned to face him, her hands propped on her hips. She had dragged on an old T-shirt without putting on underwear and he could see her lovely curves outlined in the thin material.

She had scooped back her hair into an untidy ponytail, and she looked adorably mussed and well-screwed.

“There will be rules.”

“Such as?” He folded his hands over his chest.

“We do not acknowledge each other at work.”

“I have to confer with you on cases,” he pointed out.

“We do it in a professional manner.”

He inclined his head in agreement. He was enjoying the scenery and was careful not to show how much. Her hands on her hips were stretching the fabric against her bare breasts. "Anything else?"

"I will not come to your place."

"Then I will be coming to yours!" There was a determined jut to his chin that made her want to stamp her feet.

"I need to think."

"And while you are doing so, you would like me to give you space."

She gave him a hopeful look which collapsed when he added. "Not bloody likely, sweetheart."

“I am not your damn sweetheart,” she blazed at him.

“Lover then.”

“I do not want to be in a relationship with you!”

“I can prove that is simply not true,” he started to approach her, and she stepped back.

“Please....” She held up her hands. “I -I need to think.”

He stopped, a frown settling on his forehead. “You are afraid.”

“Can you blame me?” She cried. “I have always been a good girl. Until I went to Boston and met an asshole in college.” She twisted her hands in agitation.

“He used me and posted my picture on social media for my dad and all the world to see. Pictures of me posed in my underwear. He was the first man for me, and I thought he was into me....” She bit her lip and turned her back on him.

Maurice felt the anger twisting inside his guts as he stared at her hunched shoulders.

“Tell me who this - this prick is,” he said in a low, angry voice. He was not certain he could control the anger pouring through him. Someone had hurt her and that was not acceptable. He wanted to avenge her.

“So, you can do what?” she demanded, whirling around to face him.

“Show him what it means to have his vital organs kicked in,” he moved towards her, his hands gripping her arms, “to let him know that you have someone in your corner who is going to defend you.”

“I don’t need a defender,” she grumbled, her expression clearing.

“Who is he?”

“He is” She shook her head. “It does not matter anymore.”

“Clearly, it does, and it is standing in the way of what we have.”

“We do not have anything....,” she gasped as he started to shake her.

“No more!” He told her coldly. “I love you....,” he closed his eyes briefly as she stared at him in shock. “That was very premature. I wanted to lead up to it, perhaps with fine wine and some candlelight, but here we are. I am in love with you.”

“You barely know me.”

He gave her a telling look.

“Not in the true sense of the word. You cannot just tell me you love me! What do you expect me to do?”

“Give me a chance. I am not going anywhere, Mariel,” he warned, “get used to it. What else do you have to do? Dusting? Vacuuming? What?”

“We need to talk.”

“We have work to do,” hauling her into his arms, he kissed her roughly. “Shall we darling?”

Her pager went off while she was in the middle of the two of them folding laundry.

“What is it?”

“It’s Sarah. I have to get to the clinic.”

“I will come with you.”

“No. We cannot be seen together.”

He bit off a sigh and opened his mouth to say something when she stopped him.

“Please.”

“I am going to give you time to come to terms with me being in your life. I will also try my best to be professional when we are at the clinic. But...,” he held up his hands when she opened her mouth, “we see each other every night. Either you come to my place, or I come to yours.”

“Fine. Can I go now?”

“Of course,” he said magnanimously, “just” Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her thoroughly. “I will be back tonight. Keep me posted about Sarah.”

“How is she doc?” The little girl’s mother asked anxiously.

“Her fever is high, and her ear infection has gotten worse. Her throat is also sore.” She smiled at the little girl. “How are you, sweetheart?”

“I am sick.”

“And we are going to do everything to get you better.”

“Doc? What is it?”

“I am going to prescribe something for her pain.”

“Will she have to spend the night?”

“I recommend that,” she scribbled something on her pad, “it’s an antibiotic. I am going to give her something for the pain. Okay Sarah, let’s get you settled.”

“Is she going to be, okay?”

“We will make certain of that.” She left the mother with the child and instructed the nurse on duty as to her care before going into her office and plopping into the chair behind her desk. She was tired and confused. Her weekend had been something she had not expected, far from it.

And she had told him about her humiliating first relationship. After that episode, she had done her best to bring back her 'good girl' image. The pictures had reached even the small town of Mountain Glades and it had taken a while for the talk to die down.

But her dad had been incredibly supportive of her. It had scarred her so much that she had sworn that she would never give herself to a man unless it was her husband and she had kept that promise to herself and dove into her work.

She had been determined that there would be no more gossip about her - she would stay clean and above reproach.

And now - she shook her head and slumped back against the chair. Now she had to contend with him. He had declared his love for her, but she could not afford to fall for that. Richard- even the very name made her want to puke. He had told her he loved her and had treated her as if she was a queen.

She had foolishly agreed to his taking pics of her - when he had charmed her by telling her how her body was to be flaunted.

“You could have been a model, darling,” he had said, snapping away with his phone. She had shied away from posing nude. When she saw the photos, she cringed, wondering how she would have lived it down if she had done what he begged her to do.

He was now a doctor practicing medicine in New Jersey and married with a child. He had tried reaching out to her, but she had refused to take his calls. The guy had almost ruined her life and disgraced her dad. Nothing he said to her was going to make that right. She jumped slightly when her phone rang.

“What?”

“Is that any way to greet your lover?”

“You are not...,” she sighed wearily, “what do you want?”

“I am checking on you and Sarah. What’s the prognosis?”

“Her ear infection has worsened.”

“You are thinking it is something else?”

“It might be. The left ear is swollen and red.”

“She could have introduced a foreign object. Did you do an x-ray?”

“I am about to request one.”

“Want me there?”

“No. I do know how to do my job.”

“You sound testy, is it the lack of sleep?”

“You know very well it is. I think you should stay at your place tonight.”

“Then you will be coming to me.”

“Maurice,” she lowered her voice. “I have to get some sleep.”

“I will allow that, but I intend to be with you.”

“We have work....”

“I will sneak out early in the morning to avoid being seen.”

“Maurice....”

“I am coming over Mariel and if you lock the door, I am going to stay there pounding loudly enough to wake the neighbors.”

“Damn you!” She hissed.

“I love you too, darling. I will see you later.”

She hung up without responding, almost grinding her teeth in frustration. Damn his stubbornness, she fumed.

Chapter 11

“You said you would allow me to get some sleep.”

“And I meant it.”

“Good!” She continued to stare at him. She had left the clinic with mixed feelings of anticipation and dread as she came home. “We are both naked,” she pointed out.

“I do not usually sleep in any clothing, and I love the feel of your slender curves against my body.”

“And you expect us to sleep - you know, like this? You do not feel the urge to - you know.”

A smile touched his lips. “Oh, believe me, I feel the urge whenever I think of you and that is every minute of the day.”

“But you are not going to do anything about it?”

He bent his head to stare at her. “Unless you want me to.”

“No!” She told him firmly, even though her heart was pumping out of control.

“Sure?”

“Positive.” She closed her eyes to prove her point. “You are holding me too close. It’s going to be difficult to go to sleep.”

“I will loosen my grip a little,” he did so, “now go to sleep.”

He smiled slightly as he watched her struggle to go to sleep. "We could always talk," he told her lightly.

Her eyes flew open at that, "perhaps we should."

"What should we talk about?" He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"What you said earlier."

"You are going to have to be more precise."

"That you love me."

"Oh that. What do you want to know? The meaning of the word and what it entails?" He raised one thick brow at her, and she had to bite back a smile. "I would figure you would know all of that already. Being the intelligent woman, you are."

“You are mocking me.”

“No!” He grinned when she punched him in the stomach.
“That hurt.”

“Yeah, right.” She snorted, delighting him further. He watched as she lowered her lashes, her fingers playing dangerously close to his nipple. “How is your uncle?”

He grinned at the change of topic. “Holding his own. Pissed that he is going to have to give up some of his less than stellar habits.”

“Such as?” she asked curiously.

“Whoring and drinking,” he said bluntly, “an unfortunate family trait in the males of my family.”

“Including you, I take it?” she asked with a curl of her lips.

“I am the exception to the rule. An anomaly.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Ask me about the last relationship I had and how long ago.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“Is it not? Ask me, my love.”

“I don’t care,” she said stubbornly.

He tilted her chin up. “You are lying. You are forgetting that you have a very expressive face. Ask me.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Ask me,” he repeated, and she knew that he was not going to stop until she did.

“You are incredibly annoying,” she said with irritation. He merely cocked a brow and waited. “Okay fine. When was your last relationship?”

“A year ago.”

“And you have not been with anyone since?”

“No.”

“You must have been in love with her,” she said lightly, trying not to show the surprising jealousy stirring inside her.

“I was attracted to her. This is my first time for being in love.”

She blinked at that and tried to quiet her uneven breathing. “What happened?”

“She was into me for my money.”

“How did you know?”

“The things she said and did. She wanted gifts and hinted at me buying her a diamond bracelet and necklace - expensive trinkets here and there. And she wanted me to give up medicine and take my rightful place in the company.”

“She wanted what was best for you.”

“I want what’s best for me. And I do not allow anyone to dictate to me about my own career path.”

“Every woman likes trinkets. How do you know I am not greedy and grasping?”

“Are you?” He gave her an amused look.

“I could be.”

He slid a finger along her throat. “Rubies.”

“What?”

“They would suit you,” he bent to kiss the hollow of her throat, “and diamonds for your ring with emeralds surrounding the stone.”

“You are presuming a lot,” her fingers tightened around his neck as he continued to nibble away at her skin, “and you promised to let me sleep.”

“You started it, sweetheart. And now it is too late.”

“Why?” She gasped when he placed a hand on her buttocks and pulled her closer to the evidence of his arousal. “Maurice, we have work....”

“I know. But you cannot leave me like this. I would not be able to get any sleep.”

“You are going to have to leave early in the morning.”

“I brought clothes to wear to work tomorrow.”

“You cannot be seen leaving here.”

“I will make sure no one is watching,” he promised.

“Maurice....”

“Shh, baby,” he whispered thickly, his mouth closing around her nipple. With a shuddering breath, she gave up the argument and surrendered to the sweet torment of his mouth.

She was acutely aware of his presence during the day. He had left several minutes before she did and went back to his place to retrieve his car.

They had showered together and the intimacy of him sponging down her body would stay with her forever. He had been thorough, using the sponge to sluice between her thighs, sending her into a frenzy of desire so fierce, she had begged him to take her, and he did - against the tiles, with her legs wrapped around his waist.

She still needed time to think, but she could not do so with him around and he was refusing to stay away from her. She was in the doctor's lounge having a cup of coffee with Angie before her next patient when he came in, his eyes zeroing towards the table she was occupying.

Her breath lodged inside her throat at the intent look on his handsome face. She knew his body like the back of her hand and the thought of the things they had done together made her warm all over. She started as he made his way towards them, almost sagging in relief when he was stopped by another doctor.

Finishing her coffee in undignified haste, she got up and muttered to her friend that she had patients to see. She was halfway across the hall when he called out to her.

“What? I mean what is it? I am running late.”

The knowing look on his face told her he knew exactly what she was doing.

“This will only take a minute. I need to see you in my office.”

With a resigned sigh, she followed him, sliding past him as he held the door open for her.

“Please make this quick.”

“I intend to!” Slamming the door shut, he crowded her - trapping her body between his and the hardwood door.

“What are you doing?”

“I am starving,” he whispered against her lips.

“Maurice, we cannot...,” she moaned, her hands going around his neck as she sank into the torrid kiss. His hands wandered all over her body, before clutching her

derriere and making her acutely aware of his desire. His pager went off then, forcing him to let go of her.

“This is crazy,” he whispered thickly, leaning his forehead against hers, “I will try and stay away from you for the rest of the day as difficult as that will prove to be,” he framed her face with his hands, “I am not willing to wait for very long to come out of the closet, darling.”

“You promised!” She reminded him shakily. Her heart was beating rapidly, and she felt weak with need.

“I will give you two weeks.”

“No....”

“Two weeks and then I announce it at the town square that you are mine.”

“You have no right....”

He kissed her roughly. "I have every right. See you around," he grinned at her fuming expression and easing her aside, opened the door and left.

Mariel leaned back and closed her eyes, struggling to compose herself before going back out.

"You are going to need surgery," Maurice told the man gravely.

"How bad is it?"

"Bad enough to require us to operate and the sooner the better. You have had that bullet moving around in your intestines for how long?"

“Since I had the grand idea of leaving my home and going to New York to visit my brother.” Jake struggled to sit up against the pillows.

“And you never thought of getting it out?”

“The doctors did not want to mess around inside my gut and when they told me that it was not life-threatening, I figured I would get on out of there and come back home,” he grimaced in pain, “but now it has become a problem.”

“Definitely. We will prep you for surgery as early as this afternoon.”

“Am I going to die?” The pallor on the man’s face indicated how scared he was. “I have not made peace with my mother, and I still have things to do. I broke up with Sally recently and would love the chance to have another chance with her. Could you call her for me? I need to tell her that I love her....”

“You will get to do all of that yourself. But we have to get this bullet out before it does irreparable damage,” he signaled to the nurses, “they are going to get you ready while I go and scrub up and prepare the room.”

“Thanks, doctor,” he took a deep breath. “I got shot right there in Brooklyn because I was defending an old lady from getting mugged.”

“Very heroic.”

“Yeah,” Jake said glumly, “I thought so at the time.”

“I will see you in the OR.”

“How is she, doc?” Gracie asked anxiously as she finished her examination. “I have to tell you that I did not sleep a wink last night. She was twisting and turning in the bed as if she was in pain.”

“The nurses would have called me if anything was out of order.” Mariel smiled at the little girl. “How are you this morning Sarah?”

“Feeling much better. My throat is not hurting so much.”

“That’s good news. And your ear infection is clearing up.”

“Can I take her home?” her mother asked hopefully.

“We will see,” she squeezed the little girl’s hand, “why don’t you relax, and we see about getting you something to eat.”

“Can I have a red Jell-O?” she asked hopefully.

“I will see to it. I just need to talk to your mom for a little bit. Gracie?” She led the way into the waiting room and

closed the door behind her.

“What is it?”

“The cause of the ear infection was not a virus.”

“What caused it?”

“Sarah pushed something down her ear, and this is not the first time. The next time might do considerable damage. You are going to have to start monitoring her carefully.”

“I try my best, but I am a single parent and I work all the time and there is no one to watch her.”

“What about your sister?”

“She has her hands full with that husband of hers and those two boys. I cannot add to her burden.”

“You cannot leave her alone when you go to work, Gracie, there must be some other arrangements you can make. What is your shift like?”

“I work at the factory as you know, and my shift varies.”

“And you cannot take her to work with you.”

She shook her head. “It is not allowed.”

Mariel thought about it some. “And daycare?”

“Is too expensive.”

“Let me think of something. In the meantime, she can stay here while you go to work tonight.”

“You need the bed,” the woman protested.

“Not right now and she is still recovering. Let her stay a couple of nights while I try and figure out a way to help out.”

The woman grasped her hands gratefully. “Thank you so much, doc. The good Lord bless you.”

“We will figure things out,” she assured the woman.

“It’s actually a very good idea my dear,” Mrs. Flemings said approvingly, “but Dr. Steadman is one step ahead of you,” the woman indicated for her to take a seat.

“What do you mean?”

“He broached the idea before he went away and when he came back, that was the first thing we talked about. There is a pressing need for aftercare for these mothers who do not have the support, especially during the summer break.”

“And?” Mariel wondered how he never said anything to her about it.

“A fundraising.” The woman folded on top of the table. “To which his company is going to be donating a hefty sum of money to build a daycare and employ people who will be able to take care of these children when their parents go to work. Gracie might even be part of the staff who will be employed.”

“That’s a wonderful idea.”

The woman looked at her curiously. “I know you do not approve of Dr. Steadman, my dear, but he is proving to be a blessing. Not, that your dear father is not sorely missed....”

“I am no longer upset, Mrs. Flemings,” she told the woman quietly wondering what she would say if she knew what she and Dr. Steadman have been up to.

“You are not?”

“No. You are right. He is an excellent doctor and as the chief, he is doing a very good job.”

The woman nodded in approval. “It’s so good to hear you say that. He also suggested something else.”

“What is that?”

“He wants to name the wing after your dad.”

She stared at the woman speechless.

“If you don’t approve....”

“I am overwhelmed,” she whispered, “he suggested it?”

“Yes.”

Her pager went off. “I have to go. Thank you.”

She stumbled out and closed the door, leaning against it and taking several deep breaths. She managed to compose herself and went on her way to attend to her patients.

“What is it, Eileen?” He dragged off his surgical gloves and dumped them into the trash can. The woman had

followed him into the on-call room, and he would have to go around her in order to get out.

The surgery had been long and more difficult than they had anticipated and it had taken them some time to locate the source of the bleeder, during which they had almost lost Jake on the operating table. He was not in the mood to be cornered by this woman.

“You have not been at your place for the past two nights.”

He turned to face her slowly. “How do you know that?”

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her lab coat. “I stopped by to see if you needed help with anything.”

“Both nights?”

“Yes. Where have you been?”

“I do not owe you any explanation. Please allow me to get by.”

“I thought we had something.”

“I told you repeatedly that there is nothing between us. Now if you don’t mind....”

“You led me to believe that there was some hope.”

His eyes chilled over. “I did no such thing. Now allow me to....”

“Who is she and why did you choose her over me?”

Maurice cursed under his breath. “I am not going to talk to you about this. Now for the last time, let me pass and

as your immediate boss, I am advising you to get back to work.”

Without waiting for her response, he brushed past her and almost ran into Mariel. His heart sank when she looked past him and saw Eileen coming out of the room.

“I see you are busy,” the frostiness in her voice warned him of what was to come.

“I am not. Is there something....”

“Never mind. Sorry to interrupt.”

His hands clenched into fists as he watched her hurry away. He could not go after her, not with Eileen standing there. “Get to work,” he told her curtly before heading to the recovery room to see his patient.

Mariel avoided him for the rest of the day, calling herself all sorts of names for falling for his lies. She had seen the triumphant look on the other woman's face as she came up behind him.

They had been in the tiny room alone and she could just imagine what they had been doing in there. He paged her several times and she ignored it, busying herself with her patients. Afterwards, she left the clinic and accepted an invitation from Ned to have coffee, determined not to go home, in case he showed up.

"I thought I was on your list of people to ignore," Ned teased her as he brought her the cup of caramel latte.

"Not at all. The curse of being a doctor...." She told him thanks and wrapped her fingers around the cup. "How have you been doing?"

He quickly launched into a discussion about the hardware business, explaining that at this time of the year, there were several projects going on.

“Dr. Steadman has been in several times, getting several times inquiring about some of the projects going on. As you know, my dad is in charge of the park and recreational area and the business community has been trying to beautify the area for years.”

“And now it’s being done?”

“Yes,” Ned nodded, “it seems the doctor is flexing his muscles and considering that he has considerable resources, that is a good thing.”

“I suppose.”

“The end of summer dance in the square is coming up and I would like to officially ask if you would be my date.”

She hesitated for a minute and then the image of Eileen coming out of the on-call room behind him flashed

through her mind. "I would love to," she told him with a lift of her chin.

"Excellent," he told her with a pleased smile.

Her heart skittered inside her chest when she drove up an hour later to see him pacing on her front porch. She had not answered his calls and was wondering how long he had been there and if anyone had noticed him.

"I have been calling you," his green eyes blazed as he watched her come up the steps.

"I went out and you really should not be here."

"Where the hell were you?"

“Last I checked, I am an adult,” she opened the door and stepped back as he stormed by her.

“I know you think that something is going on between me and Eileen....”

“It’s none of my business what you do with anyone. I was not thinking about you or her when I was having coffee and pie with Ned.”

His fingers dug into her arm as he spun her around to face him. “Don’t play games with me, my love, you would not like the end result.”

She lifted her chin even though her insides were quaking at the formidable look on his handsome face. “I am not afraid of you.”

He shook her. “Damn you! I was cornered in the room by her and had no way of leaving without mowing her over.”

“I don’t care!” She cried, “I accepted Ned’s invitation to the end-of-summer dance.”

“Then you are going to look like a fool when you show up with me.” He told her darkly.

“I am going with him.”

“Wanna bet my sweet?” He drawled, eyes glinting dangerously. “I wonder what poor Ned is going to say when I march into that hardware and tell him to stay away from you.”

“You would not dare!”

“Try me, darling.”

“Get out!”

“Not a chance. As a matter of fact, I think I should put everyone’s mind to rest by announcing tomorrow morning that we are involved.”

Her eyes widened as she stared at him. “You wouldn’t.”

“I was thinking that kissing you right there in the reception area would do the trick.”

“And I would never forgive you.”

“Never is a very long time and if that is what is needed to prove to you that I am into you alone, then so be it.”

“Please...,” she felt the bravado leaving her immediately like a puff of smoke, “you promised.”

“That was before you pissed me off by first ignoring my phone calls and going out with Ned. And then accepting his invitation to the party.”

She glared at him. "I will call and let him know that I have changed my mind."

"Good," he inclined his head, "now is there something you want to say to me?"

"I hate you?"

"Try again, darling."

"I wish you would go home."

"I am home," he hauled her into his arms, "wherever you are is home for me and it is time you begin to accept that. I am still thinking of making a statement at the clinic about us."

“Go to hell,” she whispered as he crushed his lips against hers.

Chapter 12

She almost did not go. The end-of-summer dance was a big thing in the small town. It was the time when people - everyone - came out in droves, wearing their best summer clothing, knowing that very soon the weather would be changing, and the bitter cold would soon start to set in.

There would be food - an overflowing amount and ever since she was a child, she had not missed it. She had picked up a floral dress with crisscrossed straps that left her shoulders bare.

She was jumpy and irritated that the darn man was calling all the shots or thought he was. Her nerves were messed up because at the clinic she kept expecting him to declare his intentions to everyone. Or try to approach her and make good on his threat to kiss her in front of everyone.

She had also noticed that he was no longer sitting with Eileen but was sitting by himself with a few of the junior

doctors stopping by his table. She had been so tense for the past few days wondering if he would come over while she was with Angie and had spent little to no time at the table with her friend.

And he was always at her place because she refused to go over to his. She also had to admit that she was becoming accustomed to being with him. That feeling of his arms around her was becoming a part of her. The sex was intense and always blew her away. And falling asleep in his arms was becoming a norm for her.

He had not declared his love for her again and did not pressure her to tell him how she felt. How did she feel? She wondered as she stood there looking at her reflection in the mirror. She knew without a doubt that she had crazy feelings for him. The sight of him was enough to throw her into a frenzy.

As soon as those brilliant green eyes touched her, she melted into a puddle and when he touched her- she inhaled and closed her eyes. "Okay girl, calm yourself down. Don't allow him to think that he is calling the shots." But was he not? Here she was eager to get dressed in order to please him.

She had called Ned and told him that she had to refuse his invitation and damn him, Maurice had been right, she felt like a fool, and she had hurt a good man with her selfishness and her jealousy. She had seen Maurice with Eileen and thought the worst.

She was not used to acting on impulse and that was exactly what she had done when she had coffee with Ned. She had drawn him into her fight with Maurice and gave him hope. When she knew that there was none. She had feelings for Maurice, that much was clear.

It was complicated and she was afraid because she had never felt this way before and she was frightened by how intense her feelings were for this man she had thought she hated.

But she could not lie to herself anymore. Her breath was caught inside her throat each time she even thought of him and even now, getting ready for the dance, she could feel the excitement building inside her.

She had persuaded him to get ready at his place and he had reluctantly agreed. Something told her that he was not going to allow her to ignore him, and she had no idea what to do about it. And she had not told her best friend about the relationship.

Holding the dress up against her, she eyed herself critically. It had a flared skirt and cinched-in waist, the bodice more of a corset than anything else and it was one of the most daring outfits she had ever worn.

She was going to leave her hair loose - not because he had specifically told her that he liked it that way, she tried to convince herself.

Biting her lip, she stepped back from the mirror and resumed dressing.

Maurice had just bounded down the stairs to grab a beer from the fridge before heading out when he heard the

knock on the door.

A smile of pleasure and surprise touched his face as he wondered if she had changed her mind and decided to come out and meet him so that they could arrive at the dance together. The smile faded however when he opened the door and saw who was standing there.

“I thought you would like some company.”

He had to hand it to her, the woman was persistent as hell. “What are you doing here, Eileen?”

“I know you said the other day that there was nothing between us-”

“There isn’t.”

She firmed her lips. “But I do not see you with anyone.”

“I am involved.”

“Who is she?”

“That is completely none of your business and you are bordering dangerously close to stalking.”

Her eyes flared at that. “I am just trying to be nice.”

“You are trying too hard and coming here to my home is moving past the boundary.”

“I am not good enough for you,” her lips wobbled, and the tears started.

“That’s not it at all. I am sorry if you misread my attention, but I am not interested in you other than as a colleague.”

“Fine!” She told him angrily. “I hope whoever she is, breaks your heart into tiny pieces.” Turning around, she flounced away much to his relief. He had had one fight with Mariel about her and was not relishing another. Slamming the door shut, he popped open the can and sat at the counter to drink his beer.

He had threatened to go public with their relationship and Eileen’s constant harassment was making him think seriously about doing so and damn the consequences. He was tired of hiding what he felt about her. He wanted the entire damn town to know his intentions were honorable.

He wanted to marry her, take her on a honeymoon to beat all honeymoons and settle down and have children with her eventually. He had never felt so strongly about anyone before, and he was excited about being with her.

He did not want to sneak around any longer. He wanted her in his arms. He wanted to take her out on silly outings, like an ice cream cone in the park, a run up

where the mountains rise in majestic beauty that had given the place its name.

And tonight- he tossed back the rest of the beer in the can. Tonight, he was going to make sure there was no question as to the status of their relationship.

“You seem tense,” Angie commented, “and girl, I have never seen you look more exquisite. I do hope this is not for Ned. It would have all been wasted.”

“It’s not.” The festivities had begun, and the music was blaring over the speakers. She had seen Ned talking with Eileen and had deliberately avoided the two. “There is something I should tell you.”

She steered her friend away from the noise and the crowd. He was not here yet, but she had a sneaky feeling that he was going to show his hand tonight. She was beginning to know him very well.

“You look intense.”

“I don’t know how to tell you what I need to.” Mariel passed a hand around the back of her neck, her eyes searching for him. Where on earth was, he?

“Honey, just say it.”

“I no longer hate Dr. Steadman.”

“That’s good because he is a stand-up guy and doing a lot for the clinic.”

“Yes!” She clasped her hands in front of her.

“Mariel?”

Taking a deep breath, she started to blurt it out when she caught sight of him striding towards them, a determined look on his face. "Damn him," she muttered.

"Who?" Angie turned to see what she was looking at and saw him coming forward. "I thought you said you did not hate him anymore."

"I don't, but right now I would like to smash him over the head. I asked for more time."

"More time for what?"

"For coming out of the closet, Nurse Angie," he gave her a formal nod before taking Mariel's hand. "How about a dance, darling?"

"You just have to be calling the shots, don't you?" She asked him angrily.

“Actually, I was going to give you your two weeks until Eileen came calling by my place again.”

“Did she?” Her eyes glittered dangerously.

He grinned at her. “No need for jealousy, my love. I told her that I was involved with someone.”

“Did you give her my name?”

“No. But that made me decide enough was enough.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Angie clapped her hands in delight.
“You two are a thing.”

“We are!” Maurice wrapped his arm around her waist and kept her by his side. “She begged me to keep it between us, but no longer.”

“Good for you.”

“I am thinking of announcing it to the entire town. Think the guy holding the microphone will let me have the use of it for a few minutes?” he asked Angie with a grin.

“Do it and see how fast I leave here.”

“See what I have to deal with?” He pulled her into his arms and ignoring her strenuous protests, kissed her full on the lips. “Now it’s settled.” Releasing her, he stepped back and with a careless wave of his hand, he made his way over to a group of men waiting to hand him a beer.

“You sneaky bitch!” Angie whispered. “How long has this thing been going on?”

“A couple of weeks,” Mariel sighed, shoving her hands into her pockets, “I tried to deny what I feel about him, thought he was just another rich guy trying to score points with a small-town girl.”

‘And now?’

“Now...,” she lifted her shoulders, “now I have these confusing feelings for him, and it scares the crap out of me. He told me he loves me.”

“Honey, that’s terrific.”

“I don’t know, Angie. He is from a different world, and I keep expecting him to up and go. He is the only son and heir to a fortune. Eventually, he will have to take his rightful place there. This is my home and will always be so.”

“Honey, the man seems to adore you. Yes, I understand your uncertainty and hesitation, considering what happened to you before. But Dr. Steadman seems to be the real deal.” She linked her hand with her friend’s arm. “Don’t look now, but that bitch Eileen is heading this way.”

“Great,” she said with a sigh, “just what I need.”

“People are staring at us,” she muttered.

“So, they are,” he was holding her close as they danced.

“And your girlfriend Eileen stopped short of accusing me of taking her man.”

His green eyes sizzled at her. “She is not my girlfriend. Ned gave me the cold shoulder when I tried to talk to him about a topic. He just turned and walked away.” He gave her a hard stare. “You encouraged the poor guy for no reason. He did not have the good sense to realize that you are way out of his league. Poor thing.”

“I can see how much you feel for him,” she told him darkly, “we are going to be the topic of discussion for months.”

“Then I suppose we had better get hitched,” he said so casually that for a minute she thought she had not heard right.

“What?”

“Marry me.”

“You must be out of your mind.”

“Not the response I expected,” he said dryly, “why the hell not?”

“We barely know each other.”

“That again.”

“Yes. That again. I refuse to marry you in haste and end up down the road staring a nasty divorce in the face.”

“That analogy is flawed, and I am offended to know that you are thinking of divorcing me when we are not yet married. So, let me get this straight. You prefer to shack up with me.”

“That way when you decide to leave, you can do so without having to go through a lot of legal tangles.”

“Are you through?” He asked her coldly.

“Yes. I know you are upset....”

“Lady, you do not know what I am.” The song ended just then, and he released her. “Have a safe walk home.” She looked in shock as he walked away and left her

standing there. How dare he! She thought, the anger simmering through her body.

He was the one who insisted on them coming out with their relationship and now he was walking away and leaving her there with the people staring at her.

“Honey,” she was very grateful when Angie came up to her, “is something wrong?”

“He just left!” She gripped her friend’s hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

Maurice was so angry that it took him a few minutes to reach his place. He sat on the porch, his hands clasped in front of him. For the first time in his damned life, he had declared his love for a woman and asked her to marry him and she had thrown it back into his damn face.

Well to hell with her! He was through dancing around her like a ballerina. He was going to leave her alone. Go back to the way things were.

He leaned back in the swing and closed his eyes in despair. He could not go back to the way things were. Even if he proved her right by getting the hell out of town, he would never be able to forget her.

He was in love with her - she was inside his blood, in his mind and he could not see his damn life without her in it. He was hooked for life, and it was pissing him off that she was taking his emotions and twisting them like a damn pretzel.

He was not used to taking so much crap from a woman and still stuck around. But she was different. With a sigh, he shoved his fingers through his hair and stared off into the gathering dusk.

He should not have left her there. He had gone to a lot of pains to put his stamp on her and because of anger, had

left her standing there. By now, everyone would know they had had a fight and he had walked away. With an aggravated sigh, he pushed himself out of the swing and headed down the steps.

“Are you going to sit?”

“I am too mad to think about staying still. He was the one who wanted us to go public and what did he do? Walked away leaving me there. The same thing I was running away from. Just because I told him that it was not a good idea for us to get married.”

“The guy told you he loves you and proposed and you shot him down. Wow!”

“Can you blame me?” she asked angrily. “He is Maurice Steadman, heir to a fortune. he does not belong here.”

“So, in essence, you are going ahead and doing what you think he will be doing. You are doing it to him before he does it to you.”

“Yes. No.” She dragged her fingers through her hair.
“When did my life become so complicated?”

“Do you love the guy?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly, coming to sit next to her friend on the porch swing. “All I know is that when he touches me, I go up in flames. I cannot stop thinking about him.”

“It sounds like love to me.”

“I am scared that my tidy life is about to blow up again and this time there will be no coming back.”

They both looked up as the gate was unlatched.

“I think it is my cue to leave,” Angie got to her feet and met him as he strode up the steps. “Doc.”

He nodded and walked over to where she had gotten slowly out of the porch swing, her eyes blazing.

“You have some nerve....”

“Shut the hell up!”

“How dare you...,” she broke off with a squeal when he lifted her and hoisted her over one shoulder.

“Let me up.”

He did not answer but kicked the door shut behind him and marched up the stairs, his hands clamped around her legs.

He did not stop until they were in her bedroom where he dumped her unceremoniously on the bed.

He wrestled off his shirt and toed off his boots.

“If you think you are going to have sex with me after that stunt you pulled at the park....”

“You talk too much,” he growled as he dragged off his denims and underwear, dumping them onto the floor. She tried not to notice his bulging biceps and his washboard stomach or his impressive sex. And she fought him on principle when he started to turn her over to unzip her dress.

“Stop fighting, dammit,” he ripped the material, ruining the material.

“Let me go and you are buying me another dress!” She was panting when he turned her back over and dragged

the dress off her.

“Bill me!” He dumped the dress onto the floor and unhooked the lace half bra she had on. Next came her panties and then her strappy sandals, leaving her completely naked. Lifting her, he landed her against the pillows and settled in next to her, his arms clasped behind his head.

“I am not going to ask you to marry me again.”

“Good!” She dragged at the sheets, but his long lean body was hindering her.

“If you want to shack up with me and endure the gossip, it’s your call. But know this...,” he turned his head to look at her, “I intend to be here every night. As a matter of fact, I am thinking of giving up the cottage.”

“You are not moving in here.”

“Why darling, I thought you wanted us to live together instead of making it official,” he drawled sarcastically.

“I am just being practical,” she muttered.

“Of course. It does not make any sense for me to be running over to the cottage every single morning. I am moving in.”

“This is my place and I have the last say.”

“I already had a key made.”

“What?” She blinked at him.

He shrugged broad shoulders. “I am here to stay, darling. Get used to it. I will move my clothes here and the rest of my things starting tomorrow.”

“You are not moving in.”

“Go to sleep,” he told her gruffly. “I am going to try and get some sleep.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “Then you should have stayed at your place. I am going to watch TV.” She picked up the remote and he snatched it from her. “If you want to do so, go downstairs.”

She fought him for it, but it was a losing battle. “You are only tiring yourself out,” he told her calmly, barely breaking a sweat, while she was panting as if she had just run a marathon.

“I hate you!” She cried, the tears gathering in her eyes.

“Yeah, so you keep saying.”

She got off the bed and reached for her robe, tying the sash around her waist. Without a word, she stamped out

of the room and slammed the door shut behind her.

Maurice closed his eyes wearily. He was alienating her, but he was determined to show her that he refused to be intimidated by her. He had proposed to her, told her what was in his heart, and she had just shrugged and gone on her way.

He was pissed at her for causing him to make a fool of himself. And he could not leave her alone, which had been proven to him tonight. The thought of never being with her was making him angry. He was stuck.

Mariel did not turn the television on. Instead, she went into the kitchen and plonked the kettle on the burner and turned on the flames. She was so mad at him that she felt like going upstairs and dumping cold water all over him. How dare he just march into her life and behave as if he was in control of her life.

She had been living a normal, well-ordered life before and now he had changed all of that. Now she was going to be the talk of the damn town again. She rummaged inside the pantry and took out a box of chamomile and located a cup. She blinked away the tears as she sat and waited for the water to boil.

And the humiliation of it was, even though she was so mad at him, she had wanted to feel him inside her, and had been yearning for it. Damn him to hell!

Chapter 13

For the next few days, they existed in a sort of cold war. She had come upstairs that night to see him fast asleep and stood there staring hungrily at his magnificent body. He had not bothered to throw the sheet over him, and his nudity was there in all its glory.

The powerful chest, with the smatterings of dark brown hairs, narrowing down his flat stomach - she had refused to look further down, and that night's sleep had eluded her. The next day he left saying that he had things to sort out. She had thought he was not coming back, but he had gone so late that night and she had ignored him.

They were barely speaking to each other and when she had suggested that he slept in one of the other rooms, he had refused. When she had tried to get off the bed, he had thrown his leg over hers to trap her.

He had not made love to her in days, and she was ashamed to say that she was yearning - the hunger for

him was so deep that she could barely stand to be around him, let alone sleep in the same bed.

If he was punishing her, he was doing a good job of it. At work, they barely communicated and whereas before, he would call her into his office to make out, he was strictly the professional now. She hated it and hated how much she was longing for him.

The Monday morning following their coming out was difficult, with Eileen throwing daggers at her and the rest of the staff giving her curious looks; if only they knew, she thought bitterly.

“Dr. James, a word, if you please?” His deep voice jarred her out of her troubled reverie, and she felt hope spring up inside her breast. Surely, he was going to do what he normally did in the past. Push her up against the door and have his way with her. She could feel the heat permeating her body at the thought of feeling him against her.

“Leave the door open,” he told her curtly as he went and sat behind the desk. The hope that had flared inside her

shriveled and died a slow death.

“What is it?”

“Your patient, Sarah Wells has been coming to the ER for the past couple of months with one ailment after another. Mrs. Flemings spoke to me earlier and told me that child services have been sniffing around. Is there anything you can tell me about the child’s mother?”

She stared at him for a moment and could not believe that this was the same man who had teased her and made love to her until she was weak and trembling in his arms. She did not know this cold unfeeling beast sitting behind the desk that had once belonged to her dad.

“She is a single parent. Her husband up and left both mother and child to go to greener pastures, or that was the excuse he gave her. And she works hard to provide for both her and Sarah. Are you trying to imply that she is hurting her daughter?”

“I am not implying anything,” he indicated the folder in front of him, “the child has suffered an ear infection, there was a bruised knee, a dislocated shoulder and another ear infection and it says here in your report that a foreign object was shoved into her ear. Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“How do you explain that number of injuries in such a short space of time?”

“Gracie Wells is a very good mother and is doing the best she can with what she has. She has to work, and sometimes little Sarah is left by herself...,” her voice petered off as she realized that was the very last thing she should have said. “She has no one to watch her....”

“Leaving the child alone is unacceptable in any circumstances.”

“She will be coming on board here at the clinic after the new wing has been completed.” She gave him a

pleading look. “The construction has started and within months, she will have a new job which will ensure that her child is right here under her nose.”

“In the meantime, child protective services want answers and are in the middle of investigating the mother.”

“Can’t you do something?” she demanded. “Isn’t that what you are here for? To help those who need it. My dad would have done something to ensure that the child stays with her mother.”

He gave her an intense look. “And that right there is what I have to contend with. Your angelic father. Nothing I do will ever be good enough for you, right? I have been compared to the man since I arrived and have been found severely lacking. I am not him Mariel and if you continue to compare us...,” he waved a hand.

“What’s going to happen?” she asked, her eyes flashing. “You are going to leave? Wasn’t that the plan all along? Aren’t you just passing through?”

He gave her a long, level stare, his expression inscrutable and she felt the fear flooding her heart. She should apologize. She should

“That will be all, thank you. Please close the door behind you.”

She stood there for a minute before turning to leave.

For the rest of the day, he did not come near her, and they passed each other along the passageway, and he did not even look in her direction.

He did not come home that night. She had left the clinic before him because she had some errands to run and someone to check on. She had reached home an hour later and prepared a salad for supper and waited inside the kitchen for him to come and he did not.

There was not even a phone call from him. She refused to cry over him - she had done the right thing. It would have been inevitable anyway.

All she had done was to make the first strike. He had not repeated his proposal- not made his declaration of love again. Yes, he had told her that he would not be asking her again, but he had not even touched her since their big blow-up after the dance. Now he was gone, and she was certain he would not be coming back to her place.

Dumping the rest of the salad into the trash, she washed out the things she had used and headed upstairs to the bedroom. His stuff was still there. A robe hanging next to hers on the hook inside the closet and his open suitcase.

A few items of clothing were hanging next to hers and she went in - touching the baby blue cotton shirt that still had the scent of him clinging to the fabric.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled the subtle cologne, the tears gathering at the back of her eyes. Was she wrong to be pushing him away? Couldn't she make the first move towards reconciliation? He would be at his cottage

now - all she had to do was go over there and throw herself into his arms and beg his forgiveness.

But what about marriage? Was she willing to accept his offer? No..., she shook her head. They did not know each other long enough for that to be an option.

The fact still remained that he was from an entirely different world from hers and one day he was going to have to return. He was fooling himself into thinking that he would not have to take up his rightful place at the company. Her home was here, and she could not live anywhere else. It was better this way.

They would never have made it anyway. He was the son and heir to a vast fortune, one tainted by bad press. He had told her that the males in his family were not faithful, and she did not want that in her life. She wanted someone simple, a man who was going to be there for her at all times. That man was not Maurice Steadman.

But she was going to miss his lovemaking and the heights of pleasure he had brought her repeatedly. She

had never experienced anything like that in her life - never thought anything like that ever existed.

But he had proven her wrong and there was the possibility of a baby. Her heart quickened at that. The idea of a fetus growing inside her - one that had come about as a result of the intense passion between them - was making her a little melancholic.

No, she shook her head. For both their sakes, she could not wish that on herself. It was over between them; of that she was sure, and she would never trap him into coming back to her as a result of that. It was better this way.

When he did not return to her place two days in a row, she packed up his things. At the clinic, he would ignore her, and she told herself that the pain of losing him would go away eventually. She also ignored the whispers and gloating looks from Eileen and carried on with her work.

“Honey, what’s going on?” Angie asked her one evening as they were making their way along the aisle of the supermarket to pick up a few items. “Is it really over between the two of you?”

“Yes.” She firmed her lips and turned to the shelf to select some canned peas.

“Why?”

“I really do not want to talk about it.”

“I am your friend....”

“And as my friend, I am asking you to respect my wish. He is gone - and it is better this way. We argued and it made me realize that I was fooling myself or rather, he was fooling himself into thinking that anything could ever come of it.”

“He seemed genuine,” Angie hissed out a breath as she saw who was approaching them, “we are just going to ignore her.”

“Is that possible?”

“Hi girls. It seems like we had the same idea,” Eileen stared at Mariel, “how are you holding up, my dear?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“After that big to do at the party two Saturdays ago and now to learn that you and Dr. Steadman are no longer an item....” She tutted and shook her head in mock sympathy. “You must feel like the biggest failure.

You are once again the topic of discussion. I mean after that incident where you posed naked for that guy you were seeing, and he plastered it all over the web and now this. I am surprised you can come to the clinic.”

“Why don’t you get the hell away from us, you spiteful bitch!” Angie hissed at her. “What happened between Mariel and Dr. Steadman is none of your business.”

“Thank you, honey,” Mariel placed a restraining hand on Angie’s arm. “But I can defend myself. I did not pose naked as you put it, Eileen, and bringing up my past is pretty low, even for someone like you.

You have never heard me telling people of your desperate attempts to lure men over to your home or how you begged Simon from the farm to buy you gifts and pretend that he was interested in you.

Do you know why? Because I happen to be a lady and I also happen to think that what one does in their own time is no one’s business. Now if you will excuse us, we have shopping to attend to.” She swept past the glowering woman and went across to the next aisle to pick up some pasta.

“That’s telling her, honey,” Angie said with a grin.

“That was not something I wanted to do,” Mariel said wearily, “and she is right. I did not want to ever become the fodder of gossip again and it seems like this time it is going to take longer to recover.”

“Have you heard?” Angie woke her up two mornings after the supermarket incident.

“Angie?” She rolled over and glanced at the clock on her bedside table. It was 5:00 am. in the morning. “What’s going on?”

“It’s all over the news honey. Your man - his sister was involved in a terrible accident.”

She sat up then, wide awake. “What? How....

“Turn on your TV, honey. I am certain he is on his way out of town right now.”

She fumbled for the remote and the reporter was outside a major highway where there was a pile-up of vehicles. In horror, she listened to the sober tones of the female reporter who was speaking about the drunk driver who caused the pile-up.

“The man is dead, and several others are injured including Marianne Steadman, daughter of pharmaceutical giant, Maximillian Steadman. The young heiress has been rushed to an undisclosed hospital to preserve her identity. We are not privy to her condition as the family wants the chance to concentrate on the young lady’s recovery.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, “Angie, let me call you back.” Hanging up the phone, she called his number, and it went straight to voicemail. She tried several times and got the same result and finally left an urgent message. “Maurice, I heard about the accident on the news.

Please..., I don’t know what to say, but when you get this, please call me and let me know how she is.” She

hung up and dragged her fingers through her hair. What he must be going through! He had spoken often about his 'baby sister' and how much she meant to him.

"Please call me back. Please."

Maurice rushed into the hospital's waiting room to find his father and uncle pacing the length of the room.

"I just spoke to the charge nurse. She is still in surgery. What the hell happened?" He had been traveling since he received the news at midnight and was so tired, he could not stand still. He had left immediately after waking up the administrator to tell her the news. "I don't know when I will be back."

"Go and be with your family and keep me posted."

"She went clubbing with some friends from her college. In the middle of the damn week." His father was haggard, hands shaking.

“They are saying that there is bleeding on her brain, concussion, cracked ribs and a broken arm. She has been in surgery for the past three hours and we are yet to hear anything. You are a damn doctor, why don’t you go into that OR and see if you cannot find out what the hell is going on?”

“It does not work that way. I am going to have to sit and allow the doctors to do their work and trust that they are doing the best they can.”

“We contribute a hell of a lot to this hospital....”

“And that does not mean a damn thing at this point. Marianne is a patient - one who they are trying to save her life. Right in that OR they are not thinking of her last name. The most important thing is saving her life,” he dragged his fingers through his hair, “a drunk driver caused this?”

“And if he was not already dead, he would be,” his uncle said grimly.

“My sentiments exactly,” Maurice muttered. He had just taken a seat when the doors were pushed open, and the doctors walked in. They sprang up, bodies tensed as they waited for news.

“Maurice, good to see you, sorry that it has to be under these troubling circumstances.”

“Now that we are all caught up. What’s the word about my daughter?” Maximillian asked harshly.

“Forgive my dad’s rudeness, Carl. What’s going on?”

“As you were told, there is extensive damage to your sister’s body, but the worst of it and the most troubling is the swelling of her brain. She hit her head hard against the dashboard and it caused her brain to shift.”

“Oh, Jesus!”

The man nodded. "We have stopped the bleeding to a point but as you know...."

"You cannot tell anything until after twenty-four hours or more. She is in a medically induced coma."

"Yes."

"I need to see her."

"Of course. You already know that we are doing all we can to save her life."

"We know. Thanks, Carl," he nodded to the rest of the team and waited until they had left the room.

"Speak English!" His father snapped.

“The next twenty-four hours will be touch and go.” He told them grimly. “It can swing either way and we are just going to have to wait and see. It does not make any sense for all of us to stay here when there is nothing to report. I will keep you posted.”

“I am not leaving....”

“He is right, Max,” his brother clasped him on the shoulder, “we need to go home and get some rest.”

“I want to hear the very first thing,” he warned his son.

“Absolutely.”

There were tubes all over and the minute he stepped into her room; he felt the crushing weight of defeat closing over him. He was a doctor and he had seen these injuries almost every day, especially working in a big hospital where he had been for years.

And to see it happening to his little sister was somewhat surreal. He felt as if he was existing in a nightmare. She looked still and pale as death and he had to check her vitals to assure herself that she was still breathing, that the blood was still pumping through her veins.

Pulling up a chair, he straddled it and picked up her chart, his heart flipping inside his chest. Carl had not sugar-coated anything - but what he had left out was the fifty-fifty chance of her recovering.

The damage to the brain was a worry and it could mean a lot of things. She could be brain dead - dropping the chart, he picked up one slender hand in his.

“I can’t and will not lose you, is that understood?” He murmured in a low voice. “You are too young and have not lived any type of life yet. You just started at the

company and that guy you were telling me about maybe deserves a chance with you.

I have not had time to check him out yet or rough him up and demand to know his intentions for the most precious thing in my life,” he blinked back tears, “when you were born, I resented you at first.

I wanted to be an only child, but when I first saw you, I fell in love. You were all wrinkly and red and loud and you captured me, little sis,” his hands tightened on hers, “I will not be deprived of your annoying presence this early in your life. Please come back to me.”

He went to her place instead of his to crash for a few minutes before going back to the hospital. He checked his phone and saw the missed calls from her and listened to the message. He did not want to talk to her, not right now. She had broken his heart with her constant suspicions and rejections.

So, he decided to stay out of her way. Striding towards the kitchen, he foraged for and found a bottle of bourbon, his brand, and fetched a glass to pour a liberal amount and sat at the counter.

This could not be happening. His little sister was hooked up to tubes and her life hanging in the balance. He certainly could not think about his very brief and aborted love life right now. He could not think of her and how much he longed to bury himself inside her and forget his worries about his sister even for a few hours.

She was the only one he wanted to seek comfort from, and it sucked that he was not able to be with her to touch her and have her arms wrapped around him. Tossing back the drink, he poured some more. He wanted to sleep, was tired, and bone weary, but he knew he was going to need some help shutting his eyes.

He wanted to be hopeful that he was not going to lose his sister, but he had documented the injuries and they were extensive. It was going to take a miracle for her to come back to them in one piece. Finishing the drink, he rinsed out the glass and put away the bottle of bourbon before going upstairs.

He hesitated a moment before stepping into her bedroom, smiling whimsically at the clothing piled on top of the bed. "Still have not hired a maid, I see." He sat on the edge of the bed and looked around expecting to see her coming out of the closet. "Oh, sis," he whispered in despair as he flopped back against the pillows.

Chapter 14

“The swelling has gone down somewhat.”

“But there is still a chance that the damage is there,” Maurice said.

“Yes. I am sorry that I cannot give you anything more positive.”

“It’s not your fault,” Maurice heaved a sigh, “it has been more than a week and she has still not woken up.”

“We are doctors and we both know that the body has a way of healing itself in repose.”

“I wish I could be practical about this. If it were any other patient, I would be telling the loved ones to hang in there. There is still life flowing through her veins and that means something.”

“But you are personally involved.”

Maurice nodded. It seems like he had aged ten years over the last ten days. And he was very tired. He had been living in and driving from her apartment to the hospital and having to report to his father and uncle was wearing on his last nerves.

The two men expected him to work miracles and each time he had to call them and tell them there were no changes, it took all of his patience. “She is young and was previously in good health.”

“The best,” Carl said with a small smile, “her cholesterol level is the best I have ever seen, and her blood pressure was pretty normal.”

“She was a stickler - is a stickler for exercising and eating right. She could go a round or two in the boxing ring. I taught her all she knows because she would pester me to teach her to fight. She is a pain in the ass, but I love her very much.”

“She is your little sister. I have two of them myself and would give a limb or two for them.”

“What now, Carl?” he asked grimly.

“We play the waiting game.”

“Yeah!” He dragged restless fingers through his hair.
“Her heart appears to be strong.”

“It is. And she is fighting.”

“Which is a good thing.”

“We just have to wait and see.”

“The wait is killing me. I wish there was something I could do. I feel so damn frustrated.”

“Sit with her and talk. We encourage loved ones to do just that.”

“I suppose you are right.”

“We should fly in some experts. Those damn doctors do not seem to know what the hell they are doing!”

“They are the best in their field and more than that, they are familiar with her history,” Maurice said mildly, pouring himself a drink. He had thought about going straight to his sister’s apartment and taking a much-needed nap but knew they were going to want an update. One that had not changed since he had last spoken to them.

“You are a damn doctor, but it seems to me that you are sitting on your ass and not doing anything.”

His eyes sizzled dangerously as he turned to face his irate father. He had come to the office where they were both camped out waiting for news. “Tensions and tempers are high at a time like this and I am going to ignore that slur. Marianne is the best of us and the only one who matters in this damned messed up family.

I am doing all I can in my position. I am a close family member, and it is not legal or moral for me to jump in there and take over. I am just a GP, and the brain is not my area of expertise. The doctors are working night and day to come up with a solution. So, don't you sit there and tell me that I am not doing anything!”

They glared at each other for what seemed to be an interminable amount of time before the older man backed down.

“Maurice is right,” his uncle said gruffly, “we are all suffering here, and it does not make sense to be sniping at each other.”

“I apologize!” Maximillian dragged a hand over his lined face. he looked haggard and Maurice wondered in alarm when it was the last time the old man had gotten a good night’s sleep. He should prescribe sleeping aids for him and his brother.

“It’s just that I have not done her enough justice. I ignored her when she was growing up and never told her how much I appreciated the work she has been doing. I never told her how proud I am of her.”

“You will get that chance,” Maurice told him firmly as he finished the scotch, “I have to go. I am dropping on my feet, and I am going back to the hospital.”

“I did not mean what I said earlier.”

“Oh yes you did,” Maurice responded grimly, “but you meant no harm. I will keep you posted.”

Mariel woke up in the early hours of the morning with a scream trapped inside her throat. Her skin was clammy with sweat and her abdomen was like someone had placed a hot poker there.

Dragging off the sheets, she stared at the spreading blood in horror. "No! No! No!" Swinging her legs off the bed, she gripped her stomach and swayed dizzily. It took her a few minutes before she could drag herself to the bathroom.

A scream left her throat as she staggered over to the commode and sat down. The sweat was dripping off her forehead and running down her chest and the pain was spectacular!

She had discovered only recently that she was carrying his baby and had not decided what to do about it. And now she was losing it. The tears gathered at the back of her eyes and made their way down her cheeks as the not yet formed fetus passed through her and into the bowl.

She stayed there for a few minutes to make certain that everything was out before she rolled off almost all of the tissue to staunch some of the bleeding.

Firming her lips, she staggered off the commode and made it to her bedroom to get her phone. She could not do this alone. She was a doctor and knew what to do basically, but she was going to need some help. “Angie,” she gritted her teeth as the pain tore through her stomach. “I am sorry to wake you, but I need your help.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like I just lost my baby....” The tears were coming again. Her friend had rushed over and patched her up as best as she could, and they had both checked to see if they had gotten everything.

“You are still going to have to get yourself checked out by an expert.”

“I know,” Mariel nodded, “I will go into Virginia when I feel strong enough to see a doctor there.”

“I will drive you,” Angie sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand, “I am also going to suggest strongly that you get in touch with him. He is the one you need at this time.”

“No!” She shook her head. “It has been three weeks since he left and has not been in touch with me. I even called him when his sister came out of the coma, and he has not called me back.”

“The man is still pissed at you, and he got the scare of his life. He almost lost his sister.”

“It does not matter,” she said quietly, “it’s over.”

“Honey, you have been like a shadow since he left. You were working yourself to the bone and you have not been out of the house socially, it has been just work for you and you have lost weight. You look like a damn stick.”

“I was pregnant, and I did not even realize it,” the tears slid down her cheeks, “and when I started to put two and two together., I did not know how to feel or if I even wanted the baby. Now, that is no longer an issue, I feel as if the most important part of me has been torn away.”

“It’s going to take some time. And you need someone to help you get through it.”

“Not him.”

“Honey....”

“Please. I do not want to talk about it anymore.”

“I am not an invalid.” Marianne protested as her brother lifted her and placed her on the sofa. She had awoken from her coma three days ago without any lasting impact from her injuries.

The swelling had gone down, and she was on her way to recovery. Her father and uncle had also insisted that she move back home until she was well enough, and Maurice had agreed with them.

“You were almost dead so forgive me for not taking any chances,” he told her mildly as he covered her with a blanket.

“You need a shave,” her hand cupped his strong jaw fondly, “and dad and uncle seem to have mellowed somewhat.”

“Almost losing you has placed things into perspective for them,” he sat at the opposite end of the sofa and placed

her feet onto his lap, “you gave us quite a scare. What the hell were you thinking - going out clubbing in the middle of the week?”

She arched her brows at him, and he laughed ruefully. “I sound like our old man, and I am looking for someone to blame for the accident. The one who caused it is dead and I cannot get to strangle him, so that leaves you.”

“I am still a very ill woman, and you are going to have to be gentle with me.”

“My ass,” he murmured dryly.

“When are you leaving?”

“I am thinking of sticking around,” he said casually.

“I do not need a babysitter, darling.”

“Your previous actions indicate otherwise.”

“Maurice....”

“I am thinking of coming back to stay.”

“Because of me?”

“You are certainly a factor. And there is nothing for me there.”

“There was someone,” she deduced quietly.

“Yes, but it is over.”

“Is it?”

He gave her a wry look. “You are supposed to be resting.”

“I have been resting for almost two weeks and you look like hell, brother.”

“That’s because you chose to go out clubbing and almost got yourself killed.”

“I think it is more than that.”

“Think what you like...,” he frowned as his phone started vibrating. Fishing it out of his pocket, he stared at the strange number and the area code he recognized. “This is Dr. Steadman.”

“Dr. Steadman, this is Angie.”

He felt his heart starting up as fear touched him. “What is it?”

“It’s about Mariel.”

Putting aside his sister’s feet, he got slowly to his feet, his ears buzzing. “What’s wrong?”

“She had a miscarriage.”

“A misc...,” he closed his eyes briefly and felt the room swirling around with him. “Where is she?”

“At home presently. She did not want to tell you and made me promise not to do so. But I think that you deserve to know.”

“You did the right thing and Mariel, and I are going to have this out once and for all. Thank you.”

“Mariel?”

He turned to look at his sister and realized that he had forgotten she was there. “A long story and one I do not have time to get into. I have to go.”

“Mountain Glades?”

“Yes. It’s going to take me a while to get there!”

“I am certain dad will let you borrow the jet. After all, it is an emergency.”

Striding over, he bent to kiss her cheek. “I will be in touch.”

“Don’t worry about me darling,” she reassured him.

“How can I not?” he retorted, “just make sure you rest and take your medicine.”

“Yes, doc. Go.”

Mariel wrapped the robe around her body and made her way downstairs towards the kitchen. Picking out the box of chamomile, she put the kettle on.

She had gone to the doctor and had been given a clean bill of health and had been told that there was no apparent reason for the miscarriage. “These things happen,” the woman told her sympathetically. “But there is no reason you cannot try again in six weeks.”

Like it was that easy. She had been absent from the clinic for a week now and had given the excuse that she had a cold and did not want to pass it on to anyone. The

administrator had told her to take time to recuperate. “You have not taken any sick leave or personal time for years, my dear.”

But she had been in bed the entire time and could not stop crying and she was not eating. She stared at herself in the mirror and was shocked to see how gaunt she was.

Her bones were sticking out and she looked awful, like something out of science fiction. She was going to have to pull herself together before she went back to work. She was so absorbed in her misery that it took some time for her to realize that someone was inside the house.

Her heartbeat quickened and she quietly turned the flames off. She lived in a place where it was relatively safe, but you never knew. Looking around for something that could be used as a weapon, she grabbed a skillet hanging over the counter and gripped the handle with both hands.

She was lifting the heavy pan over her head when the frame of the man materialized inside the doorway. The pan clattered to the tiled floor as she gaped at him. Surely, she was hallucinating.

The figure that had haunted her dreams every single night since he had left was standing inside her doorway and she wanted to throw herself into his arms. “I hope you were not planning to brain me with that,” he took in the gauntness of her face and the painful thinness of her body and wanted to shake her for going through all of this alone.

“What are you doing here?” She barely resisted the urge to hurl herself into his arms and stood where she was.

“How are you doing, Maurice? Long time, no see. How about that kind of greeting?”

“I do not want to see you and you should not have let yourself in. I am demanding back my keys.”

“They are actually mine since I was the one who paid for them,” he reached her in two long strides and batted away the hands that started to push him away.

“How can you be so damn stubborn and selfish?” He whispered furiously as he swung her into his arms and carried her into the living room. “You had a miscarriage and did not think I should know about it?” He sat down and kept her firmly on his lap.

“I am going to kill Angie,” she said furiously.

“Not when I am about to strangle you,” he turned her head to face him, “Mariel, what the hell is the matter with you? Why would you not want to let me know....?”

“Don’t you dare pretend that you care!” She blazed at him. “I called you several times and you did not return my calls. You were no longer interested-”

“I was worried about my sister!” He blazed back. “And yes, I was pissed at you. I offered you marriage and left

myself vulnerable by telling you that I love you and you offered me nothing in return. What did you expect? That I would come groveling?"

"I don't want you here."

"That's too bad, sweetheart because you no longer get to make that decision. Look at you!" His voice had dropped - his tone achingly tender. "You are disappearing before my very eyes."

"I lost my baby," she whispered.

"Our baby!" He corrected her.

"I had no idea I was pregnant until a few days before it happened. I woke up early one morning to see all that blood." The tears were streaming down her cheeks and breaking his heart. "I felt this horrible pain and instinctively knew what was happening and I wanted to die." She sank into his arms, and he held her as she sobbed her heart out.

His expression turned grim as he passed his hands soothingly up and down her back. She had been slender before, but now she was just skin, and bones and he hated himself for allowing her to dictate what had transpired between them. And he had not returned her calls.

She had had to go through all of this alone and for that, he could not forgive himself. The crying had stopped but still, he held her, neither of them saying anything.

“I am okay,” she whispered, “you may go.”

He hissed out a breath and got up, holding her firmly in his arms as he made his way upstairs and into her bedroom. Toeing off his boots, he got in the bed and held her against him. “I am not going anywhere.”

“You do not have to feel sorry for me.”

“I am not going anywhere,” he told her tightly, “and nothing you say will make me change my mind. I should not have listened to anything you said, Mariel.

My pride was dented, and I decided that being here - staying here with you was not worth a damn. I was wrong. I should never have left you. And I am not going to again. I am here for you, whether you like it or not.”

“I do not want you staying out of pity.”

“Damn you!” He blazed at her. “Open your eyes and see what is in front of you. I am in love with you, dammit.”

“Stop shouting.”

“I am going to do a hell of a lot more if you continue to talk like that. Now, I would like you to get some sleep and then I am going to be taking care of you. When was the last time you ate anything of substance?”

“I don’t...,” she rolled her eyes at the look on his face, “I had a little soup this morning.”

“And?”

“A piece of toast.”

“That’s not good enough. A strong wind would blow you away. I am in love with you, but right now, I think I want to strangle you.”

The tears started again, and he gave her a look of alarm.

“Darling....”

“I lost our baby.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he gathered her into his arms, and she soaked his shirt with her heartrending tears. He continued to hold her close and within a few minutes, he realized that she had fallen asleep. easing her away

from him, he stared into her tear-stained face and saw the sharp angles and planes made by her loss of weight.

“Oh, my darling,” he whispered, kissing her forehead, “I am so sorry for the part I played in your acute misery. But I promise that I will be here for you from now on.”

Even after an hour had passed and she was fast asleep, he could not close his eyes. He kept going back to what she had told him.

She had started losing the baby in the middle of the night and the pain must have been agonizing. He had lost his baby; one he never knew he had produced and the sorrow of it was killing him. And what was worse, she could have lost her life as well.

And he was not here. He had used pride to allow him to stay away from her. Yes, he had been worried about his sister who had been battling for life, but that was no excuse for him not returning her calls. He closed his eyes and felt the tears flowing down his cheeks.

She stirred against him, her fingers curling into his shirt. Bending his head, he brushed the tendrils of hairs from her wet cheeks, his touch lingering. He would make it up to her. He was going to wait on her hand and foot until she was strong enough for them to get married and he was not going to settle for now.

He was in love with her and even telling himself that they were not suited had done a world of good and he should have realized that he would never be able to tear her out of his heart. And he did not want to. In time, they would try again for another child, but for right now, he was going to concentrate on her.

Shifting slightly so that she could settle more comfortably on his chest, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. For the first time in weeks, he felt himself drifting off to sleep without the use of any sleep aid, just her body snuggled up against his.

Chapter 15

She found him making breakfast the next morning. For the first time since he had left, she had managed to sleep through the night and was feeling amazingly refreshed and starving. The scent of coffee and eggs assailed her nostrils and was making her mouth water.

He looked up and saw her framed inside the doorway. “You are supposed to stay in bed.”

“I am hungry,” she came into the room and plopped down onto a stool, “you are wearing an apron,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, and feeling ridiculous,” he poured her a cup and added several spoons of sugar and some milk.

“I don’t take sugar....”

“Now you do,” he told her grimly, “you need some flesh on those bones. I have bruises from you sleeping on top of me last night.”

Her eyes flashed at that. “No one invited you here.”

“I do not need an invitation. Eggs for protein and bread, two slices for now, because I do not want to override your system.” He turned to fetch the OJ from the fridge. “I expect you to eat everything. I have sent out for some beef broth for lunch and will be asking my housekeeper over to make us something to eat. My culinary skill ends here.”

“I can prepare a meal....”

“You are going to get some rest and recover from your ordeal. After which, we will be leaving.”

“What? Where?”

“To get married and then off to the South of France for our honeymoon. For two weeks.”

“Wait a damn minute....”

“You are not eating,” he had poured himself a cup of coffee and was seated across from her, his fingers wrapped around the cup. She looked much better this morning, but her face still held a certain haunting quality that was tearing at his heart.

“You cannot come into my life after leaving and simply take over.”

“I can and have done so. We will fly home and get married by next Saturday. Your friend Angie can come along to be part of the ceremony, which will include my family. We leave on Thursday which will give us enough time for you to meet my family before we get hitched.”

“You are presuming that I am going to just fall in with your plans.”

He noticed with approval that she was eating everything on her plate. "I have already called and alerted Mrs. Flemings and explained what happened...."

"You had no right...."

"She told me that she understands, and we should take all the time we need; drink your juice and finish your coffee."

"Where are you going?"

"I have some calls to make."

"Maurice....," she ground her teeth in frustration as he simply walked out of the room and left her staring after him. She was going to refuse to marry him of course. He was just doing this out of pity and guilt.

And she was not going to allow him to take charge of her life. She looked down at her plate in amazement, realizing that she had cleaned it. It was the first time since she had had the miscarriage that she felt so hungry and refreshed and safe.

He made her feel safe and - she closed her eyes briefly. She loved him. It boiled down to that. When he left and when she had not heard from him, it destroyed her. She had gotten so used to sleeping next to him, of being in his arms that even when they were fighting, it was still something she looked forward to.

“Damn him!” She muttered as she drank her coffee and finished her OJ. She looked up as he came back into the kitchen. “What now?” She grumbled. “Are you going to pick out what I should be wearing?”

“I just might,” he took the plate away and cleared the counter, before turning her around and lifting her chin. “You look a hell of a lot better.”

“Why thank you, doctor,” the sarcasm was evident in her voice.

“You are welcome,” he inclined his head regally, “now, even though it will be a small intimate wedding, I am assuming you will want to look your best. I have contacted Monique and she will be calling you in the next hour to discuss your taste.”

Her eyes widened. “I am shocked. You did not pick out the dress for me?”

He hid a smile. “I stopped short of doing so and don’t be so ungracious. After all, in two weeks I am going to be your husband.”

“I am not looking forward to it,” she retorted.

“Is that so!” Bending his head, he kissed her. He had meant it to be a light caress, but she opened her mouth and met his tongue with a hunger that was met only by his own yearning.

The kiss became feverish, the passion flooding their unsuspecting bodies in a flash. He hauled her up against him and practically devoured her. It had been too long, and his body was aching to feel her curves against his. But common sense and concern kicked in and he only just managed to get her away from him.

His glittering eyes took in her flushed skin and the brightness of her eyes. "Oh sweetheart," he groaned hoarsely, "I cannot- we cannot - it would be criminal..." he let go of her and staggered back. He stared at her for a full two minutes, zeroing in on her swollen lips, before turning away. "I need some air."

Mariel sank back weakly onto the stool, her heart hammering inside her chest and her skin hot to the touch.

She wanted him – no - she corrected. She needed him. It had been a long time since she felt him inside her and she needed to do so. It would serve as part of the healing process. She was not in any pain and was over the after-effects of the miscarriage. She knew he was feeling guilty, but she was going to find a way for him to get past that.

She touched her lips and closed her eyes briefly. How she had lived without his touch when he was gone was beyond her.

Maurice took a long invigorating walk. He had to get far away from her - in order to cool his ardor. His cock was raging out of control, and he felt like a damn monster.

She had not yet recovered from the trauma of the miscarriage and if he had not stopped, he would have taken her right there like a damn animal. He inhaled the clean crisp air of fall and tried to quiet down his rioting emotions.

He could not leave her by herself for long. He had promised to take care of her, and he was going to stick to that promise. He had already alerted his family as to what was happening and surprisingly both his dad and his uncle were looking forward to meeting her.

“It’s about time,” his father had told him gruffly. He had also been sympathetic about the miscarriage.

His sister was delighted and could not wait to meet Mariel. Shoving his hands into the pockets of his denims, he stopped at the crossroad that led to his cottage and the clinic. It was a weekday and yet the place was quiet and serene. He was definitely going to make it his home.

Turning around, he headed back to her place. She was not in the kitchen where he had left her and neither was, she in the living room. He bounded up the stairs and was hit by the beguiling scent of raspberry before he walked into the bathroom. She was submerged up to her chin in bubbles.

“There you are. Where did you go?”

“I went for a walk,” he took a deep breath and started to turn away.

“Will you scrub my back?” She held the sponge out and had him staring at her with narrowed eyes.

“What are you up to?”

“Nothing...,” she lifted one long and shapely leg and brushed away the suds. “I just need help and you did promise to take care of me.”

“Mariel, I know what you are up to...,” he took the sponge from her and sat on the lip of the tub. “We cannot....”

“I know,” she leaned back against the padding and closed her eyes.

“I thought you wanted me to wash your back.”

“I changed my mind. Could you do the front?”

“Mariel...,” he hissed out a breath when the sponge came in contact with her breast.

“The nipples are still sensitive. You know from....”

“Yes,” he rasped, circling the tight bud slowly, “how is that?”

“I would prefer to feel your mouth on it.”

“Mariel – Oh, sweetheart- I cannot....”

“It’s been so hard since you left,” she whispered, “I wanted to feel your arms around me when it happened and afterwards, I wanted to feel you deep inside me....” She broke off with a moan when he hauled her out of the tub and grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her.

“If I hurt you”

“You won’t,” she wrapped her arms around his neck as he strode with her into the bedroom and placed her carefully onto the bed.

“Tell me if I am and I will stop,” he was dragging his clothes off tearing at the shirt in his haste to get to her. “I should wait...,” he was so hard that it was painful.

“No!” She opened her arms, and he went into them, his body flushed with heat. He could not manage to be sophisticated. There was no finesse to his touch. He had spent so much time staying away from her that he was now overwhelmed by emotions. He kissed her hungrily, moving down her body with undignified haste.

Her gratified moans were spurring him on and making him gauche like a schoolboy with his first woman. He latched onto the nipple and her scream rented the air and he suckled hungrily, his teeth making scratch marks on the flesh.

He would apologize to her later, but right now, his passion was unleashed, the control gone. He transferred to the other nipple and was just as thorough. But that was as far as he got.

He could not go any further or he was going to ejaculate prematurely, and he wanted to flood her with his seed. Climbing over her, he tried to ease into her slowly, but she prevented that by lifting her legs to clasp around his waist, forcing him to sink in deep.

“My darling,” he gasped, his body jerking on top of hers, “please forgive me,” he took her lips with his as he drove into her.

But it was over almost before it began. She came long and hard, her fingers biting into his back and drawing blood. The sting of it urged him - and he found himself driving into her with a force that was beyond belief. He came with her, his body shuddering, heart pumping out of control.

He slowed down the kiss somewhat, gentling it as his body undulated against hers. Ending the kiss, he shifted without easing out of her. He could not bear to be separated from her right now. Not just yet. "My sweet, are you okay?" He asked anxiously as she buried her face into his chest.

"No."

"Oh, good Christ Marie! I have hurt you."

"You did not!" She lifted her head and he saw the tears in her eyes.

"You are crying," he accused her.

"Tears of joy, you idiot. I love you."

His heart lurched and then settled as he saw the evidence on her exquisite face.

“I have wasted so much time fighting what I was feeling, and I almost lost you,” she was openly crying now.

“I am still here,” he said thickly, emotions overwhelming him, “I am still here, darling,” he kissed her wet cheek gently, “and I am here to stay.”

“You had better be,” she sniffed and blinked away the tears, “will your family approve?”

“They already do,” he still could not believe she had said the words and he was going to have her say them again.

“They have never met me,” she was still intimately joined to him, and nothing had ever felt so good.

“I told them about you.”

“What did you tell them?” She asked him curiously. She was tracing a pattern through the hairs on his chest and starting a slow fire inside him. He did not want to overwhelm her with his passion, but it might not be helped.

“That you are this stuck-up broad with a chip on her shoulders,” he grinned as she glared at him, “I told them that I am head over heels in love with the most beautiful woman I have ever known.”

“Is that true?”

He cocked a brow at her. “I never knew you were vain.”

“I might be just a little and considering you are used to beautiful women; I want to make certain it stops with me,” she told him airily.

“It definitely stops with me.”

“If I find that you are unfaithful to me....”

“You will cut off my cock?”

Her eyes widened at that. “I will not be there. I am a doctor and I know how to administer drugs without leaving a trace.”

“You are a children’s doctor.”

“Still a doctor with a precise knowledge of anatomy.”

“I am duly warned. Now if you are fully rested, we should go and get something in your stomach.”

“Not yet!” She rotated her hips and his cock quivered to life.

“Mariel....”

“Just one more. It’s been so long that I need to feel you again.”

“Oh baby,” he whispered as he covered her body with his, “we really should not be doing this.”

“I am much better,” she encircled his neck with her arms, “since you came back, I feel on top of the world.”

He kissed her then and for the next thirty minutes, the only sounds inside the room were their pants and whispered words of love.

“Relax.”

“You cannot just tell me to relax and expect it to happen. I am on my way to meet your family.”

“They are not going to gobble you up,” he grinned as he took her hand and pressed his lips against the skin. The time had flown by with him going into the clinic for a couple of hours to see some patients and coming home back to her. He was true to his word and had not left her an inch.

Angie had come over to talk about the wedding and other things, but he had not permitted her to stay for very long. “You still need to rest.” He had tried to convince her that they should stay away from the lovemaking, but she had not listened. In that area, she was the boss, and he could not resist her.

“That’s not very comforting and could be taken both ways.”

“How do you like the plane?” He was determined to sway her attention from the topic that was obviously troubling her.

“It’s like a five-star hotel. One that I have been in only once.”

“Want to try out the bed?” He wriggled his brows at her and succeeded in making her laugh.

“Not with the flight attendant hovering and being so attentive. She has offered us food every ten minutes,” she gave him a suspicious look, “is that your doing?”

“Perhaps,” he threaded his fingers through hers, “you don’t look like a scarecrow anymore.”

“Why, thank you.”

“You are welcome,” he inclined his head and flashed her a smile. Mariel stared at him and felt the love bursting into her chest.

“What is it?” he asked with a frown.

“I love you,” she said simply. The three words had him unbuckling her seat belt hastily.

“What are you doing?”

“We are definitely checking out the bed or bunk or whatever the hell it’s called.”

“The flight attendant....”

“Will know what we are up to,” he stopped in the middle of the aisle and kissed her ardently, “you cannot say those words and expect me to just sit there and not do anything about it.”

“Maurice....”

He kissed her again for saying his name in that seductive voice of hers. Lifting her into his arms, he strode into the stateroom and slammed the door shut.

They were met at the airfield by a company car and whisked away to where the meeting would be taking place. She was curled up against him, her head resting on his shoulders and still flushed from the torrid lovemaking an hour ago. They had freshened up in the rather lovely peach and cream bathroom and she had changed her clothes.

“Falling asleep on me?” He murmured into her hair.

“Maybe!” She inhaled his cologne and felt peace and contentment stealing over her for the first time in years. She never saw herself as a woman needing the care of a man, but with Maurice it was natural. He took care of her, and it felt wonderful.

“We are almost there, sweetheart.”

His endearments made her feel like the most loved woman in the world, and she could feel the tears threatening again.

“And I have nothing to worry about.”

“Absolutely nothing,” he assured her.

And he was right. As soon as the uniformed maid opened the glossy red double doors and ushered them into the huge living room, she was welcomed with open arms and treated as if they had known her for a long time. Marianne was especially delighted that she was going to have a sister who was a doctor at that.

“What’s this about getting married on Saturday?” Maximillian asked gruffly. “You cannot wait for a proper ceremony?”

“We are having it right here at the manor. I have already procured the license and the priest who will be performing the ceremony,” Maurice said firmly. He was leaning negligently against the large marble, a drink in his hand and looked at home in this setting.

Marianne had insisted on Mariel taking a seat next to her on the comfortable sofa. Seeing him in this atmosphere, acutely reminded him that he was not some simple guy, but the heir to a fortune.

“Why the hurry?”

“Why dad, are you trying to ask if Mariel is knocked up after what happened only a few weeks ago?” His green eyes glinted. He had warned them not to bring up the painful subject of the miscarriage and they had agreed.

“Of course not. I just figured Mariel would want a big wedding....”

“No!” She shook her head. “A small intimate one is perfectly fine.”

“There you go.” His eyes met hers and held a question in them. When she smiled at him, he expelled a breath. He did not want her thinking or reflecting on what had happened. They had talked about it at length, and he was trying not to beat himself too much because he was not there. “It’s settled.”

Mariel passed her hands over the front of the dress as she stared at herself in the mirror. This was her wedding day! In a few hours, she was going from being Mariel James to Mrs. Maurice Steadman and she could not wait. She lifted her left hand to stare at the square-cut diamond surrounded by the smaller ruby stones.

“Girl, I am speechless,” she turned to look at her best friend who had flown in last night and was bowled over by the magnificence of the manor and its surroundings.

“You don’t think It’s too form-fitting?” she asked anxiously. “Monique told me that it’s perfect, but I lost so much weight....”

“It’s perfect and pearl pink was the right choice.”

“I wished dad was here....” It was the only bad moment for her and this morning she had found herself crying.

“He is not here to walk me down the aisle.”

“He is here in spirit, and it was decent of Maximillian to offer.”

“It was.” Taking a deep breath, she reached for the bouquet of orchids, peonies and roses, which the girl handed to her. “I am ready.”

The ceremony was short and sweet and was held in the blue and white ballroom which had been decorated by an expert.

Pink, blue and green balloons floated against the ceiling. Rose petals had been strewn all over the red carpet that had been placed in the center of the room. The gathering was small, but she could not have asked for anything more.

Maurice, looking resplendent and handsome in a dark blue tux, made her smile as she was handed to him by his dad. Within minutes they were husband and wife, the legalities dispensed with. A prenup had been signed and had been a bone of contention between them when it was mentioned.

“I do not mind signing it, darling,” she had assured him.

“I do not like it,” he had muttered darkly, “I am marrying you for love.”

“And I am marrying you because you are great in bed.” She had finally teased him out of his distress. And now she was Mrs. Maurice Steadman, for better or worse.

Chapter 16

“Will we be living here?” Mariel could not believe they had been married for almost three weeks now. He had originally said two weeks for their honeymoon, but that had been extended to three.

They had spent a week in the charming city of Avignon, another week in Carcassonne and diverted to Tuscany where the company owned a villa there. The entire time had been one of revelation and she could not believe she could fall further in love with the wonderful man she had married but had been proven wrong.

“I have not decided yet....” He had carried her over the threshold and was still holding her in his arms. “What do you think?” He went into the living room and sat down with her in his arms.

She had regained her weight and was more exquisite than ever. The honeymoon had done her wonders. He had bought her so many things that it had been

convenient that they had been loaned the use of the jet to transport them to and from the places they had visited.

“I don’t care,” she snuggled against him, “as long as I am with you.”

“Good choice of words,” he kissed her roughly, “we have been traveling for ages and tomorrow they are planning an entire soiree for us in the town square.”

“I cannot believe they are going through all that,” she mused.

“They did not get to be part of the reception, so I guess we have to at least give them that.” He tilted her chin up. “How are you, Mrs. Steadman?”

“I am great. Wait! Isn’t it going to be confusing to both be called Dr. Steadman?”

“Unless you tell them to call you Mrs. Steadman, instead,” he grinned at her.

“Not a chance.”

“Just a thought. I really do want everyone to know that you are mine.”

“Your possessiveness is annoying,” she complained, “like when you almost punched that French guy in the face for touching me.”

“I should have knocked his lights out,” he muttered, eyes glowering, “he was touching your breast.”

“It was an accident,” she protested.

“His hand just slipped from your shoulder to your breast. Yeah, right.”

“You are impossible,” she shook her head, a smile hovering at her lips.

“You are enjoying this aren’t you?” he said darkly.

“A little bit. Are we going upstairs?”

“To sleep.”

“We will see.”

“Mariel....”

“I did not say anything.”

“I know that look, woman, and we have been at it since the honeymoon. It was a long flight, and we need to

recover.”

Minutes later, he rolled off her, his heart pumping hard inside his chest, his eyes dazed by the frenzied lovemaking they had just participated in. “You are going to be the death of me,” he whispered as he gathered her into his arms.

“Hopefully, not anytime soon,” she whispered back.

“You are glowing.” Angie pointed out as they made their way to the table where the food was being served. The couple had been congratulated and wedding gifts were loaded onto a table with several of the nurses in charge of seeing to them.

Eileen had grudgingly wished them all the best on their nuptials. “I should have known he was interested in you.”

“I am happy.”

“And you have regained the weight.”

“My husband insists on feeding me every two hours.”
She laughed, completely unaware that the term
‘husband’ had tripped off her tongue naturally.

“I am happy for you, honey,” Angie told her sincerely.

“Any chance of you coming back to the clinic soon?”

Maribel glanced over to where Maurice was chatting with the administrator and several of the members of the board. The addition to the hospital was up and running and several members of the business community had donated the necessary furnishings that were needed.

“We should be back on Monday. I cannot believe that I met him several months ago. It is so crazy that I am completely in love with him.”

“Not so crazy at all,” Angie piled her plate and glanced over at one of the doctors’ coming towards them,
“Donnie and I are dating. And before you say anything-....”

“I was going to say, that I wish you all the best,” Mariel told her with a brilliant smile, “hi, Dr. Mitchell.”

“Dr. James – er, Steadman. Dr. Steadman, it’s good to see you.”

“I know there will be a lot of confusion, but Dr. James is fine too.”

“Not according to your husband,” Angie told her mildly.

“We will figure it out,” picking up her plate, she went to join him.

“Please tell me, you are not examining what I have on my plate.”

“I always knew you were very observant.” Taking up a plump grape, he fed it to her. “Why don’t we sit for a minute.”

“I am not tired,” she protested.

“I am and getting bored with all the shop talk,” he guided her to an empty bench and wrapped his arm around her shoulders loosely, “you just saved me from hearing for the third time the prize chicken that laid a dozen eggs in one go.”

She laughed at that, dark brown eyes twinkling, “Farmer Jed.”

“Precisely!” Picking up the napkin, he dabbed at her lips. “How soon can we leave?”

“In case you do not realize it, this party was thrown in our honor.”

“Which means we should be able to dictate what time we get to leave.”

“It means the opposite.”

He sighed, stretching his legs out and turning his head to kiss her. “We are still newlyweds and need time alone.”

“Which we have each time we go home.”

“It’s not enough,” he kissed her cheek, uncaring that people were staring at them, “it will never be enough...” He breathed against her mouth. “I want you – even now, my cock is out of control.”

“Maurice...,” she swallowed the lump inside her throat, her appetite for food disappearing, to be replaced by something more potent.

“Sweetheart?”

“We should....”

“Leave?”

“Yes.”

“I am thinking that very thing. I will come up with some excuse. How do you feel about having stomach cramps?”

“Why can't it have something to do with you?”

“Because I am the man and nothing is wrong with me,” he told her smugly.

“For that sexist and completely biased remark, you get to be the guy with the stomach cramps.”

“Not if I get to the relevant party first.” He started to get up when she pressed a hand to her chest and let out a gasp.

“Darling, what’s wrong?”

“I feel a little faint,” she whispered.

“Is it your blood pressure? Do you feel dizzy? Crap and I left my stethoscope at home.”

“I just need a drink of water.”

“Coming right up,” she waited until he had gone to do her bidding before she made her move.

She was still laughing when they got home. “You should see the look on your face when you realized what I did.”

He glowered at her. “For that stunt, you get to sleep alone, and I had planned this whole seductive scene with the bottle of Costa Romance I brought back with me, but now that’s shot to hell.”

“Maurice, where are you going?”

“To watch the game. I understand that the Lakers are playing, and I have been missing a few of the games lately.” Picking up the remote he switched the TV on. “Some good movies are on your favorite station, Netflix, I think?”

“Do you want an apology?” She folded her arms over her chest and glared at him.

“I don’t know, darling; did you do something worthy of one?”

“You are just mad because I tricked you.... Damn you stop!”

“Why should I?”

“Okay, fine, go on your way. You are right. I think there was something I was thinking of watching on Netflix after all.” She shimmied out of the denims and then took off her panties. His eyes narrowed as he watched her dragging the plum-colored sweater over her head. Next came the nude-colored excuse for a bra.

His cock surged to life as he stared at her slender curves hungrily and he knew that he had lost the battle of wills.

“You are going to pay – one way or another,” he promised as he took off his shoes and then his clothes.

“I thought you were going to watch the game,” she said innocently as he lifted her into his arms.

“Just shut up,” he growled, covering her body with hers.

It was almost Christmas when she confirmed why her breasts were extra sensitive and she had been feeling slightly dizzy in the early hours of the morning.

She had not said anything to him because she knew he would go nuclear about taking care of herself. It was a constant battle of will between them and even at work, their arguments were a source of amusement to the rest of the staff.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked briefly before pushing the door open. He was perusing a patient's chart and sitting behind his desk. “Something wrong?” she asked him lightly.

“A blocked intestine, easily fixed.’ Pushing away the folder, he concentrated on her. “You have news.”

“How did you know?”

“You, my dear wife happen to have a very expressive face and I have a feeling that Dr. Williams confirmed the fact that you are pregnant.”

She stared at him and sat down in resignation. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“Then you should have chosen a regular guy to get hitched to. I am a doctor and more than that, I know every inch of that delectable body of yours.”

“You are incorrigible.”

“That I am. Now it comes to the part where I cut your hours.”

“You would not dare!”

“I happen to play a dual role in your life. Boss and husband.”

“I am just two months pregnant.... “

“And we have no idea why you had that miscarriage before. So, we are not taking any chances. Dr. Carter will take over most of your patients....”

“Absolutely not! I am not terminal Maurice; I am just pregnant.”

“And I am honor bound to take care of you and our precious cargo. Starting now, you are going to be doing at the most only five hours and then go on home.”

“You cannot do this!”

“I can and I will. It’s for your own good.”

“I am not a child....”

“You happen to be carrying one and I want to make certain that our baby comes to full term, even if means locking you inside the house.”

She got up slowly, the anger simmering inside her. “You think you can control my life?”

“I am your husband....”

“Not my damn keeper!”

“Therefore, I am taking it upon myself to make certain you take it easy.”

She turned to leave, and he stopped her when she got ready to jerk open the door by placing his hand against it.

“Let me out,” she said frostily, “for the next few hours that I am here, I have patients to see.”

“I am scared,” he admitted hoarsely, “I know I am being highhanded, but I am afraid. I was not here when you went through the horrible ordeal, but I saw the aftermath and I do not want you to go through that again. Please understand.”

Her anger deflated like a balloon pricked by a sharp object. “You think I am not going to take care of myself? That I did not do so before? I am longing for this baby, and I will do everything in my power to make certain we see our child.”

“I know,” he placed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, “do you regret marrying me?”

She gave him a startled look. “Never!” she said fervently. “I might be annoyed and frustrated at your attempt at controlling everything where I am concerned, but I love being married to you.”

“I adore you,” he whispered achingly, “so much, that it scares me.”

Her heart bumped against her ribs. “I know.” She wrapped her hands around his neck. “And I am the most fortunate woman in the world.”

“I hope you remember that when I act like an ass again.”

“Always....” She pressed her body against his and with a tortured groan, he crushed her lips with his.

“How is this?” He pressed his hands against her distended stomach. She was almost eight months pregnant, and they were still tentatively cautious.

The pregnancy was surprisingly uneventful except for a few mornings when she could not get out of bed. And he was a very attentive partner, albeit an annoying one who monitored her vitals and made sure that she ate healthily.

“Right there,” She leaned back against him and took several breaths. Classical music was playing in the background, and they were doing their evening exercises.

Their son, Caleb George Elliot was thriving and moving around inside her womb as if restless to make his appearance. They had been traveling back and forth to see his family and both his uncle and dad had been to visit twice. His sister had taken a liking to the small town and visited every other weekend.

They were still living at the original home and had decided to stay put for the time being.

“Your ankles are swollen.”

“A little bit.”

His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. “I thought I told you to stay off your feet.”

“I just went for a walk. I was cooped up inside the house with nothing to do and it’s such a nice day....”

“What am I going to do with you?” He asked plaintively, his hands splayed protectively over her stomach. She was wearing winter green tights and a cropped top, revealing her skin and he could not stop looking at the evidence of their child growing inside her womb.

“Love me and put up with my raging hormones.” She settled more comfortably against him. “Right now, I am

starving.”

“Again?”

“Are you complaining?”

“You are going to eat us out of house and home,” he said indulgently. He felt when she stiffened, “darling?”

“It’s probably nothing. Braxton Hicks...,” she closed her eyes briefly and breathed in.

“Mariel?” He prodded in alarm.

“It’s gone...,” she took a deep breath. “I am not due for the next three weeks....”

“And we both know that babies can come two weeks before or two weeks after.” Shifting carefully, he helped

her up and settled her against the cushions. “How about some tea?”

“That sounds lovely.”

He hesitated as he stood there looking at her.

“I am fine. Probably Caleb just getting impatient. I am so happy you got Sheila to finish the nursery. I love everything about it. And the furniture your dad and uncle shipped here is too much over the top.”

“Our son is going to be the heir to a fortune, so they are entitled.”

“I wished you had not reminded me,” she told him with a sigh, “I keep trying not to think about all that money.”

“So do I,” he squeezed her hand and left to go and make her tea.

Maribel rubbed her stomach absently and turned onto her side as she tried to make herself more comfortable. He had been such a wonder. He was patient with her and would massage her stomach when it stiffened up, especially over the last couple of months. Her stomach cramped up again and she had to take several deep breaths.

“Easy there, honey,” She whispered, rubbing her belly. Swinging her legs off the sofa, she eased to her feet and started walking the length of the sofa. He came in with the tea on a tray to find her massaging the small of her back.

“Maribel?”

“I am just a little uncomfortable. I am fine.”

“You keep saying that. Want to sit?”

She nodded.

Taking her hand, he led her to the comfortable easy chair he had bought her as soon as he realized she was pregnant.

“Stretch your legs out, darling,” he adjusted the leg rest and placed the tray on top of her belly. “How are you?”

“Better.” She took a sip of the tea and leaned her head back. “Aren’t you supposed to be going out to the clinic?”

“I already assigned my cases to Dr. Miller. I am staying put. Know what I am thinking?”

“What?”

“We should put some music on and start dancing.”

She smiled at him. “Sounds like a good idea.”

He was watching and waiting for the signs, so as soon as he felt her twisting and turning next to him later that night.

Springing up from his pillows he switched the lamp on. “Darling?”

“I think it’s time,” she bit down on her lip and closed her eyes as she tried to ride out the contraction, “they are about ten minutes apart.”

“I will call Sylvia and alert her that we are coming in.” Swinging his legs off the bed, he rushed into the bathroom to splash cold water over his face and dragged his fingers through his hair. He was sure there was nothing to worry about even though the baby was two and a half weeks ahead of the due date.

“Okay, my sweet, let’s get you dressed. Can you get up?”

“Yes.” She took his hands and levered herself up, swinging her legs off the bed. “I am not worried.”

“Why should you be.” He grabbed the robe that had been placed within reach and helped her on with it, tying the sash around her extended waistline. “Ready darling?”

She nodded.

“Let me grab the bag.”

“You are going to have to call your dad and the rest.”

“As soon as we are out of the house and at the hospital.”

“Dad, you don’t have to make the trip. It is two in the morning,” he protested.

“That baby is my first grandchild, and I am not going to miss his birth. The jet is already fueled, and both your uncle and sister are raring to leave. We will see you in a bit.”

Maurice hung up the phone and went back into the delivery room. “How are we doing?”

“Perfectly fine,” she smiled at him as he took his position behind her, “I think Dr. Larson is saying that our son’s head is crowning.”

“It’s about time,” he muttered in relief.

Their son was born in the early hours of Sunday, June fifteenth, looking all wrinkled and screaming angrily as soon as he made his appearance.

“He has a very strong pair of lungs,” Angie said in delight as she wrapped the infant up after cleaning him up, “and he is adorable.”

“I want to hold him,” Mariel was exhausted, but the ordeal had not been as bad as she expected.

“Only for a few minutes, darling. You need to get some rest,” her husband told her firmly.

Mariel cradled the infant in her arms and felt the tears pricking the back of her eyes. “His eyes are golden brown,” she murmured, brushing back the dark hairs off his forehead, “he has the cleft in his chin like yours,” she told her husband, “And the shape of your nose and mouth.”

“A chip off the old block,” Maurice sat next to her as he stared at his family. The familiar emotions took hold of him, and he felt overwhelmed.

“Here.” He took his son from her carefully, rocking him back and forth slowly, until his lashes started to drift over his eyes. “The family is waiting to meet you, little fellow. Why don’t we put them out of their misery?”

Two days later, she was home, with her and her son given a clean bill of health. The proud father had taken a month off to stay with his family, even though he had hired a local woman along with their housekeeper to help with the heavy lifting.

Mariel had taken indefinite leave, telling everyone that she was taking the time to spend with her newborn. “I will do consults from home and pop in whenever I am needed.”

“Watching him sleep again?” Her husband came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“He is a tiny miracle,” she whispered, leaning back against him.

“Thank you, darling,” he told her softly.

“I should be the one thanking you,” she turned in his arms, “you have given me what I needed the most.”

“And what is that my love?” he asked her tenderly.

“A family!”

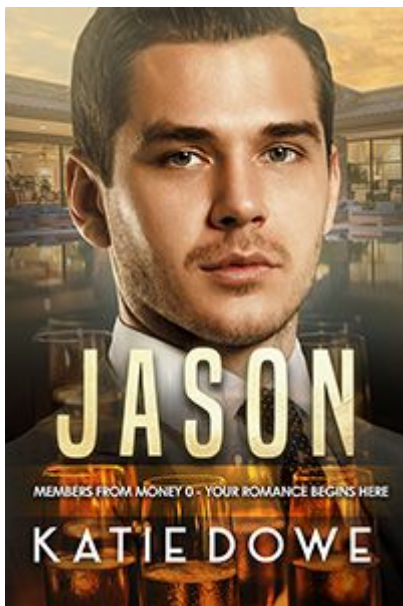
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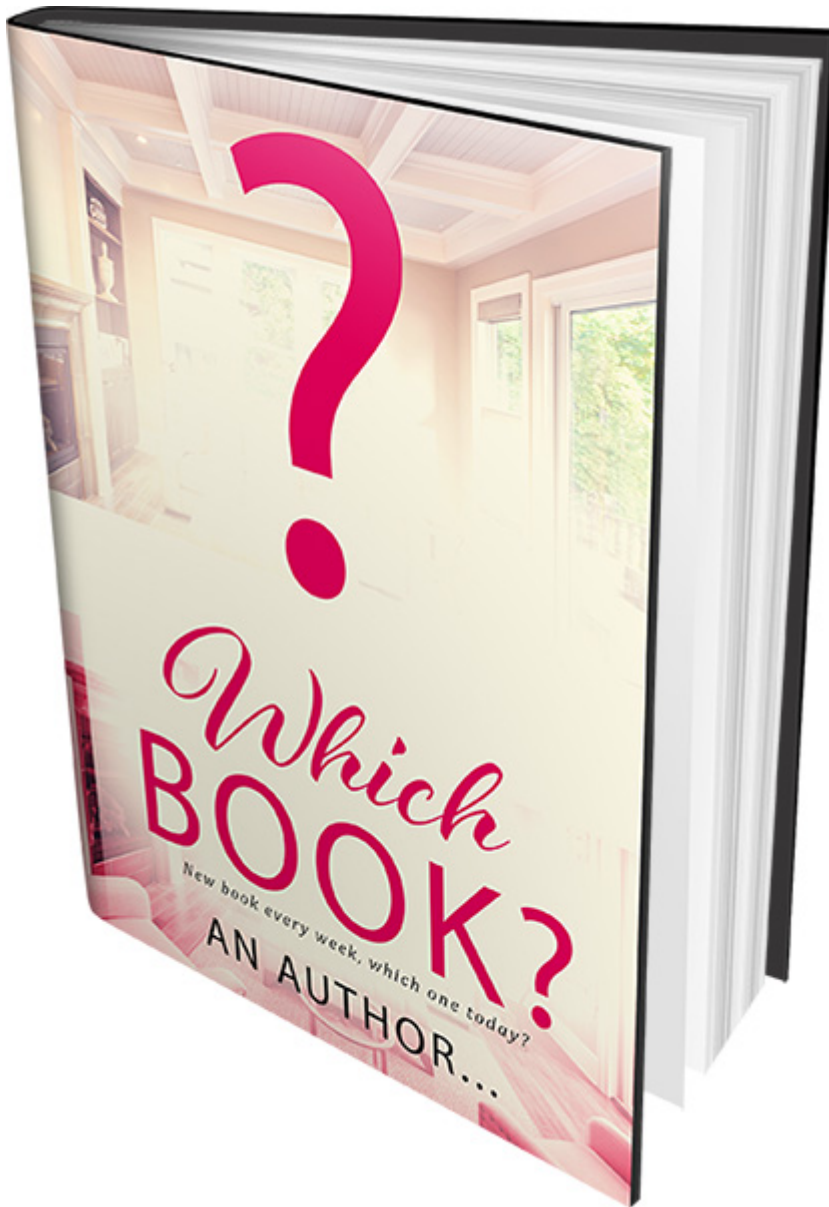
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Also available: [The Fake Date That Changed Everything](#) by Alanna Richardson:



Description:

A sexy BWAM romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

When ER doctor Jasmine decides to go on a blind date with billionaire cook Kim Joon in place of her best friend, the last thing she expects is to enjoy Kim Joon's company more than anything else.

Now he wants to see her again and there's no other option but to play along with the lie and find the chance to let him know she has no intention of dating him!

At least, that was the plan until he kisses her!

Now Jasmine finds herself indulging in a romance that shouldn't have started in the first place!

Joon is absolutely falling hard for Jasmine but has no idea that she has been serving him a lie this entire time!

What will happen when he finds out who she truly is?

Will he stand by her side, or leave her in the dust?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Alanna Richardson of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due shockingly hot sex scenes with a billionaire!

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Also available: [Future Mrs Baker](#) by Jada Scott:



Description:

A sexy BBW romance by Jada Scott of BWWM Club.

I love my life as a software engineer, but I'm stuck with insecurities about being overweight, and I have absolutely no hopes of ever finding love.

I definitely hold a grudge against people who treat me poorly about my weight, and when I blame a social media app's algorithm for perpetuating this stigma, I suddenly go viral!

Now word is out that the app's handsome and arrogant CEO, Nelson James Baker, doesn't take kindly to the threat I pose against his company, and is planning to retaliate!

I need to use all my computer skills to expose his schemes to the public...

But never in my plans did I intend to fall for the billionaire instead!

Yet as I give my heart to him, I become tangled in a web of feelings and untruths...

Not to mention my deep-rooted insecurities!

Am I making the wrong choice by giving my heart to Nelson?

Or might I finally have found The One?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Jada Scott of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Future Mrs Bake now.](#)

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Also available: [Swept Me Off My Feet](#) by Taylor Holton :



Description:

A sexy single parent romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

Single parent Aliyah has a gift of art and uses it as therapy for those in need.

On top of this, she's also waitresses at nighttime to help pay for her family's living expenses!

After a horrible tragedy retired billionaire Erik McAdams has run away from life.

He starts to attend Aliyah's classes and notices that his wounds are starting to heal...

And it's not only the art that's healing him, but Aliyah's presence too!

Aliyah finds Erik undeniably attractive but tries to dodge his flirtatious advancements.

After all, her heart has been broken already once before, and she doesn't want to give up her newly found independence!

Can Erik convince her that she doesn't need to give up who she is to fall in love?

Or will Aliyah force herself out of his life forever?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Swept Me Off My Feet now.](#)

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You'll also want to check out these hot billionaire brothers and cousins in the [Brothers From Money series](#) too:



& many more...

[Click here to meet them and more now.](#)

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Also available: [Future Mrs MacPherson](#) by Jada Scott:



Description:

A sexy surrogate pregnancy romance by Jada Scott of BWWM Club.

Working in the same industry, I knew I would have to work with my dead best friend's awful multi-billionaire husband eventually...

To say that I have a grudge against Terry for being a bad husband is an understatement...

But everything changes when I find out that my friend's dying wish is for me to have Terry's baby with her frozen eggs!

What a wish list to put on two people who can't agree on anything without arguing!

I never thought I would be forced to be around Terry 24/7...

And I'm starting to realize things aren't quite what they seemed...

And that my best friend might have been conning me all these years!

Have I made a mistake in thinking Terry is a terrible person?
Or am I just setting myself up for heartbreak?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Jada Scott of
BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes with
a billionaire!

Want to read more? [Then click here to get Future Mrs
MacPherson now.](#)

*

Also available: [The Moment That Changed Everything](#) by
Taylor Holton:



Description:

A sexy widower romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

When Sandra Bolton is invited to sing at the wedding of
billionaire Andrei Wagner, she hopes it'll change her life and
her career forever...

It does change her life, but not in the way that she thinks!

When she begins to sing, Andrei cannot take his eyes off her even though his bride is heading down the aisle toward him!

And when the story hits the tabloids no one cares about the truth, especially not Andrei's supposed bride!

Sandra watches helplessly as her career and life are quickly turned upside down...

But when Andrei comes to her rescue, the attraction between the two is inevitable!

And by the time Sandra realizes this, she is in too deep.

Now she has a choice to make:

The career she has worked so hard for?

Or the man who came to sweep her off her feet?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Taylor Holton of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes!

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