

SWEET *Obsession*
Whiskey Row Series

D.A. YOUNG

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BY

D. A. YOUNG

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This book is a work of fiction and intended for mature audiences aged 18+ only. All names, characters, places, businesses and incidents are products of the author's imagination and have been used factiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales or events is entirely coincidental.

SWEET OBSESSION PLAYLIST

EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED – TAYLOR SWIFT FT. ED SHEERAN

LET HER GO – PASSENGER

EASY TO LUV U – STACIE ORRICO

FOOL OF ME – MESHELL NDGEOCELLO

COUNTDOWN – BEYONCE

LOVE ME LIKE YOU DO – ELLIE GOULDING

RIPTIDE – VANCE JOY

CHANDELIER - SIA

SITTING ON THE DOCK OF THE BAY – OTIS REDDING

FIRE – THE POINTER SISTERS

COME WITH ME NOW – THE KONGOS

I BELIEVE IN YOU & ME – WHITNEY HOUSTON

ALL SUMMER LONG – KID ROCK

LOSE YOURSELF — EMINEM

STAY WITH ME – SAM SMITH

B DON'T KILL MY VIBE – KENDRICK LAMAR*

INVINCIBLE – KELLY CLARKSON

CRASH MY PARTY – LUKE BRYAN

HELLO – BEYONCE

Author's Notes

*“Writing to me is simply thinking through my fingers.” – Isaac
Assimov*

I never knew what I wanted to be growing up and at times felt lost and frustrated. I just knew I had a very big imagination but no outlet for it. That if I saw or thought of something, I could spin a story out of it, and enjoy the tale no matter how odd it might seem to others. It wasn't until a couple of years

ago that I sat down and finally started writing. Out came all the stories and characters that had been impatiently partying in my head, waiting for me to realize that writing was my true calling.

This book is dedicated to anyone who ever did or does struggle to discover their passion and to everyone who believed in me, especially the friends and family members who let me know that reading was not their thing, but they enjoyed what I did share with them.

To Karen Kunz and Patrice Harrison words can't express how much I appreciate you ladies and all that you do. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

I hope you enjoy my first book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions. Please email me at day_one2015@outlook.com

Jack and Noelle's story is the first of the Whiskey Row Series. I hope you enjoy the characters you meet along the way, as they all have a story to tell.

Sincerely,

D. A. Young

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<https://www.facebook.com/D-A-Young-1695356880704195/>

Prologue

1992

Whiskey Row, Tennessee

The turnout for the funeral service atop a high hill just outside of town was sparse. There was Reverend Melton, Jeb the undertaker, a handful of drunken men, and three boys. The boys listened stoically as the preacher struggled to find kind things to say about the deceased. Eventually he stopped trying when he noticed the second oldest boy smirking at him. He glared at the lad and quickly finished his speech before letting the other men speak. They bemoaned the death of their drinking partner as they went on about what a great poker player he'd been. As they walked away, they patted the shoulder of each boy and mumbled their condolences. Still, the young trio said nothing.

Standing next to the grave, the boys watched dirt slowly fill the hole and cover the casket. It had been a depressing affair; nothing like the glorious service held a week earlier in the cemetery where the entire town came to pay their respects as the angelic voices of the church choir filled the sky. On that

day, the townspeople wailed and cried as they felt the tragic loss of one of their own. The many dishes of food brought to the Sullivan doorstep would feed the boys for at least two months. Yes, this turnout was different. But it was one the boys wouldn't have missed for the world.

Reverend Melton stopped next to the group. He looked at each of them, studying their stone-faced expressions. Like their parents, they were incredibly good looking. Jackson was the eldest and he resembled his dear mother down to his calm personality. Standing tall at five feet-ten inches, he had short black hair and hazel eyes. He already looked wise beyond his thirteen years as he took on the role of the family patriarch.

Eleven-year-old Darby was the second eldest, and unfortunately, resembled his bastard of a father. A strapping lad, he had thick reddish-brown hair that fell to his shoulders in sheets, and his eyes were a dark, stormy green. Many a lecture had been given to him because of the mischief he was always up to; but he shrugged it all off with the Sullivan 'devil-may-care' attitude and a shit-eating grin.

And there was Casey, the baby of the family, who was eight years old. His dark blonde hair came from his paternal great-grandfather and was cut in a bowl that framed his head. Being small in stature, due to a fever at birth, had earned him the unpleasant title of 'Little Shit' from their father. His bright hazel eyes were filled with tears as he too stared at the grave.

Clearing his throat, the reverend began somberly, "Boys, I'm sorry for your loss. It's bad enough to lose your mother, but to lose your father as well-"

"We didn't lose our mother; she was taken from us, Reverend," Darby vehemently interjected with a sneer as he continued to stare into the grave. Casey clutched his thigh and

started to sob quietly. Reverend Melton shot Darby a censoring look as he bent down to console Casey; but he twisted away from them and launched himself at his eldest brother. Jack picked him up in his arms and rubbed his back as sobs shook his tiny body. The older man watched helplessly as the inconsolable little boy cried harder. Addressing Reverend Melton, Jack nodded his head and spoke for the first time that morning. “Thank you for your time today, sir. We really appreciate you coming out in this weather to assist us with this matter. Drive safely back to town, okay?”

Realizing he’d been dismissed and by a thirteen-year-old lad no less, Reverend Melton simply nodded his head and made his way down the hill, saying prayers for them the whole way. The grave was now a quarter of the way filled. Jeb was working fast because the University of Tennessee was playing in less than an hour against Vanderbilt. Jack and Darby looked at each other silently communicating before Jack spoke.

“Hey Jeb, why don’t you go ahead and get out of here? Darby and I can finish up,” he suggested firmly.

“Awww hell. I can’t leave you two to bury your pappy. It ain’t the Christian thing to do,” Jeb said slowly as he snuck a glance at his watch.

Darby snorted, “Old man, you’re as much a Christian as the Devil is an angel.”

Jack hid a smile as Jeb glared at his younger brother. Darby didn’t flinch, meeting the older man’s glare head on.

“One of these days, Darby Sullivan. One of these days...” Jeb threatened taking a step towards the little brat who balled his

fists up and puffed his chest out.

Jack stepped between them and gave Jeb a hard look. "But not today, Jeb. Thank you for your time; we can take it from here." Jeb shrugged. What did he care?

"Suit yourself, young 'un." Jeb dropped the shovel and tipped his hat. "My condolences to your family," he said before running down the hill to his truck. He sure hoped the boys had saved him a seat at the bar.

It was a cool afternoon, but the sky was rolling with dark, gray clouds that promised a whopping thunderstorm with rain showers that would last a couple of days. The boys had watched the Weather Channel's ten day forecast last week after burying their mother and specifically picked this day. Soon it would be time, but for now, they settled down to wait.

Jack walked over to the backpack he had packed early this morning and took out some sandwiches and sodas. Darby pulled a blanket out, and they all sat down to eat in silence, lost in their thoughts. Casey soon drifted off to sleep in Darby's lap, his sandwich half eaten. It was only then that the two brothers spoke.

"So what's the plan, Jack?" Darby asked around a mouthful of bologna and wheat. His older brother was the only person in the world he would listen to and follow blindly. His back bore the marks of his father's belt buckle for his outright defiance, and his ears had often been blistered by his mama's lectures, but all Jack had to do was look at him, and he would cut all bullshit aside.

Jack looked up at the rolling sky which was getting darker by the minute. Soon, he thought. "I spoke to Aunt Kelly in

Memphis. She's willing to take us in."

Jack didn't mention that in exchange for room and board, he would give her some of the money his mother had secretly saved for them. Aside from his brothers, Jack wanted nothing more to do with anyone named Sullivan, especially live with a complete stranger; but he needed to make sure they didn't get separated. "The goal is for us to stay together, no matter what. It's what she would have wanted."

Thunder rumbled loudly above them as the clouds turned darker with each passing minute. "Come on, Darby. It's time."

Jack and Darby stood up, leaving Casey to sleep restlessly on the blanket. Darby reached into the backpack and pulled out a can of lighter fluid before following Jack to the half-buried grave. When they suggested the deceased be buried out of town, no one had put up much protest; for he was a truly evil man, and the town was relieved to be rid of him. The only protest came from lazy, old Jeb when they requested that a very deep grave be dug.

Without looking at each other, the brothers quickly unzipped their pants and relieved themselves into the grave. Once finished, Darby contemptibly spat into the hole then shook lighter fluid down into it. When the can was empty he nodded at Jack.

Jack reached into his pocket and produced a lighter. He flicked it open and a blue flame shot out almost hypnotizing him. As he spoke, his voice took on the Irish accent that only came out when the boys were emotional.

"We do this to honor our ma, Moira Sullivan. A kind and beautiful lady she was. May she finally rest in peace without

having to look over 'er shoulder for yer' sorry arse. She was a true angel, loved by everyone who knew 'er, especially her boys. I know she's happy now to be rid o' the likes o' ye as we are. Yer' gone but will never be forgotten, Ma. May you rot in hell for all eternity, Patrick Sullivan, and even then t'would be too short a time for ye in our opinion." Darby nodded; and with that, Jack dropped the flame into the pit of hell, his eyes burning with unshed tears of rage and sorrow.

Quickly the flames spread, consuming the casket in a blazing fury and almost reaching the top of the grave. As the fire burned, Jack and Darby both looked on serenely. It climbed higher just as the rain started falling softly. They gave the burning pit the one-fingered salute before quickly gathering up their trash and stuffing it into the backpack. Darby pulled out their raincoats before putting the backpack on, while Jack wrapped Casey in the blanket, making sure he was protected from the quickly-falling rain. They started down the hill when Casey stirred sleepily, opening his big hazel eyes.

"Is he truly gone, Jackie?" Casey asked in a whisper, as if afraid to believe it.

Jack squeezed him closer as he answered, "Dinna fash yerself, Case. He'll not be botherin' you again. Get some rest now." And Casey went back to sleep, a peaceful smile on his face.

The rain started to come down harder, and by the time they reached the bottom of the hill, they were exhausted; and it would already be a long way back to town. It was at that moment that they noticed a black sedan on the side of the dirt road. Two men, underneath umbrellas, were leaning against the hood. They appeared to be waiting for the boys.

The dark-haired one had a full beard and wore his hair slicked back in a ponytail. He was a huge, muscular man that stood

six feet six inches tall and wore a lumberjack plaid shirt and well-worn jeans with work boots. Jack recognized Alexei Romankov, the town's richest business man. The boys nodded in respect to him, and he did the same.

The other man wore an expensive dark suit, and his long dark blond hair was pulled back from his angular face. His expression was intense as he watched them through narrowed, dark eyes. He was a stranger, and that was completely unacceptable to the boys as it was synonymous with danger. Darby quickly pulled his trusty switchblade from his front shirt pocket. The blade gleamed with deadly intent as he placed himself in front of his brothers.

"Who the fuck are you?" Darby snarled. Alexei quickly hid a smile. The blond stranger raised his eyebrows and stood up straight. He murmured, "You weren't joking, old friend," before turning to face the boys again.

"Young man, if you don't wish for me to give you the ass kicking you rightly deserve, you will put that knife away. NOW!" he spoke sharply, in a gentrified tone. To Jack's surprise, Darby obeyed immediately. Nodding at Jack, he continued. "My name is Ian Rusnik, and I knew your mother. In the event that something happened to her, I was to come immediately for you. Unfortunately, I did not hear of her passing until this morning," he said sorrowfully. "You are to come live with me now."

"How do we know you are who you say you are?" Jack asked suspiciously. He was unaware his ma had any friends other than the ones his father had allowed her to have, including Alexei's wife Vivienne. She was certainly not allowed to be friends with any man. Suddenly he was very tired. His arms were heavy from carrying Casey. He just wanted to get out of the cold rain and be alone with his thoughts.

At that question, Darby's blade came out again. As Jack glared at the stranger defiantly, he could feel Alexei's sharp gaze on him. He daredn't look his way, because then he would be reminded of his mother's friendship with the man's wife. For sure he would lose it. He needed to be strong for his brothers, not bawling like a stupid baby. Thanks to his bastard da, he was now the head of the Sullivan family.

Ian gave Darby a disapproving look and cleared his throat. To Jack he said calmly, "Loose wall in the pantry." Jack froze, remembering his last conversation with his mother as she furiously whispered to him while his father screamed through the locked bedroom door.

Grabbing his shoulders, Moira looked him in the eye. "Looks like we've been found out, boyo. I want you to take yer' brothers far from here. Yer' now in charge, Jackie. Go to the McNally residence; they'll know what to do. Stay off the main road. When this all settles down, the money I've saved for us is in the loose wall in the pantry. Remember that. Loose wall in the pantry. You boys are my greatest loves. Always remember that and be happy." She said this calmly as she kissed and hugged each of them tightly. They sobbed quietly as their father's roars filled the house. "Now go, Jackie! I'm counting on you. Go!"

With tears in her eyes, Moira shoved the bedroom window open for them. Jack knew in his heavy heart that this would be the last time he saw her alive. Grabbing her hand he pleaded. "Come with us, Ma!"

Moira Sullivan touched her eldest son's face and offered a smile full of heartache and regret. "Jackie, I'm giving you and yer' brothers a chance to be free of this hellhole I've created. I

wish things coulda been different, but they can't. Be happy, a stór."

Straightening up, her eyes cooled as she said firmly "Now as yer' ma, I order you to leave this house and not look back." And with that, she shoved him halfway out the window. He jumped the short fall to the ground and ran with his brothers towards the woods as they heard the bedroom door burst open.

Screams of fury and agony filled the night air and twice he had to wrestle Darby back as his younger brother tried to return to the house, tears of rage streaming down his face. Casey's cries of terror were shrill, giving Jack a headache, but he forged ahead to their closest neighbor's home, not once looking back.

"Jack?" The sound of Darby's worried voice shook him from his reverie. "Jack... what should we do?"

"We should go with this man," Jack said softly as he and Ian continued to stare at each other. The older man smiled slightly and reached for Casey. Darby stepped forward, "I'm watching ya'. Try anything stupid and you'll not live through the night. Do ya' ken?"

Ian rolled his eyes and picked Casey up gently. "Young man, you are entirely too blood thirsty for your age. Perhaps a stint of military academy will straighten you out."

Jack placed a hand on Darby's shoulder to calm him while looking at the blond man now cradling his youngest brother. "We stay together, Ian." His tone was ice cold and his eyes far wiser than his years.

Alexei gave a sharp bark of laughter and Jack could sense his approval. Eyebrows raised, Ian said calmly "Of course,

Jackson. Please, let's leave now and get out of this dreadful weather."

As he walked past Ian to the car, Darby muttered under his breath, "City girl."

"Go on, boys. I'll take care of this," Alexei said in his heavily accented English; his gaze approving as he looked up the mountain to the flames burning bright despite the rain.

Jack started to follow his brother to the car, but Ian stopped him with a question.

"Want to tell me what happened up there?" He asked speculatively. Jack looked up at him and could see the reflection of the fire burning in the older man's eyes.

"Bonfire party," he murmured, not looking back as he stepped into the warm vehicle.

Chapter One

Present day...

New York City, New York

The door to the study flew open, startling the tall, handsome man who was just about to knock on it. He immediately stepped out of the way as a ball of fury with a mutinous

expression flew by him, leaving a cloud of orange blossom and white gardenia in her wake. The scent instantly aroused him just as it had for the last four years whenever he encountered it. He watched for a moment as her long, lean legs carried her swiftly towards the front doors; a butler with a bland expression, already holding one open for her.

“Get back here, Noelle! We are not finished! Noelle! Noelle!!” The older black gentleman shouted furiously as he stood behind his desk waiting for his command to be obeyed.

He'll be waiting awhile, Jack thought before he spoke for the first time. “She’s gone, Ronald.”

Jack watched with a barely suppressed smile as the other man, now annoyed, threw himself back into his chair. The normally personable senator looked more like a petulant child throwing a tantrum. “Anything I can help you with?”

Jack was curious as to what would make the normally shy and quiet woman break that pattern and rise like a stormy phoenix. The transformation had been magnificent, he mused, thinking of the fire in her eyes and elevated color to her face. Her movements reminded him of an electric storm back home in Tennessee.

Ronald sighed, shaking his head in the negative. “Noelle’s asking me to release some of her money from the trust fund my parents left her so that she and her girlfriend can start that damned event planning business. I don’t think it’s a good idea. There are already too many companies like that in this city. They’ll get swallowed whole by all the bigwigs, and then she’ll be out of that money. I tried to explain that to her, and what do I get for my troubles? Ungratefulness and a temper that rivals her mother’s to boot.”

Jack inwardly cursed the older man for his assumptions. Didn't he know that doubt was the biggest killer of dreams, and not failure? As he looked at the well-polished man sitting across from him, he knew that Ronald Kramer didn't have a clue. He and his wife Alicia came from old money. From birth, he'd been groomed to be a successful politician like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him. His idea of struggling would be whether he should wear the dark red tie or the burgundy one.

"How much was she asking for?" Jack asked casually, hoping his tone conveyed just the right amount of disinterest. "By the way, here's the list of charity events that I thought you and Alicia might want to look into sponsoring. I highlighted the ones that are close to the First Lady's heart."

Ronald eagerly reached for the papers that Jack held out. "Noelle wanted a two hundred-thousand-dollar advance. Thanks; I'll go over these with Alicia tonight when she gets in from Florida."

Jack frowned. This was Alicia Kramer's third trip to Florida this month. "What's going on in Florida?"

"We're looking into having a home built there, and she's been scouting properties," Ronald replied absently as he flipped through the pages. "I see a couple already that I know she'll want in on."

Alicia Kramer, with her coolly unflappable personality, was the epitome of class. Secretly, her staff called her "The Robot" as she appeared devoid of emotion. This statement wasn't entirely true though because she did have two passions: The first was meddling in her children and grandchildren's lives, often by giving tons of unsolicited advice. And the second was Michelle Obama.

Alicia was obsessed with being at every event that the First Lady attended as well as what she wore. It was in the Kramer's contract with *R.R. & S Relations* that Alicia was at every event that Mrs. Obama attended, if possible. Jack had to also add his own clause that the Kramer's would be on their own if they were deemed a stalking threat due to Alicia's extreme fondness for Mrs. O. Normally, Ronald indulged his wife to her heart's desire, but even he had to draw the line at spending Christmas in Hawaii just so they could run into the First Family.

When it came to her passions, Alicia was nuttier than a squirrel's den before winter. It was one of the main reasons that made Jack hesitant to jump into her crosshairs regarding a certain beauty. Not that he'd had much of an opportunity to, considering she avoided him like the plague whenever they happened to be in the same vicinity.

"Well let me know what she likes, and we'll see about getting her in. I'm gonna take off now. Call if you need anything," Jack said and quickly left the room. He waited until he got into his matte black Range Rover Sport to make the call. The phone rang twice before it was picked up on the other end. A raspy voice with a heavy Long Island accent answered, "Hello?"

"Ira, its Jack. How you doing?" he greeted his longtime friend and client.

"Jack, my boy! I can't complain. Business is booming, but the wife wants me to turn in my reigns and retire; leave the daily grind to our boys. But, I says to myself, if I do that then I might as well give my company away for free, ya know?"

Before Jack could answer, Ira continued. “Those two knuckleheads don’t got the business sense God gave a sloth. And on top of that, they fight like freakin’ cats and dogs. All your hard work into establishing our reputation would go down the toilet if I even *thought* of retiring, Jack.” His last comment was said with a despondent sigh.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ira. Perhaps I have a solution that will work for both of us,” Jack said pleasantly. He was already aware of the tense circumstances at Rothman Investments and planned on speaking to Ira about them. The situation with Noelle Kramer was only speeding up the process.

“I’m listening,” Ira urged. “I love making money, but Maureen won’t wait on me forever to give her time. Got to do it while I’m young ya’ know?”

Jack smiled into the phone. Ira was sixty-five years old and hated the thought of retiring. He would probably die at his desk because he wouldn’t make time to go to the hospital. “I have a friend with a sound business plan. All that’s needed is the funding to make it happen....”

Chapter Two

New York City, New York

Strawberry Rhubarb. Cherry Lemon Curd. Sweet Potato Praline. Pie flavors ran through Noelle’s mind as she waited alone in the large conference room. She couldn’t help it; baking relaxed her, and she’d just recently discovered a love for pie making. *Chocolate Crème Brulee. Coconut Key Lime*

Cream. Bananas Foster. Why had she let Sidra talk her into this? Noelle Kramer asked herself ruefully for the hundredth time. Lattice. Crimped. Graham...she was moving on to crusts now.

“Girl, call Jack. He’ll know what to do. He’s a fixer,” Sidra Barton, one of her two best friends urged. “All the bigwigs use him as a consultant when they need to clean up an image. His ideas are brilliant, and he’s damn good at what he does. I mean, he does a great job for your dad, right? Jack is really smart and nice too, unlike that asshole brother of his. Besides, he’s so damn fine on the eyes; I totally feel like I should pay him just for the view whenever I’m in his company.”

Sidra finished with her signature husky laugh, and Noelle joined in with a weak one of her own. No one, not even her closest friends Sidra and Avery, knew how she felt about Jack Sullivan. And they’d been her best friends since the second week of first grade at My Lady Prep Academy.

“I just feel so angry and humiliated; not to mention terrified about how this will affect my family,” Noelle murmured. Inwardly she cringed at the backlash that would undoubtedly ensue and how her well-respected family would weather it. The Kramer name would forever be tarnished. God, and her mother’s reaction; Noelle shuddered at the thought of being on the receiving end of Alicia Kramer’s sharp tongue. And then there was Jack’s reaction...

Noelle nervously paced the large conference room floor, her stomach swirling with butterflies as she waited breathlessly for Jack Sullivan, P.R. Extraordinaire, a.k.a. “The Fixer”. He was a man who walked into a room and commanded everyone’s attention without saying a word. His gorgeous, rugged looks took her breath away, and his swag vibrated at the highest

frequency possible. And the intensity of his hazel eyes touched her to the very depths of her soul.

Over the years Jack barely said more than a handful of sentences to her, but it was enough to make her panties wet just the same. Nothing sexual, just simple shit like *'Hi, how are you?'* But he possessed a deep, slow southern drawl that was so sexy; it made country crooner Sam Hunt's voice sound like Pee Wee Herman. Whenever Jack spoke, all she heard was *'I want to make you scream with my tongue.'* So perhaps there was a bit of a lost in translation problem, and that usually resulted in her gaping at him like an idiot, which was why she tended to avoid him as much as she could.

Whenever they were at the same functions, Noelle could hardly glance at Jack. She was afraid that everyone would see her ill-concealed yearning for him. Her nights though were filled with visions of his big, muscular body totally dominating hers; and often she'd awake having to finish off what was started in her wild fantasies.

Not that those dreams would ever turn into reality. In Jack's presence all Noelle ever felt from him was pity. Since her parents were his clients, and her godfather one of his business partners, he was often exposed to various stages of "Operation Fix Noelle"; interventions staged on her behalf by her overly-caring and too nosy for their own good family. As he stared at her with those unreadable hazel eyes, Noelle could feel Jack's disgust coming off of him in waves at how pathetic she was. He would excuse himself as if he could hardly stand to be in the same room with someone as pitiful as her, and she wanted to die of embarrassment.

The run-ins weren't so bad now that Noelle rarely saw Jack since she'd finally moved out of the Kramer fortress. Against her parent's protests, she decided to go forward with her

business plans after receiving a pre-approved loan letter in the mail. The letter almost seemed too good to be true as it outlined plans for helping small businesses owners to achieve their dreams, but she knew she had to try. Much to her surprise, her request for a loan was approved; and the owner of the bank Mr. Rothman had worked closely with her and her business partner and other best friend Avery Monroe to ensure they were set up for success.

The event planning company *On a Whim* that she co-owned with Avery was off to a good start with a steady stream of small businesses looking to do events. Just two weeks ago they were asked by an aristocratic polo player to plan his birthday party without even proposing a bid. It was going to be the event of the season, and it would definitely open doors for them. The ladies could hardly contain themselves.

Ever since they were little, they'd dreamed of doing something like this. Avery would cut flowers from the garden and make pretty arrangements for their tea parties, while Noelle would make the scones and sandwiches. Sidra would provide the music by beat boxing until it was time to eat. Now they were all grown up, turning dreams into reality. Noelle was in charge of menu planning and catering. Avery was in charge of entertainment and decorating. Currently they were working out of their homes to save money for an office space. Sidra was still dee-jaying but worked for Jack's firm as well.

The growing business was a good thing because it afforded Noelle less time to think about the one man she couldn't have. But now she needed his help and would result to begging if needed. The door slowly opened, and she steeled herself in anticipation of seeing the man she'd been desperately in love with since she was twenty-one walk through it.

Jack, with his iPhone glued to his ear, hurried through the elevator doors of the tenth floor office suites of his business *R.R. & S. Public Relations*. The crisis he was presently dealing with involved the current *Miss World Beauty* and her now ex drug-dealing boyfriend who'd supplied endless amounts of drugs to two of the three judges on the panel in exchange for her winning the title. The truth was discovered this morning when, during a heated lover's quarrel, he decided to throw it in her face that she would not have the title if it weren't for him. After blackening his eye, Inez Gaines promptly informed Jack and the authorities of his illegal activities. Jimmy Vasquez and the two judges were quickly arrested and waiting to make bail.

Jack knew that as soon as Jimmy got out, he would stop at nothing to slander Inez's image and that of the pageant. A buddy of his in the NYPD had tipped him that Jimmy was already screaming in holding that the bitch had used him just to win the title. He needed every piece of information on the little fucker that he could get his hands on, but for now, he had to concentrate on making sure both of his clients came out ahead.

"I want it leaked to the press that Inez and the douchebag have been separated for a while because she suspected something had transpired, and she's been working with authorities to get a full confession from him. I don't want her portrayed as a victim, but for whom she is," Jack barked orders to his second assistant, Eli Johnson.

"Inez Gaines is a strong woman who knows right from wrong. She hit him in self-defense because he tried to get physical with her. Get me the list of charity functions that she has lined

up. She is going to attend each event and will be handheld through them. Under no circumstances is she to be left unattended with an audience or access to social media. Call Darby and make sure he tightened her security detail already and knows she is not to speak to the press! Her volatile personality makes Donald Trump look spineless, and I'll be damned if her ex's lawyer will get to paint an image of him being a victim of domestic violence."

Jack fired off more orders as he walked through the sliding office doors and waved at Margo his first assistant. She stood up to follow him into his office. Sensing that she wanted a word with him, he quickly lowered his voice, ending the call with "And please remind my brother that Ms. Gaines is a client and to be treated like one. Translation: We. Don't. Fuck. Our. Clients. He's a goddamn lawsuit waiting to happen."

Just thinking of his hellion of a brother made Jack wince. Women loved Darby Sullivan, and he loved them right back until they wanted something permanent. Turning, he faced his personal assistant with a charming smile.

"Good morning, Margo. I like your new haircut and isn't that the scarf I gave you for your birthday two weeks ago?" he asked smoothly. Although she was almost fifty-eight and a happily married grandmother, Margo felt her heart stutter as she took in her boss's gorgeous face. *Merciful heavens, he was a good looking man.* One that had women acting like all types of fools. They attempted to sneak past her into his office and called all hours of her shift trying to reach him. All of them wanted to be Mrs. Jack Sullivan, and who could blame them?

Jack Sullivan was movie star handsome; extremely easy on the eyes with his thick, curling black hair, straight nose, and square jaw. His broad muscular body filled out tailor-made suits to perfection. His mama, Margo surmised, had raised him

right. He was as kind as he was smart. Jack believed in treating people fairly, and he worked hard. He had forty employees under him and made it a point to touch base with all of them during the workweek. That wasn't to say that he didn't have a temper if you crossed him. Margo winced thinking about those who had challenged him.

Now what was he saying? Margo wondered. Ah yes, the scarf and her hair, which she self-consciously touched. Her Albert hadn't been crazy about the pixie look, but she thought it was time to retire the salt and pepper chignon style she'd worn for the last ten years. Her bright smile was stunning against her walnut complexion. "It is indeed, sir, and thank you."

Jack flashed a quick smile. "Looks nice. Excuse my language, but we've got a real shit storm heading our way, and it will take precedence over anything else we're working on. Eli will be contacting you shortly with the details for a press release to write up. Hold everything and today's lunch will be a mandatory in house affair for everyone while we brainstorm in the big conference room. Order it from Ruth's Deli for a delivery around one this afternoon. Field any calls for me from Vivi and Ian got it?" he asked absently while he sorted through the stack of memos on his desk. His two partners were blowing his phone up because they'd been adamant about not taking *Miss World Beauty* on as a client, especially when the gorgeous, but temperamental, Inez Gaines won the title. He loved and respected them dearly, as they had shown him the ropes of this business; but his gut insisted that they get Inez, and Jack always went with his gut.

Margo nodded and turned to leave. Then she remembered something and cleared her throat. He looked up curiously. "Sir, what should I tell the young lady in the conference room? She's been waiting for you for over an hour? She doesn't have an appointment, but insisted on waiting. Very pretty girl, if you don't mind my saying."

“Get rid of her. No one gets in without an appointment, especially today with this circus affair going on,” Jack said tersely.

“Very good, sir. I will let Ms. Kramer know that you are unavailable and will attempt to schedule her at a later date. I do apologize-” Margo started only to be interrupted mid-sentence.

“Kramer? As in Noelle Kramer?” Jack interrupted sharply. “Noelle Kramer is here? In my conference room?” At Margo’s quick nod, he quickly moved around his desk and headed for the door. At the doorway, Jack turned back to his bemused secretary. “This takes precedence over that other thing now. Hold all my calls and meetings today until further notice. You and Eli need to partner up on the Miss World Beauty thing until I’m done with my meeting with Ms. Kramer.”

Noelle Kramer was in his place of business, Jack thought as he hurried to the conference room. Anticipation rushed through him at the thought of seeing the young beauty. He paused outside the conference room door and watched through the window as she paced up and down the room like a sleek panther. Once again he marveled at her loveliness, pleasure sweeping through him as he watched her unobserved. Usually he had to make sure his gaze on her didn’t linger too long; lest he draw attention to himself. His attraction was just as intense as it had been the first time he laid eyes on her at her twenty-first birthday party four years ago. The night his life changed forever.

Four Years ago....

It was an extravagant affair with all the who's who of New York in attendance. Normally Jack didn't go for pretentious crap like this, but decided to make an exception because it was business. So, he donned a black tux and showed up. Within ten minutes, he'd known that his being there was a mistake. Anxious to get away from the snobbery of the mega wealthy assholes around him, Jack slipped into the family library. Only after he settled into a leather club chair in the corner shrouded in darkness did he give a sigh of relief. He would stay another thirty minutes out of courtesy to the family and then make his getaway.

Although Jack knew the Kramer's well, the birthday girl was somewhat of a mystery. Apparently Noelle had been attending school in Paris, and her return happened to coincide with her twenty-first birthday. Her mother, never one to miss an opportunity, used the event as a way to reintroduce her into elite society. Jack had just pulled out his phone to check emails when the door quickly opened and then slammed shut again.

Jack couldn't see anything in the darkness, but he could hear the sound of heavy breathing. Judging from the sounds, it was a woman. He smelled her before he saw her. A scent of something flowery seduced his nostrils. Then the lamp closest to the door was turned on, and he forgot to breathe as he took in the alluring vision before him.

She was leaning against the closed door. Jack estimated her to be about five feet eight inches tall with skin the color of brown sugar. Her hair was in a sleek bun pulled away from her finely-sculpted face to showcase her perfect forehead. Dark slashing eyebrows slanted over large eyes that were narrowed

as if in concentration. Later he would discover that they were a dark gray, the same color the sky turned before a storm in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Her nose was short and cute, her cheekbones sharp enough to cut butter. She would have been mainstream pretty if it wasn't for her lips. Oh yes, that lush mouth was a game changer. Her red-glossed lips were a true gift from the gods and looked pillow soft. They made Angelina Jolie's lips look like straight lines. Jack turned hard as stone as he imagined having their fullness wrapped around his cock while he pumped in and out of them. Jesus.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" She muttered in a soft but frustrated voice as she rubbed her temples with both hands. In a burst of energy, she started to pace in front of the door, and Jack took the opportunity to admire her slender but curvy body encased in a strapless, frothy, lavender concoction that swirled and whirled around her as she paced. Her shoulders gleamed like satin, and he ached to push her bodice down and fill his palms with her breasts. Jack forced himself to pay attention to her one-sided conversation.

"Why did I let her talk me into coming back? I should have just stayed where I was and no one would have missed me," she moaned, waving her hands around. "Fuck!! Come on Noelle. Girl, you can do this! Get it together. It's just for one night then you can take off." A quick glance at her gold watch made her gasp. "Late again! Mother is going to kill me!! But first..."

Jack watched in amusement as he listened to her pep talk. Then his mouth went dry as she dipped her hand between the succulent mounds of her breasts. Let me do that for you sweetheart, he thought to himself, growing harder by the second. His trousers were painfully tight. Christ, he really needed to adjust himself, surprised that he was this hard for a beautiful stranger. Unfortunately, any movement would give

away his hiding spot and bring attention to him. To his surprise, she pulled a small bottle of liquor out of her bosom.

“Good thing I took this off of the plane,” she murmured in delight before unscrewing the lid and downing the tiny bottle’s contents in one gulp.

“Here goes nothing.” She set the empty bottle on the console, adjusted her bodice then slipped out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind her. Jack quickly stood up, groaning in agony as he adjusted himself. So that was the birthday girl, he mused, walking to the door. His phone buzzed and he pulled it out to read the text.

Running late! You must be bored to tears. Have you started planning your exit strategy yet? If so, shall I catch up with you later then?

Jack reached the door and picked up the empty bottle. Her perfume lingered in the air, seducing him further. Tequila. She had downed the fiery liquid without flinching. A sense of admiration filled him. She was beautiful, entertaining, and could drink hard liquor like it was water. He replied to the text.

Change of plans, I’m staying.

That was four years ago, and Jack was no closer to Noelle now than he’d been the first time he laid eyes on her; though it wasn’t for lack of trying on his part. Whenever she saw him, Noelle would smile politely, murmur a quick hello, and then

disappear. Jack couldn't really say that he blamed her. Being the youngest in a family such as hers, she stuck out like a sore thumb. She had two older siblings. Her brother Darren was a surgeon married to a Boston socialite, and her sister Sloane was married to a famous Greek playwright and owned a successful art gallery in Soho. Between both siblings, there were five grandchildren. Noelle had changed her college major three times with no definitive graduation date in sight.

It was definitely a bone of contention between Noelle and her parents, Senator Ronald Kramer and his old money, socialite wife Alicia Kramer. They felt she wasn't utilizing her life's potential and never hesitated to point it out to her how accomplished her siblings were; which in turn made her siblings give her lectures during family gatherings. These always made Jack think of the Festivus episode on Seinfeld.

Jack, from his end of the dinner table, willed her to tell them to fuck off, but she never did. Noelle just sat there in her pretty Kate Spade or Ann Taylor outfits, with a polite smile on her tension-filled face. In the end, he would excuse himself for fear that he would suggest one of his firm's oldest clients eat a fat dick and chase it down with a tall glass of shut the fuck up.

The few times that Jack did see Noelle relaxed were when he entered the house through the kitchen. Noelle would be happily conversing in French with their chef and assisting with meal preparation that is, until she'd catch sight of him. It made his stomach turn when he'd see the anxiety in her eyes, bringing back dark memories of his Ma trying to anticipate Patrick Sullivan's next unpleasant move. So Jack would simply nod in acknowledgement and keep it moving.

During dinner Noelle would steal looks at him when the family complimented a particular dish. Jack started to observe her reactions and realized the dishes she worked on would

always be the recipient of rave reviews from her unknowing family. Amidst the lavish compliments bestowed on the chef, he would raise an eyebrow at her as they heaped praise on the red faced little bastard and her big, gray eyes silently begged him to keep her secret; so he did.

Finally, unable to take any more of her parents' stifling attitude, Noelle relocated to Park Slope in Brooklyn four months ago. Grinning to himself, Jack thought of what Alicia Kramer would say if she could see her youngest child right now.

Gone was the sleek bun and Stepford Wife attire that made Noelle a clone of her mother and sister. In her place was a bohemian goddess. Her hair was a riotous mass of black curls. No makeup touched her flawless brown skin except the clear gloss on her sexy mouth. Her long, flowy dress was a vivid cobalt blue with large orange and white flowers splashed all over. It had spaghetti straps, and the deep v neckline exposed her sexy cleavage. Numerous gold bangles adorned each sleek arm. Her skin gleamed like silk, and Jack wanted to reach out and feel if it was as soft as it looked.

Lust rolled through Jack like a freight train. He mentally pictured himself bending Noelle over the table and lifting the lower layers of her dress to sink into her from behind, his hands sliding around to cup her breasts and hold her in place. Christ, he needed to get a grip, but it really couldn't be helped. His dick just knew what it wanted, and it loved it some Noelle Kramer. Jack had been with many women, but none had ever affected him the way she did which was scary considering they'd never even kissed. Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and slowly opened the door.

Noelle whirled around to face him; the long skirt of her dress opening, allowing him an admiring view of long, toned legs

before he raised his gaze to find himself drowning in her luminous gray eyes. Her sexy lips parted in a nervous smile before she spoke in her soft modulated voice. “Hi, Jack. Sorry to drop in on you like this, but I have an issue;” Noelle murmured nervously, raking a well-manicured hand through her long curls; and taking a deep breath, she continued, “Something I believe only you can help me with.”

Chapter Three

Noelle was being blackmailed. There were nude pictures of her. *With another man*. Noelle Kramer had been photographed in the nude with her ex-boyfriend Remy Dumont. The asshole was threatening to let the pictures go viral; knowing the damage it could do to her family name. In exchange for his silence, Remy wanted Noelle to marry him so that he could become a U.S. citizen— or give him three million dollars. She had a week before he would take action.

A slow rage filled Jack’s body as he tried to listen to Noelle’s nervous explanation. *Another man had dared to touch what he considered to be his*; he thought furiously, watching her luscious lips form the words that he was having a hard time processing. Had seen the body he obsessed about. Jack, tapping his pen against the table, tried to appear calm and unaffected as he shifted in his chair. *Tap. Tap. Tap. How he wished it was a knife gauging the son of a bitch’s eyeballs. Remy Dumont; what a pussy name*, he thought scornfully.

“I haven’t seen Remy in four and a half years. Our relationship kind of ran its course by the time I left to come home. I thought we parted as friends,” Noelle explained warily. Jack realized she was watching his right hand make stabbing

motions with the pen he was holding. *RELAX. Woosaaaa.*
Focus, Sullivan, he told himself. It wasn't about him anymore.
Noelle was now his client, and as such, needed him to be at his
best whether she liked it or not.

"I need to ask you some questions," Jack said coolly before
placing a note pad in front of him to take notes. He looked at
her for consent, and she nodded her head to let him know it
was okay to proceed.

"What's his full name and age?"

"Remy Alain Dumont. He's twenty-five, just like me."

"How did you meet?"

"Hemmingway's, a bar close to the university."

"How long did the relationship last?"

*"On and off? Three and a half years. We kept breaking up
because he thought getting high on whatever drugs he could
find was more important than getting his education."*

"Before last week, when was the last time you spoke to him?"

"Two weeks before I left Paris."

"So no correspondence at all? Emails, social media, letters?
Any mutual friends pertaining to any of those things?"

“None.”

“Does your family know about him?”

“Only my sister, and that’s because she was going through my pics of my time abroad. I downplayed the relationship though.”

“Exactly what was the nature of your relationship that he was able to take such personal pictures of you?” Jack asked dispassionately while gritting his teeth. Even though he already knew the answer, and it was fucking killing him, but he needed her to say it. *Woosaaa! Woosaaa! You didn’t even know she existed back then.* Noelle squirmed under his intense scrutiny.

“We um...dated.” By the look on Jack’s face, Noelle clarified; “We were lovers for a while. Nothing serious though. It just kind of happened and turned into a relationship of convenience. It wasn’t even that great; just something to pass time.” She lamely finished and watched as Jack’s eyebrows rose.

Damn, I’m rambling again, Noelle thought as she rubbed her forehead and wished for the thousandth time that she’d never dropped her panties for such a piece of shit. At the time, she’d thought it was a sign. She was in Paris studying to become a chef when she’d met a Remy; just like the Disney movie *Ratatouille*. And boy had he turned out to be a big fucking rat alright.

“So you weren’t in love with him?” Jack demanded harshly. “You were just fucking him? Is that something that you do often?” he snarled as he finally lost his cool; watching as

Noelle blushed furiously. She stood up, her beautiful gray eyes turning stormy in response to his insinuations.

“Contrary to what you and my family seem to believe, I’m an adult. You know, someone who is capable of making logical decisions? No, I do not take sexual relationships lightly. Jesus, I had the whole sexual health history talk and used protection like everyone else. Remy never came off as being this sleazy. Never did I dream that I would have to worry about him. He was always so easygoing,” Noelle shook her head in disbelief.

”He didn’t seem like that type of guy, but I also think I was drugged. I...I’ve never done two of the sexual acts depicted in those photos before. It was something that Remy and I constantly argued about. I just think that I would have remembered doing that stuff. Anyways, I came to you because I didn’t know who else to turn to, and Sidra said that you’d be able to help me. But maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. All I seem to hear in your tone is judgment; hell, I might as well have been talking to my parents.”

Jack winced at the dig, but Noelle was too busy rummaging in her oversized purse to notice. Finally, she withdrew a letter-size manila envelope and tossed it on the conference table in front of him.

“There’re copies of the pics I made for you. I’ll let you decide if I can continue pursuing my current career or if I should just make a career change right now and try to beat any records Jenna Jameson might have,” Noelle said sarcastically before walking out the door and slamming it behind her. Jack watched as she stormed down the hall and out of his sight.

Well, well, well. Who knew all that fire was brimming underneath her shy exterior? And she was funny too. Jenna Jameson, the porn star? Like hell, Jack snorted. He eyed the

envelope. Inside were pics of a naked Noelle. He needed to open the envelope but was torn. Professionally, he needed to see what kind of damage control was necessary, but personally he knew that if he saw the body he'd been dreaming about for years, he wouldn't be able to sleep until he'd bedded her.

With a sigh of resignation, Jack snatched up the envelope and pulled the pics out, trying to view them objectively. Just as he thought, they were pretty bad. In the first pic, Noelle was naked and on her back with her eyes closed. Her arms were thrown over her head, and there was a wiry built black man with braids nestled between her legs. In the next pic, the same man's naked backside was in full view with Noelle's behind in front of him. Her face was turned away and covered by her hair arms spread out in front of her. The last pic showed the front of the man, naked and kneeling on the bed as an equally naked Noelle covered his lower area with her head. The man gripped her hair and she appeared to be giving him a blow job while he was in the throes of ecstasy.

Jack tried to view them objectively, but it was hard not to notice Noelle's toned body; the full breasts topped by large chocolate nipples. Her ass was also full and firm-looking; her skin, flawless. The image of her naked was forever imbedded in his mind now. Cursing, he adjusted himself. Lord help him, he was a sick fuck. The poor girl had come to him for help, and here he was getting harder by the minute.

Instinct told Jack the photos were staged and taken without her consent. Noelle had mentioned that she might have been drugged. He looked at her expression in the first pic again. She might as well have been a mannequin. A woman receiving oral would have some sort of expression to indicate whether it was good or bad. Her eyes were closed and so was her mouth. Her face was void of any emotion. Her nipples were unaroused, and her hands just lay above her head; palms open, not gripping or clenching anything. Even in the other shots, she

wasn't gripping the sheets or the douchebag's thighs. There were only three options at this point: A, this guy was the worst lover in the world. B, Noelle was a lesbian. Or C, she had been drugged.

Jack was going to go with option C, and pray like hell that B wasn't even an option. Option A was a non-motherfucking factor, because by the time he was done with Remy Dumont, he'd be lucky if he was able to even *eye fuck* anyone.

The consultation with Tarik Owens was taking longer than expected. Although Noelle had come prepared with menu proposals, the hot playboy extraordinaire was far too busy flirting with her to glance at her suggestions for his birthday bash. A talented polo player of Algerian and British descent, he had deep olive skin, tousled sun-bleached hair, almond-shaped blue eyes, and a sexy smile that kept the ladies fascinated with him. He was extremely put out that Noelle seemed immune to his charms. This was their third meeting, and Noelle had decided if he slid over one more inch to close the gap between them, there would not be a fourth.

“Oh, do lighten up, babe. You know what they say about all work and no play,” Tarik oozed in his charming British accent and gave her a sexy wink. Noelle ground her teeth in frustration. It wasn't that she didn't like Tarik, but frankly, he was wasting her time thinking she should be delighted to bask in his glory. And when you wasted her time, you fucked with her money. *On a Whim* couldn't pay bills on insincere flattery and sexy smiles, no matter how good looking the source. Noelle briefly closed her eyes before opening them to take a glance around Niko's, an upscale eatery in Manhattan that

served authentic Greek and Italian fare. All around her it seemed people were having a great time enjoying the wonderful food. Meanwhile, she had long since lost her appetite for the plate of moussaka in front of her as she fended off Tarik's advances. Not that she'd had much of an appetite since leaving Jack's office three days ago. Every time she thought of his words and disgusted looks, Noelle felt like she wanted to crawl under a rock and stay there forever. Unfortunately, she had a business to run, so embarrassment would have to wait.

"I have four menus here, Mr. Owens. Please pick one," Noelle said firmly, ignoring his comment. She refused to entertain him one moment longer "Your birthday is in four weeks, and you've revised the guest list six times. This has caused a delay in sending out the invitations. We have yet to visit any of the venues I had lined up for your approval because you keep traveling off to God-knows-where with the latest supermodels. The only reason we are having this meeting is because my friend Sidra is friends with your best friend who happened to mention that you would be here today for lunch, and I 'conveniently' ran into you outside," Noelle finished, grinding her teeth and using air quotes with her hands.

Tarik's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Noelle held up her hand to silence him. She took a deep breath because it just about killed her to say what she had to next. "I really don't feel that my company is meeting your needs, thus making us incompatible. At this time, I'm going to exercise my withdrawal clause from the contract and refund your fifteen-thousand-dollar deposit."

At first Tarik just stared at her, his mouth agape in shock. Then he threw back his head and howled with laughter, causing other patrons to stare at them. His laughter was rich and melodic, and Noelle could see everyone becoming enamored

with him, which irritated her even more. Finally, he stopped laughing to gaze at her somberly.

“Noelle, I’d like to apologize for my boorish behavior. You should have told me of your displeasure with the supermodels...there is no need for jealousy. I am more than enough man for all of you birds,” Tarik finished teasingly and finally closed the space between them as he put his arm around the back of the booth they shared.

And now they were done. Noelle and Avery really needed his business to establish the company but not his bullshit. “Tarik, we are now having what is called a *‘Bye Felicia’* moment. Your check will be returned in the mail, but lunch is on you.”

Amidst his protesting, Noelle grabbed her papers and stuffed them into her briefcase before grabbing her purse as well. She slid out of the booth, turned, and promptly collided with a large black wall. *Oomph!*

Strong arms reached out to encircle Noelle as she lost her balance; and she grasped at them feeling the well-muscled arms beneath the suit as she inhaled the sexy cologne the wall was wearing. “Oh my goodness, thank you. I am so sorry about that,” she said with a smile and then froze as she looked up into the angry hazel gaze of her rescuer. Her smile of contrition turned into a fake one as she coolly uttered, “Hello, Jack.”

Jack was just walking into Niko's when he heard the familiar laugh of Tarik Owens, one of his firm's client's. At first, he hadn't liked the young man, deeming him too cocky. Vivienne and Ian had disagreed.

"There's nothing wrong with loving and appreciating life. We should all take a page out of his book," Ian said with a pointed look at Jack.

Vivienne simply said, "That man is so fine, I'd let him get away with slapping my mama."

As Jack came to know Tarik, he had begrudgingly come to the conclusion that perhaps the other man wasn't so bad after all. Tarik had a great work ethic and was professional at all times during his media events. So he thought he'd walk over and say hi while he waited for his lunch companion to arrive.

As Jack started walking towards the intimate booth in the back of the restaurant; he realized who Tarik's date was and found himself hating the egotistical jackass all over again as he stood next to the table and glared down at Noelle's bent head. Too busy gathering her things and attempting to leave the booth, she didn't even notice him until she slammed into him.

The moment Noelle's body collided with his, and he was engulfed in her unique scent; Jack's cock went hard. Tarik was forgotten as he stared into her gray eyes and followed her small pink tongue as it darted out to lick her succulent, glossed lips. His grip tightened and his breathing became labored. Suddenly Jack was aware they had an audience and reluctantly stepped back from Noelle to glance at Tarik who was staring at him curiously.

“Hey Jack! Good to see you,” Tarik said with a friendly smile, standing to his feet to shake Jack’s hand. Jack automatically shook his even though he wanted to punch the other man in the throat for looking at Noelle like she was all of his favorite desserts combined into one meal.

“Tarik. Noelle. Am I interrupting something?” Jack asked smoothly as he observed the unfinished meal and partially-full wine glasses. Noelle shifted as she adjusted her belongings on her shoulder; and Jack used the opportunity to take in her sleek form encased in a denim jumpsuit that displayed the swells of her breasts, along with the black blazer and black, peep-toe flats that completed her business casual attire. She’d accessorized with silver bangles and large hoop earrings, and her curls were pulled back in a low ponytail. He allowed his gaze to rest on her toes for a moment, thinking the vibrant fuchsia color really complimented her skin. *Fuchsia?* Since when did he think of fuchsia? They were just pink dammit. Shit, she had him really fucked up. *Fuchsia.*

Noelle gave him a hard look. “Not at all. I was just leaving. Goodbye, gentlemen.” And she walked away without looking back despite Tarik’s objections and pleas. She could feel Jack’s scorching gaze on her the entire time. It was just as she got to the door that she felt the light grip on her elbow and looked back into Jack’s steely gaze. Her arm felt burnt by his touch even through her jacket, and she tried to jerk away; but Jack only tightened his grip and escorted her out of the restaurant onto the busy sidewalk.

“Do you mind?” she asked with a pointed look at his hand. He gave her a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes and continued to hold on to her, although he did loosen his grip slightly. He didn’t seem the least bit concerned with the irritated looks he was receiving as he delayed the steady flowing hustle of New York pedestrians in a hurry, by keeping them in the middle of the sidewalk.

“What’s going on with you and Tarik?” Jack demanded, ignoring her question and still pissed at finding them together all cozy and shit. From a P.R.’s standpoint, he could reluctantly admit that the two of them looked good together, and jealousy reared its ugly head. Jack wanted to throw Noelle down on the table and fuck her in front of the whole restaurant so that everyone would know whom she belonged to, especially her. Noelle winced, and he realized his grip had tightened again, and he reluctantly released her. “Sorry. Again, what’s going on between you two?”

“Why? Are you worried that I’m going to get my oversexed claws into him?” Noelle jeered, giving him a dirty look as he continued to glower at her, jaws clenched. She sighed.

“What do you mean what’s going on with him??? There’s nothing going on with him, okay? Nothing. Nada. Zip. Tarik was supposed to be our first big client, but I can’t even get him to focus on planning his own stupid event! All he wants to do is try to figure out different ways to get into my panties! Now I have to go back and tell Avery that I walked away from our biggest client to date because if I didn’t walk away, I would have stabbed him to death with a butter knife!!!”

Jack smiled slightly at her outburst, and she pursed her lips frustration, barely resisting the urge to stamp her foot like a child.

“I’m so glad I could amuse you, Jack. It’s certainly a step up from the disdain you were projecting the last time we met,” Noelle said snidely. His smile disappeared, and he looked troubled as his gaze became focused on something over her shoulder.

“We’ll talk later. Don’t worry about Tarik. I’m sure he’ll realize you mean business and straighten up. Now, unless you’re interested in joining me and your mother for lunch, I’d start walking away if I were you,” Jack laughed quietly at the look of abject horror on Noelle’s face as she walked past him hurriedly without another word. He stared at the formidable dragon coming his way and sighed, wishing he could follow behind Noelle.

Chapter Four

“Ice water with lemon, and I’m ready to order as well. I’ll have the cioppino along with the grilled artichoke salad, hold the dressing,” Alicia Kramer stated imperiously and handed her menu back to their server just as Jack slid into the seat across from her. He could tell from the twitch of her right eye that she was annoyed at being kept waiting for ten minutes, but it couldn’t be helped. He needed to make a certain polo player understand that the only relationship he would have with Noelle would be a professional one; and that it would be in his best interests to straighten up.

“Excellent choice, madam.” Their server turned to Jack. “And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the fire roasted lamb chops and mint orzo with an ice tea, and please bring sugar with it, thank you.” Jack smiled as he handed over his menu. A glance towards Alicia found her looking at him with amusement. He raised an eyebrow questioningly, and she shook her head knowingly.

“Sweet tea. You can take the boy out of the south, but the south remains tried and true,” Alicia murmured, picking up her

fork and knife. Somehow he didn't think it was a compliment and watched as she inspected the silverware with a slight frown on her perfectly made-up face.

At the age of fifty-nine Alicia Kramer was still a very attractive woman. There was no gray in her hair thanks to the discreet coloring of an expensive hairstylist. She maintained her size six figure with the help of personal trainers and a strict eating regimen. The fine structure of her face hinted at delicacy, but Jack knew she was more Rottweiler than teacup poodle. Alicia Kramer ran her home and family with a polite, yet unyielding force. She was Ronald Kramer's right hand, and he never made a decision without consulting her first. He recalled something Ian had said one time.

"My God, the airs that woman puts on! When we were in college, Alicia was the queen of Cracker Barrel! She knew where every one of them was located and their hours of operation too!" Ian snorted derisively as they'd watched the Kramer matriarch nibble demurely on a watercress stalk as though it was the best thing she'd ever eaten.

Jack didn't bother addressing her comment. He was focused on the frown Alicia Kramer was allowing to mar her lovely features; in public no less. He happened to know that she spent an astronomical amount of time and money to maintain a wrinkle-free, youthful appearance. The frown was a telling sign that she was deeply disturbed by something, and he wondered if she knew the real reason for their meeting today.

"Was that the famous polo player everyone's been talking about?" Alicia asked with interest. "I read somewhere that his father was some kind of European royalty."

"Yes, that was him. Sorry about keeping you waiting," Jack said, not really caring to be reminded of the good-looking

younger man that had expressed an interest in Noelle. An interest that hopefully he wouldn't be stupid enough to act on now that Jack had set him straight.

Jack grabbed his briefcase and reached in to pull out the Kramer's agenda for the following month. "Here are all the political events scheduled for June. The lists are separated by Democratic Functions, Kramer Fundraisers, and First Lady Events."

"Oh goody! I'm definitely interested in seeing where we can make raise money for Ronald." Alicia took the packet Jack had prepared and slipped on her Tom Ford reading glasses. For the next fifteen minutes, they discussed the pros and cons of each event, just as their food arrived. Jack dug into his meal with relish, enjoying the tender lamb and the cool mint in the orzo. As he watched in amusement, Alicia picked delicately at her food. She sipped most of the broth from her seafood stew and ate only the artichokes from her salad.

"Is the food not to your liking, Alicia?" Jack asked mildly, watching as she delicately wiped her mouth and smiled.

"It's a little spicier than I would have liked," she said, staring at his damn near empty plate. Alicia shuddered slightly as though the thought of consuming a full meal brought her nightmares; and then suddenly her face brightened and he was put on alert.

"I think it would be a great idea for us to get involved with the *Let's Move* campaign. Would you please reach out and see if it would be possible? Perhaps they need an ambassador of sorts."

The hairs on Jack's neck stood up, and he knew he wasn't going to like where this conversation would lead next. "What

did you have in mind, Alicia?” he asked slowly. “The commitment to this project would have to be very high. Are you prepared to step away from your other projects to take this on?”

Alicia waved her hand dismissively. “Oh please, Jack. I’m way too occupied to take this on. I was thinking that Noelle could do it. I don’t know if you’re aware, but Noelle used to attend camp for kids of a larger stature.” Alicia raised her eyebrows and made a subtle widening motion with her hands. “So she has experience in this sort of thing. Besides, it will give her something meaningful to do. I’d rather she do that than run all over Manhattan attempting to solicit herself out like a prostitute with this party planning business.”

Cold fury roared through Jack as he listened to this shallow bitch dismiss his beautiful Noelle.

“From what I understand, her business has had repeat clients. That’s not bad considering she’s been in operation for only five months,” Jack seethed. “That would be an indication that she’s definitely doing something right. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Alicia rolled her eyes. “Well who are her clients? It seems they are desperate and willing to hire anybody. I don’t think they’re anyone that we would associate with. Don’t get me wrong, Jack. I love my daughter, but I find her taste to be slightly... questionable. For instance, take that outfit she was wearing today,” she said looking him directly in the eye. “It was trendy and vulgar. Nothing a real lady would ever be caught dead in. Too bad she took off before I could tell her.”

Aaah... So Alicia had seen her daughter and was pissed that Noelle had, with his help, managed to avoid her. “I think your daughter has a good head on her shoulders and a great sense for business. Today she closed a deal on a major event that

most of the city will be dying to attend. Noelle's far too busy to be involved in your charity work at this crucial time in her career. I think Darren would be a better fit. He is a heart surgeon after all," Jack said smoothly, realizing that he'd put himself deliberately in Alicia's crosshairs. That was fine with him because at this point he was all out of fucks to give when dealing with her high-handed ass.

Alicia surveyed him coolly. "I disagree. Noelle is a much more suitable candidate, besides, Darren is busy saving lives. You seem rather passionate about my daughter's life, Jack. Why is that exactly?"

"I'm interested because she's got talent to make it to the top. Obviously, I haven't known Noelle as long as you have, but from what I've seen, she is an excellent chef. How do you think those dinners at your home were so wonderful? Tell me, have they been the same since she left? I know I haven't eaten there since she's been gone. That chef you hired severely embellished his culinary skills. He got lucky when he discovered Noelle's passion for cooking. When you hired him four and a half years ago, we strongly advised your husband against it. He didn't listen to us because you just had to have a Michelin star chef. Did you know that on the weekends, Noelle used to give him cooking lessons?"

Jack took a sip of his sweet tea, watching Alicia's face flush. He knew at that moment that she had not been aware of the goings-on in her home. Alicia's expression was now a mask of ice. *Oh, you're pissed lady? Well, fuck you; I am too!* Jack thought prepared to go the distance for Noelle.

"Again, what is your interest in my daughter?" Alicia asked, her tone chillier than Antarctica. A man with smaller balls would have dove under the table. Jack Sullivan was not that

man, and he was far too busy having a ‘nobody puts baby in the corner’ moment to tread lightly.

Jack reached back into his briefcase and pulled another folder out. “I’m sure your concern for your daughter is...genuine. I’m not a parent, but I’d like to think your feelings come from a good place. At this time, I need you to let me do my job in the best way that I can. Stalking the First Lady is not a priority for Vivienne, Ian, or myself. This is a service we will no longer be providing to you. So I suggest you get yourself moving on that “Let’s Move” campaign and prepare to break a sweat,” Jack continued as if he wasn’t aware that Alicia’s mouth was flapping like a fish out of water.

“What *is* our main priority as stipulated in the contracts that we sign with our clients is making sure that they always look great and are portrayed in the most positive light. To make sure that they are never associated with negativity and eliminate any threat of it, correct?” Jack asked, holding the folder out to a furious Alicia.

“Correct,” Alicia snapped, snatching the folder from him. *How dare this hillbilly talk to her like this?* she fumed, thinking that it was time to remind him who he worked for. As Alicia opened the folder, she promptly froze upon seeing the pictures inside.

Jack sat silently, watching the blood drain from her face as Alicia hurriedly flipped through its contents. It didn’t give him any pleasure to do this, but it was his job to protect his clients. Alicia and Ronald were his clients, but Noelle was his heart, and he’d do everything in his power to protect her; even if it meant being a bastard to his clients. Jack watched as Alicia’s eyes rose to meet his, and they were filled with trepidation as she anticipated his next words.

“Alicia Kramer, *you* are now the threat to your family. My job is to eliminate threats, and I’m damn good at it. I’ve got a couple of options as to how I can proceed with that information, but we need to get a few things straight first.

Do you understand me when I say that you have no more time to meddle in Noelle’s life? Or block her business efforts? You are now at a pivotal point in your life where you realize it would be in your best interest to just let her experience life and be there to support her along the way, you feel me?” Jack asked in his charming southern accent that Alicia was realizing, too late, was tempered with steel. He held up his hand and their server appeared with the dessert menu. Jack smiled in appreciation, keeping his laser-like stare on Alicia as she nodded her head to indicate she was listening.

Jack smiled at the hovering server. “We’re going to need a minute, sir.” He waited until the server left to lean in and whisper across the table, “Good. Now I don’t know about you, but I could really go for some dessert while we focus on how to discreetly extract you from the problems you’ve created down in Florida.”

Brooklyn, New York

According to the private investigator Jack hired four months ago, Noelle was very well- liked in the community and participated in numerous neighborhood events. He knew he was going overboard and being stalkerish, but what other choice did he have since she no longer lived at home? How else was he supposed to know she was okay? The report also

stated that Noelle wasn't seeing anybody. He could have just as easily asked his brother Darby to get the info, but the thought of that hound dog watching Noelle made his blood boil.

It took Jack two days to gather up most of the information he needed on her ex. Remy Dumont born in Marseille, France to wealthy Ghanaian parents. They sent him to University in Paris, but he dropped out two years after enrolling. Furious, his parents cut him off and told him to work for a living. Instead, he coasted by on running numbers and living off of rich, older women. Recently he'd fallen in with a very bad crowd and was looking to disappear.

Jack was just waiting on a call from his youngest brother Casey, an attorney in Washington D.C., who had contacts in Paris to confirm what he already knew. There were several ways this could play out, but he was trying to find the right one that would alleviate Noelle's worry *and* work in his favor. Jack felt a stab of guilt about manipulating her, but he was too far gone with possessing her to think about that now. Knowing that there had been someone before him made Jack want to ensure that there was no one *after* him. He was going to be it for Noelle.

So here he was, on a Thursday afternoon, parked directly across from her brownstone; impatiently waiting to get a glimpse of her when he should be working. Jack wanted to relay the information he'd gathered and discuss what their next move should be. From his vantage point, he could see the entire block.

About a dozen kids were playing in the street and moms were speed-walking with their strollers. Across the street in the park, a yoga class was being one with nature, while enticing aromas drifted from the various food trucks parked along the curb. Suddenly, he saw her jogging towards her brownstone. Noelle's satiny skin was glistening with perspiration, with her

sweat dampened tank top and shorts clinging to her curves. Sighing, Jack glanced down at his dick which now resided in a permanent state of hardness. He was going to have to do something about it and soon.

Jack watched as a group of elementary school kids ran up to her. They busted out singing and beat boxing as one of the boys started break dancing. He was pop-locking and made a motion to pass it on to Noelle. To his surprise, she bust out a few intricate moves of her own and passed it back to the kid. He chuckled to himself as the other kids laughed at their buddy's stunned expression. Noelle hugged the boy then they all high-fived her and ran off down the street, leaving her to continue on her way.

All of a sudden, Noelle broke into a full sprint, and the next thing Jack knew, she was launching herself into the arms of a tall, blonde guy, whom he hadn't even noticed standing by her brownstone steps because he was so focused on her. Jack sat up straight. The asshole caught her and twirled her around before soundly kissing her on that gorgeous, laughing mouth. *Who the fuck was this clown???* Jack was going to kill that sorry ass investigator after he got done with Ken doll.

White hot rage surged through Jack's body, and he fought the urge to get out of his car, cross the street, and beat the shit out of this stranger for daring to touch her. Swift action was needed, and he was suddenly clear on which course to take. His cell phone rang. Glancing down at the number, he quickly answered it. "Talk to me, Casey."

Chapter Five

“Theo!” Noelle laughed as the beautiful man before her swung her around in his strong arms. His scruffy chin found her neck, and she squealed in delight. “When did you get back from London?”

It was good to see Theo Adams, one of her former high school classmates. An up and coming artist, he’d also supplied her with some of the best weed she’d ever smoked. Noelle discovered that he was an artist one night as they were puffing away and insisted on seeing some of his work. Thoroughly impressed, she hooked him up with her sister Sloane who owned an art gallery in Soho.

Theo’s career instantly took off. In return, he kept Noelle supplied with weed for practically nothing. Smoking was her way of relieving the tension her interactions with her family caused her. Funny, she hadn’t needed to smoke anything in the four months since moving out of her parents’ home.

The taste of freedom was intoxicating, and Noelle was drunk on liberation. Gone were the prissy outfits her mother liked for her to wear. She now shopped in vintage thrift shops and loved showing a little skin. Noelle embraced her natural hair and only made it to the beauty shop if she knew a family event was scheduled. Just the thought of her parents horrified expressions if they ever discovered their meek-as -fuck, well-mannered daughter was a pot-smoking, borderline hippy. *Quelle horreur!*

But that was nothing in comparison to how the family would lose their shit if those pics came out. Hopefully Jack would have a solution. Noelle was starting to worry, since she hadn’t seen or heard from him since running into him at Nico’s two days ago. Sidra had tried to reassure her.

“Girl, just ‘cause you can’t see things happening doesn’t mean he’s not making them happen. Trust that he knows what he’s doing.” Noelle really hoped that was the case; otherwise, she would need to have a sit down with her parents soon because there was no way in hell she was going to pay Remy one penny.

“Last night, beautiful. I’ve already placed a delivery order for Aurelio’s meat lover’s pizza and wings. Plus, I brought a lil’ of the good shit,” Theo said slyly patting his shirt pocket. “Tried something new in Sedona that will blow your mind.”

“Ooooh, good stuff! Please tell me you made the pie a large, or I will go all kinds of hunger games on your ass,” Noelle warned half-jokingly.

Theo threw his head back and laughed, causing women on the street to give him admiring glances as he picked up his case of paints. Noelle took a moment to study her friend. Standing at six feet, two inches he looked like a model. With a long and lean build, his shoulder length hair was dark blond and curly. Eyes the color of the ocean, and a sensuous mouth that made women flock to him like bees to honey. To them, Theo was irresistible and rarely was he ever found with the same woman twice, which always led to their heartbreak.

Noelle almost wished she were in love with Theo, because that would be a walk in the park for her. Instead she was in love with a good-looking, judgmental asshole. She was kicking herself for even going to him. Somehow she just thought Jack would be different. She remembered the first time she saw him....

Past...

It was Noelle's twenty-first birthday, and her mother had planned an obscenely large debut to introduce her to New York society. Flustered by the amount of people who were pushing into her personal space, she'd gone off to sneak a quick drink. God, why hadn't she stayed in Paris? Europeans kept shit real, unlike Americans' who smiled at you while they sized up the value of your outfit and determined whether you were worth talking to. Her jaw ached from gritting her teeth and smiling so damned much. She could feel her mother's gaze tracking her every move like a heat-seeking missile.

"Noelle, please keep in mind tonight that you should be looking to make a match. There aren't that many suitors of our stature, and you aren't getting any younger, dear," Alicia said sweetly while adjusting her daughter's bodice. Translation: Beggars can't be choosers.

Noelle had just declined another dance, when a man's melodious voice whispered in her ear. "Please tell me you won't disappear at midnight and leave a slipper behind. My dear, you've been gone long enough, and I refuse to fly to another continent just to have conversations like we used to."

Noelle whirled in delight to see her godfather standing there grinning with outstretched arms. Ian Rusnik was her late Uncle Harvey's companion for over twenty years. Normally one to uphold tradition, Alicia Kramer had chucked it in the fuck it bucket and named him Noelle's godfather, much to the dismay of her snotty, homophobic parents, to please her brother. Harvey was her only sibling and she refused to turn her back on him the way their parents did for being out and proud.

“Uncle Ian!” Noelle squealed loudly, causing people to stare much to her mother’s dismay. He enveloped her in a hug, and she closed her eyes as she took in the familiar scent of his cigars, cologne, and the special godfather scent that was all his alone. “I’ve missed you so much! I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Come dance with me and allow me save you from “Mommy Dearest”,” Ian whispered conspiratorially. Without hesitation, she stepped into his arms, and they began to waltz.

“You’re the best, Uncle Ian. Thank you,” Noelle laughed joyfully and he joined in.

“No need to thank me; I recognized that hungry look on Alicia’s face. It’s the same one she would get when Harvey and I would cook in our tiny apartment. Poor thing was so busy trying to seduce your father that she refused to eat real food until he put a ring on it,” Ian said referencing Beyoncé with a wag of his brows.

“Oh, shit. For real?” The concept of her immaculate mother actually being hungry for food was surreal. Even at dinner time, Chef precisely measured out her meals with measuring cups and now did the same thing for her sister-in-law. Unlike them, Noelle refused to fall in line with that policy. No sir. She loved food way too much.

“Mmmhmmm. She was like that tiny chicken hawk on the Loony Tunes, and we were hiding Foghorn Leghorn from her.” Ian’s eyes glowed with satisfaction as Noelle struggled to contain her mirth. It was nice to see his goddaughter smiling on her birthday. He felt a pang of nostalgia. Oh Harvey, you would be so proud of our girl, he thought wistfully of his partner who’d died of pancreatic cancer six years ago.

While they loved all of the Kramer children, Noelle was the one who tugged at their heartstrings. Lacking the confidence of her older siblings, she deliberately lagged behind hating to bring attention to herself. Smart, funny, and pretty Noelle was often overshadowed by her sister's dance recitals or brother's basketball and lacrosse achievements. Oftentimes, she could be found in the library reading a book or in the kitchen helping to prepare meals.

It frustrated Alicia to no end and, fearing that their daughter would be an underachiever, the Kramer's took Noelle to see a psychologist. The shrink's diagnosis: she's a kid, leave her alone. When that didn't work, Alicia in disguise of course, took Noelle to Queens to visit a woman, she heard about from one of her maids that claimed to be a psychic. Madame Deon took one look at the fidgeting, anxious, little girl and then addressed Alicia bluntly.

"There's nothing wrong with your daughter. Nothing that a little love and care on your part won't fix. A word of warning: If you continue at the rate you are going, you WILL lose her," she warned. Dislike for this snotty, rich, woman coming through in every word. Her heart went out to the poor angel who was stuck with this uptight, skinny heifer. Alicia Kramer stuck her nose in the air. "Thank you so much for your time, Madame Deon."

After that, Noelle was put into dance, sports, and singing; all of which she enjoyed, but won no trophies. Needless to say, her parent's streak of disappointment grew tremendously. It was only when Harvey suggested culinary school that Noelle found her niche. She loved working in the kitchen and challenging her mind with recipes. She won awards for her amazing dishes in county fairs, and how did Alicia reward her? By sticking her in a weight watchers camp for kids to make Noelle aware of the dangers of overeating. Ian was furious as he watched

the light in Noelle's eyes dim. He wanted to tie Alicia to a chair and force feed her bread and sugar for a week.

"Uncle Ian, you are so out of control!" As they whirled around the ballroom floor, Noelle felt a prickle of awareness go through her and felt like she was being watched. She looked around the ballroom until her eyes clashed with a pair of burning hazel ones; and time seemed to stand still. Leaning against the entry way, with a slinky blonde whispering in his ear trying to get his attention, was a tall man whose broad, muscular build was fitted into a black tux that was clearly tailored just for him; he wore it so well.

He was perfection, standing at about six feet four inches tall with short black hair that had a slight curl to it. Thick dark brows framed his hazel eyes. His sharp cheekbones, firm lips, straight nose, and square jaw were utterly masculine, making all the other men in the room fade away. And he was watching her. His eyes were roving over her from head to toe, mentally undressing her. Noelle could feel her body responding to his perusal and she shivered in Ian's arms; stunned that a complete stranger could pull such a reaction from her.

"Are you okay, dear?" Ian asked concernedly. He took in Noelle's flushed cheeks, sparkling eyes, and parted lips. Her attention was focused over his right shoulder.

"Who is that man? I don't believe I've ever seen him before," Noelle said softly, her gaze still focused on the dazzling stranger. Ian turned to look and immediately knew whom she was talking about. The gentleman in question couldn't seem to take his eyes off of her either. For an instant, his mind flashed to another beautiful, young woman years ago who caught the eye of a good looking man. Unaware of the danger until it was too late, Ian hadn't been able to rescue her, and that relationship had ended in fatalities. But this man was more

like his angelic mother than his demonic father, he told himself. Only good would come of it; he was certain. This time, he would get it right.

“Allow me to introduce you, my dear...”

The pizza was eaten, and the wine bottle was empty. They had smoked two joints on the rooftop, and now it was time to get down to the business of posing and painting. Noelle watched as Theo arranged his brushes and then adjusted his canvas in her living room to get the best light. She shifted nervously on her chaise lounge. Clad only in a men’s white dress shirt and her boy shorts, Noelle waited for Theo to start painting her. Suddenly, he looked at her with his piercing blue eyes and grinned.

“Relax. I spent serious cash on that weed to make you feel really good. You’re not going to freak and change your mind are you?” Theo asked worriedly. Noelle shook her head no. In exchange for negotiating the low price of the brownstone with his cousin, Theo had asked if he could paint her. “I see so many elements in you, Noelle. You’re complex like magic bars and seven layer dip. I’m fucking dying to see if I can catch all of them,” he’d begged. On impulse, she’d said yes. No longer under her parents’ thumb, she was doing exactly what she wanted. “Just chill. I want you to just lie back, and let me see what I can do.” His voice was so soothing.

The marijuana should have been working its magic; but instead, Noelle was even more wound up than before she’d smoked it. Ever since her meeting with Jack, she’d been

restless. Noelle felt like she was going to come out of her skin; her sense of awareness was so heightened- from the sound of his deep, bourbon-soaked voice and that seductive smile. She had been aroused by his large hands moving the pen around. His fingers long and thick, were a contradiction to the rest of his appearance as they were calloused, which struck her as odd, considering any time she had ever seen him he was in business attire. What exactly did he do in his spare time to have calluses? It was odd to have so much feeling for someone you really knew nothing about.

Noelle's attempts at inquiry were met with suspicion from her mother and a knowing smile by Uncle Ian. Everything she knew about Jack was from Google and Page Six. She knew he was from Tennessee and the eldest of three brothers. A graduate of Harvard Business, he'd started his PR firm with her godfather Ian Rusnik and their other partner Vivienne Romankov. The firm had an eclectic clientele and represented everyone from politicians, musicians, and authors, to athletes, models and T.V. personalities. Her father Senator Ronald Kramer had been with the firm since they started.

Jack, to his credit, tried to keep a low profile; but when you were the poster boy for success, sexiness and money, it was damn near impossible to do. Page Six had dubbed him the city's most elusive bachelor since John F. Kennedy Jr. Noelle sighed glumly as she thought of all the glamorous women constantly vying for his attention. She didn't stand a chance, but that didn't stop her from dreaming about or longing for him from a distance.

During her father's last campaign, Noelle volunteered at home base and saw Jack on a daily basis. Tongue-tied, she always made it a point to make sure they were surrounded by other people, and there was no direct interaction between them. Every time he saw her, he would smile and greet her, and she would mumble a greeting before quickly walking away. Why

couldn't she be more like her friends? Sidra had an easy camaraderie with Jack and always chatted with him whenever she came to the campaign office. Avery also, and it frustrated Noelle to no end that she could not manage something so simple.

At her father's victory party, Noelle had managed to snap the perfect picture of Jack as he stood in the background listening to her father with a thoughtful expression. As soon as she moved into her home, she had it developed and framed.

"Wanna tell me about it, babe? I'm a good listener," Theo's cajoling voice interrupted her thoughts, and she smiled wanly.

"No, just trying to figure some things out. How's it going over there, Picasso-ho?" Noelle teased. "Hang out of any windows lately?" Theo's bedroom skills were legendary and had almost gotten him shot. Hired by a wealthy socialite's husband to paint her portrait, he'd quickly taken on the additional job of pleasing the woman between the sheets. One night when her husband was supposed to be out of town, he'd come home unexpectedly. The woman liked to have adventurous sex and had insisted Theo 'do' her in her husband's office. Having nowhere to hide, Theo had opened the window and jumped from the second story window and into the bed of roses below.

"Jealous much? You know if you'd let me, I could help you unwind." Theo said slyly giving her an exaggerated wink.

"Boy, please. I'd have you crying for your mama." Noelle rolled her eyes and turned her head away; missing the speculative look Theo gave her.

"Most women like a man that's in touch with his emotions," Theo murmured as he added more color to the canvas. Noelle

watched his paintbrush move in bold sweeping strokes.
“How’s your business going?”

“It’s going really good. Everything is a learning process. With every client being different, we just have to learn to anticipate their needs. We’ve had clients since day one, which was a pleasant surprise considering we only used social media in the beginning. Ian, my godfather, has been giving us pointers. At first, he wanted to do our publicity for free, but I said no.”
Noelle laughed at Theo’s incredulous look. “I know, stupid right? I thought Avery would never talk to me again, but if we’re going to make it, I don’t want it to be on anyone’s charity.”

Theo nodded in understanding. “Yeah, I get what you’re saying. My parents were really mad that I decided to take up painting instead of following them into the world of medicine, but I just couldn’t stomach being around blood and sick people all day.”

He shrugged at her startled look. “Sorry if I’m missing a sensitivity chip, but I’d rather someone get a caring and compassionate doctor than a total wanker like me. Angle your chin toward the lamp.”

“Yeah, me too,” Noelle teased as she complied with his request. Her thoughts turned to her parents and their profound disappointment in her decisions. “Do your parents support your work?”

He snorted derisively. “Not at first, but that changed when they found out that the Surgeon General of the U.S. bought one of my first paintings. Ever since that happened, it’s been nothing but love.”

Noelle grimaced. “Well I’m glad they came around. I could offer to do my father’s next political event for free, and they would still decline my offer.”

“Don’t worry, luv. They’ll come around. Let’s make a deal,” Theo suggested. “If I’m right, and your parents do come around, you birds will do my next showing for free. If they don’t; and by the way I’m really hoping that they do, I’ll auction off one of my paintings, and the proceeds will go to the charity of your choice. Deal?” Theo looked at her expectantly as he held his hand out for her to shake.

Grinning Noelle shook his hand. “It’ll never happen, but deal. Are we going to be much longer? Not trying to be rude, but I’ve got an early morning meeting with a couple of food vendors in Long Island.”

Theo stood up and started gathering his supplies. “Yep, I’m done here for tonight. Still have to go home and shower. Got a late night rendezvous that I’m not trying to miss. She’s a yoga instructor.” The last part was said in a reverent tone, and Noelle rolled her eyes at him and slid her arm through his as she walked him to the door. She gave his cheek a quick kiss.

“One day you’ll find a woman that won’t put up with any of your nonsense.” Theo looked at her with an intensity that was gone in the blink of an eye.

“When that day comes, I hope she’s ready. *Adieu*,” he murmured and opened the door where they promptly came face to face with a seriously pissed off looking Jack Sullivan.

Chapter Six

Past

Whiskey Row, Tennessee

“What the fuck were you doin’ with Vlad this morning, Moira? You looked like his whore letting him grope you in front of everybody! Have you no shame?” Patrick Sullivan yelled. This line of questioning was followed by the sound of a slap and his mother’s cry of pain. Jack gritted his teeth and quietly left his bed. He and his brother had been in bed for an hour before their Pa had come stumbling through the door. Darby was fast asleep, but Jack was old enough to recognize the signs that had been leading up to this event all day.

This morning a heavily-pregnant Moira Sullivan had taken her boys to do some shopping in town at the General Mill Store. They’d run into their mother’s good friend Vivienne Romankov. Jack thought that next to his mother, Vivienne was the second prettiest woman in the world. She had the smoothest skin and slanted, molasses-colored eyes. Her ink black hair hung in waves down her slender back.

Vivienne was newly married to Alexei Romankov. The Romankovs were one of the richest families in Tennessee, and the two women had met at their mutual OBGYN several months ago. A friendship was formed instantly. Vivienne was bright, funny, outspoken, and opinionated. Moira was also all of those things- as long as Patrick Sullivan was not around. Patrick didn’t care for Vivienne and her strong personality. He also didn’t approve of the mixing of races and considered minorities to be beneath him.

On this particular morning, Vivienne and his mother were discussing morning sickness, when Vlad Olafsson walked by. Vivienne placed a gentle hand on his arm and expressed condolences for his wife’s sudden passing in her sleep. Moira did the same, and he had gratefully hugged both women before continuing on his way. It was then that Jack noticed his father standing in the doorway of the market across the street, watching them. His ma was no fool and had quickly finished her shopping so they could head home. All day she was tense,

jumping at each sound she heard outside. Dinner was served at five, and Moira had urged them to eat quickly. Afterwards, they were to take a short shower then go to bed.

“I wasna doing naught but comforting him, Patrick Sullivan! Fer God’s sake the man just lost his wife. I offered condolences from both of us and said we’d help with the kids if he needed. Do ya ken me? Tis all!” Moira stated defiantly.

“And what about yer consortin’ with the likes of the communist’s nigger bitch? I done told you to keep my boys away from the spics, niggers, and chinks! This damn town’s overrun with them, and they’re the reasons I cannot find work!” Patrick snarled.

As he crept down the hallway, Jack could hear scuffling and his mother’s muffled cries. Slowly he peeked around the corner and saw his heavily-pregnant mother bent over the sofa while his fathers’ pale ass moved behind her. His hands were on the back of her neck, and he was grunting like a pig. Jack wanted to throw up and helplessly wished for the millionth time that he could overtake his father. Resignedly, he moved to go back down the hallway when his bastard father’s words stopped him cold.

“Yer mine, Moira. I will never let you go...”

Jack took in Noelle’s disheveled state and gritted his teeth. She was clad only in a man’s white dress shirt; her slender thighs, long, shapely brown legs, and tiny feet with red-colored toenails were on full display.

“Am I interrupting something?” Jack asked icily while continuing to survey pretty boy. According to the private investigator he’d reamed thoroughly, Theo Adams was a friend of Noelle’s from school. He was an up and coming artist; and judging from the belligerent expression on his face, his interest in the gorgeous girl standing next to him was anything but platonic.

“Jack...” Noelle breathed, shocked to see him on her doorstep. At eight-thirty in the evening, he was still immaculate looking in his navy Hugo Boss suit and tie. His expression indicated he was seriously annoyed, and she really hoped he wasn’t going to be the bearer of more bad news.

Jack inclined his head curtly. “I wanted to discuss a few things with you. If now is not a good time...”

Noelle quickly stepped back and held the door open. “No, please come in. Theo was just leaving.” Theo stepped aside quickly as he risked being run over by the larger man. Jack stepped past them; and she closed her eyes, breathing in his cologne as he headed down the hall. *Lord, he smells good*, she thought dreamily leaning on the door.

“Really, Noelle? That guy?” Theo’s disgusted tone brought her back to reality as she opened her eyes to his angry expression. “That’s the guy that has you moping all over the place? He’s way out of your -”

Noelle grabbed the door and opened it wider. She shot him a look of irritation. “Good night, Theo. Call me later okay?” Not giving him a chance to finish his sentence, she shoved him out and shut the door in his face. Noelle was well aware of the fact that she didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of being with Jack. Taking a deep breath, she locked the door and put the chain on it before walking down the hall where she found Jack standing in the middle of the living room, observing her space.

She wondered what he was thinking. Noelle’s brownstone was a far cry from the refined palatial elegance of her parents’ estate. Her childhood home was filled with tons of breakable antiques and no-touch rules. It had a very museum-like feel to it; and growing up, she treasured the normalcy of her school friends and uncles’ homes.

Although she had grown up in subdued elegance, Noelle’s taste was wildly eclectic. She liked bohemian, vintage, rustic, and industrial. You could see it reflected in her decorating with the tarnished crystal chandelier, printed velvet pillows, and navy leather-tufted sofa. Wildly-patterned floral vases were

overflowing with various plants. Her favorite pieces were the large reclaimed wood coffee table and bookshelf her godfather Ian had given her. They were replicas of pieces in his home; and when he saw how much she loved them, he had them commissioned for her as a surprise housewarming gift.

When she'd moved into the large three-bedroom building, Noelle had painted all the rooms in varying shades of neutral colors. There were windows in every room, so there was tons of light to offset the rich taupes and grays. The wood floors were an aged walnut covered with multi-colored kilim rugs. White subway tile and recycled wood cabinets complimented the kitchen and bathrooms. Gold framed pics of her loved ones were scattered throughout the place. Since the kitchen was where she spent most of her time, she'd designed it to hold up to ten people, about the usual size of her dinner parties. It had a huge dining table and was filled with state of the art appliances.

“So what brings you to Brooklyn, Mr. Manhattan?” Noelle asked sarcastically, watching as he bent to admire her table. Jack straightened to examine her, taking in her clothing with a disapproving frown.

“Who's the guy, Noelle?” Jack asked coolly although he already knew. He just wanted to hear her confirm that nothing was going on between them. Jack was actually proud of his controlled tone because internally a seething mass of jealous rage was brewing; and he was dying to chase the asshole down and give Theo Adams a southern style ass whoopin' that he wouldn't soon forget.

“Theo is an old classmate of mine. Would you like something to drink?” Noelle asked. The look in Jack's eyes made her think of a predator stalking its prey; and she took a step back, watching with relief as his gaze lost some of its intensity.

“No, thank you. I actually came by to let you know that we've reached out to Mr. Dumont. Do you mind if I sit down?” Jack gestured to her sofa.

“Oh my goodness, sorry! Yes, please sit down,” Noelle urged and watched as his large frame settled with ease into her

leather couch. Amidst all the feminine floral and velvet touches, as masculine as he was, Jack should have looked out of place with his suit and tie; but instead, he looked absolutely perfect. *Like he belonged in her space*, Noelle thought with immense satisfaction as she took the seat across from him on the velvet chaise. “So what’s the word, Sullivan? Am I going to have to change my identity or what?” she asked flippantly, trying to hide her nervousness.

Jack grunted but didn’t answer. He was too busy taking in Noelle’s bronze skin gleaming in the soft lamplights, and her seemingly endless legs. He was sure the artist hadn’t missed any of these things. “Do you always run around damn near naked?” Jack asked biting, enraged all over again as he imagined her all hugged up with him. *Punk-ass Theo*. Damn, he really needed to get it together.

The temperature in the room turned up fifty degrees with his provocative question. Suddenly they were both aware of the fact that they were alone; away from her nosy family and the hustle and bustle of his office. Just the two of them. Noelle noisily cleared her throat.

“First of all, I am nowhere near naked; and even if I was, this is my damn home. My apologies; I wasn’t aware that the great Jack Sullivan was going to grace me with his presence, or I would have dressed in my finest silks and rolled the red carpet out upon your arrival,” she snapped at him.

Despite his anger, Jack grinned; he was really feeling this fiery side of Noelle much more than the passive one she usually portrayed. He watched as she huffily tucked her legs underneath that luscious bottom. All of a sudden, Jack felt the tension he’d been carrying for the last two days’ drain from him. It was nice being here with her alone, and he planned to have many more moments like this by proceeding with his plan. *Time to get to work*.

“Dumont wasn’t bluffing about blackmailing you. He made some bad gambling investments, and now it’s time for him to man up. But that’s only going to happen if you give in to his blackmail and pay the money. Otherwise, he needs to get out of Europe, and you’re his only solution. Dumont knows that if

he marries into a well-known political family, he'll be somewhat protected.

These people he did business with like keeping a low profile in their country, and your ex is the type who would make a lot of noise if he felt threatened. Your pics would come out either way, and this could have lasting negative effects on your father's career," Jack finished bluntly, watching as the realization of how big a scandal they were trying to contain dawned on Noelle. Her hands were gripping her shirt tightly, and she was struggling to take calming breaths.

When problem-solving in his business, Jack always let the client see the enormity of the potential damage that could be done. He gave them a moment to feel the fear, and then he alleviated it with a rescue plan. It was what he called "Tough Love", and it enabled him to do his job smoothly.

"So what can we do to fix this?" Noelle asked determinedly. "If it was just me, I wouldn't give that asshole one fucking penny. But it's my family..." she shuddered. "Oh my God, Jack! My mother!"

Jumping up, she started to pace the room, and Jack took in the alluring view she made; hair whipping, hips switching, and ass swaying. *Focus Sullivan*, he reminded himself and willed his growing erection to stay down. No such luck.

"Alicia would not be happy with pics of her baby girl in her birthday suit floating around, that's for sure," Jack murmured and winced for good measure. That was the understatement of the year. Although he'd put a considerable dent in her armor and she'd reluctantly agreed to back off, the Kramer matriarch was still no one to fuck with. Heads would certainly roll, starting with the beauty's in front of him, if the pics were made public. Fortunately for Noelle, Jack liked her head attached to that delectable body. "Now I'm going to do what's best for my clients in a way that allows them to focus on their priorities as I make their problems disappear. Lucky for you I have an easy solution to your problem."

Noelle whirled to face him hope lighting up her pretty face. "Well don't keep me in suspense. What's the plan?"

He watched her carefully before dropping his bomb. “We get married.”

Past...

Noelle’s heart was pounding furiously as Ian escorted her across the ballroom to where Tall, Dark, and Fine as Hell stood watching their approach. His hazel eyes gleamed with masculine appreciation as they thoroughly inspected her. Goosebumps appeared on her skin; she was short of breath and unable to look away from him.

“Are you okay, my dear?” Ian asked again. Noelle reluctantly dragged her gaze away from the specimen of male perfection ahead of them to look into her godfather’s amused eyes.

“I don’t blame you for staring my dear; he really is quite dazzling. Hell, you should see his brothers, and he’s considered ‘the ugly one’. Their parents were quite the lookers,” Ian said with a tinge of bitterness.

“He has brothers? That are better looking? Good Lord, there should be a crime against that much attractiveness in one concentrated area.” Ian laughed as they reached the beautiful man; and Noelle realized he was even better looking up close as he gave them a slow devastating smile. His skin was smooth and supple looking with a faint hint of a five o’clock shadow.

“Jack, good to see you,” Ian greeted warmly and released Noelle’s arm to give the other man an affectionate hug. Turning back to Noelle, he explained, “Jackson here is one my business partners in our public relations firm. Jack Sullivan, this is the birthday girl Noelle Kramer. She’s also my goddaughter,” Ian added with a warning look at the younger man. Noelle blushed as Jack winked at her. Be still her beating heart...

“Ms. Noelle, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Happy Birthday, and I hope you don’t mind me attending your party; Ian invited me. Are you enjoying yourself?” His voice was deep and velvety

with a southern drawl. Noelle wanted to throw her panties at him right then and there. With a voice like that she didn't care if he described his bowel movements as long as he never stopped talking. She realized both men were staring at her waiting for her to say something.

"It's nice to meet you as well. You can crash my party anytime," she finally answered, breathlessly. Whaaat?? Who said that? At his amused expression and Ian's raised eyebrow, Noelle flushed. Clearing her throat, she corrected herself. "I mean, it's a pleasure to have you here. I..uh..hope you're enjoying yourself."

"Oh, I definitely am. Would you like to dance?" Jack asked in that deep voice with the charming accent as he held out his hand. Noelle nodded her head dumbly and placed hers in his much larger one. It was electrifying, and awareness ran through her in currents. He watched her intensely, and judging from the way his hand clasped hers tightly; she was pretty sure he felt it too. And in that instant, Noelle knew, with this meeting, everything had changed for her. She knew that all other men would be compared to this one; and that they would fall short. But all too soon the moment was broken by her mother's cool, commanding voice as she glided up behind her daughter and gently pulled her away. Noelle frowned at her, annoyed that she was no longer touching Jack, who also looked irritated by the interruption.

"Please excuse us, gentlemen," Alicia trilled with a brilliant smile. "Noelle, darling, I've been looking for you everywhere! You simply must come with me. Geneva Winters middle son is home for a brief stay. You remember Charles, don't you? He's an investment banker now. Anyhow, he recently ended his engagement to Tabitha Logway and is available. There's no time to lose as you're not getting any younger. Posture in place and smile agreeably to whatever he says. Let's go, dear," Alicia ordered briskly as she whisked Noelle away.

Mortified, Noelle turned back to look helplessly at Jack and found him expressionless with his hands now in his pant pockets as he watched her departure. Ian wore a frown of disapproval and she was certain he would have blunt words

for her mother later. Pissed off at being treated like a child, Noelle pulled away from her mother's grasp and continued to walk alongside her.

"Smile agreeably to whatever? Really, Mother?" Noelle shook her head in disgust, looking straight ahead. "Thanks for setting us back fifty years. Gloria Steinman should definitely ask you to speak at her next rally on women's liberation." She was horribly embarrassed at how her mother had just treated her in front of Jack Sullivan and Ian.

"Oh relax, Noelle. I'm just looking out for your best interests. Charles Winters is a good match for you. If you're not going to finish school and have a lucrative career, you should at least have a lucrative marriage. Or both. Look at your sister; she's beautiful, successful, and has a wonderful marriage. You just have to want these things for yourself. I don't know where your lack of ambition comes from." Alicia shook her head in disappointment at her youngest daughter's choices.

"Well, never mind, here we are. Hello Charles! You remember Noelle, don't you?" Alicia simpered as she shoved Noelle forward to meet the studious-looking man who held her hand limply. Just to be sure, she squeezed his hand and watched him give a slight frown. Nope, nothing. Releasing it she glanced across the ballroom to find Jack watching her; and for a moment, it felt like they were the only two people in the room. Even from afar, this thing between them was tangible, like an electric wire.

The moment was soon broken by the return of the beautiful blonde from earlier as she pulled him onto the dance floor. Noelle hated to admit it, but they made a good looking couple. They appeared to be having the time of their lives laughing and talking to each other, she thought enviously. The woman oozed confidence, and Noelle was pretty sure she would have never let anyone treat her like she was a five-year-old. There was no way someone as sophisticated as Jack would ever be interested in someone as gauche as me, Noelle thought despondently as she tried to listen valiantly to whatever the hell Charles and her mother were talking about. From that

moment on, she made it a point to avoid being alone with Jack Sullivan lest she embarrass herself.

Chapter Seven

Noelle was laughing and clutching her stomach as the tears rolled down her cheeks, because she just couldn't stop... laughing. Jack watched in silent bemusement as it went on and on. Out of all the reactions he'd expected her to have, this wasn't one of them; and it left him feeling slightly offended. Typically, women fell all over him and laughed with him- not at him. Finally, she stopped and wiped her big gray eyes with the backs of her hands.

"Thanks; I needed that, Jack," Noelle sighed in relaxation. "So what are we really going to do?"

"We are going to get married, Noelle. I wasn't joking." Jack restated firmly. She opened her mouth in protest, but he continued on. "The kind of people your ex is mixed up with are the worst kind of greedy lowlifes. If you give in to Dumont's blackmail, they will eventually come after you and everyone you love, ruining your family's good name in the process. Are you willing to risk that?" Jack asked sharply, prompting her to slowly shake her head in the negative.

"I didn't think so. In his culture, there is a mafia-like syndicate that ensures everyone falls in line and doesn't bring dishonor or attention to them. I know a guy that can make all of the shit he has on you disappear, but I have to show him that we are legally married. It's disrespectful to make advances on another man's wife in general; but from where his family is from, they take it to the umpteenth power. All your problems will disappear. Unless you've told anyone other than your closest friends about this, no one needs to know," Jack finished smoothly watching her pensive expression as his words sunk in.

Jack knew it was a long shot that Noelle would tie herself to him, because frankly he wasn't even sure if she liked him. She

avoided him and was always careful to make sure they weren't alone. He felt like a pathetic fool as she digested the information. There was a long moment of silence before she finally spoke. "Would you like some pie?"

Pie. The hell?? And because he'd been raised to be a gentleman, he replied politely, "Yes please; I would love some."

Noelle beamed at him and took off towards the kitchen leaving him alone in the living room. Pie. Jack shook his head in bewilderment. Why couldn't pie be code for sex? He sure as hell would love a big helping of sex with her. He stood up and watched as she walked down the long hallway to the kitchen. Again her ass teased him from underneath the long shirt she wore. The urge to bury his hardness in her balls deep was unbearable. He wanted to fuck her like an animal marking its territory so that everyone would know whom she belonged to. And that was the part of him that scared him the most. Noelle brought feelings out in him that, until they met, Jack didn't know he possessed.

Women passed through his bed, but he was always cool and detached. It was like a business deal where each party walked away mutually satisfied-until he was alone and his thoughts turned to the insanely gorgeous girl in the kitchen. He longed to make her his and felt the need to kill any man that looked her way. As he was older than her, Jack knew he had no right to want her like he did. An image of his father flashed before his eyes, and he rubbed his face trying to clear it. *You're nothing like that psychotic bastard*, he told himself firmly.

Jack wandered around her living room, attempting to clear his head. Taking in all the framed pictures of friends and family she had; one frame in particular was hidden behind all the others and immediately caught his eye. Jack was amazed to see it was a picture of him taken at one of her father's events two years ago. Why did Noelle have a picture of him? He looked up and discreetly placed the frame back as Noelle reentered the living room with a tray that held two slices of pie and two glasses of milk. He couldn't even remember the last time he drank straight milk. *That's how goddamn sweet she is;*

don't corrupt her, he told himself watching as she set the tray on the coffee table between them.

“This is a new recipe of mine, peach–blueberry basil. I hope you like it,” she said shyly and handed him a plate.

“It smells great,” Jack replied truthfully as he moved back to his seat across from her. Aware that Noelle was watching him; he cut a piece of the golden-crust pie and put it into his mouth. The flavors of the fruit, basil, and cinnamon coated his tongue. It was delicious and made him think of his mother baking on Sunday mornings before church.

“Damn, Noelle, this pie is amazing.” Quickly, he shoved another bite into his mouth. The crust was buttery and light, making him groan in happiness. All too soon his plate was empty, and he looked so forlorn that Noelle laughed and got him another piece. The musical sound played in his ears over and over again, making him realize how badly he wanted to be the only one who made her laugh and smile.

“So did you get Tarik to straighten up?” Jack asked licking his fork clean. Noelle watched his tongue swirl around the fork prongs and groaned inwardly, imagining it on her nipples.

Lawd, have mercy.

“Actually, he called me yesterday to apologize,” she beamed, remembering how surprised she’d been to hear from him. “We have a meeting tomorrow afternoon at 4:45 p.m. My goal is to get everything finalized by the end of the meeting. Avery is coming with me to make sure he stays on task.”

Jack nodded his head. “Good plan. Another way to achieve that goal is by making sure the environment is business-oriented. I find that meeting my clients who are prone to distractions in boring places makes them focus on the task at hand; they’re eager to do what I need them to do to get them out of there. If you’d like, you guys are more than welcome to use my conference room,” he volunteered. That way, he could keep an eye on the little shit.

Noelle nodded her head in agreement. “That’s great advice, and we actually did rent a meeting room. If the non-refundable

deposit didn't already clear, I would have totally taken you up on your generous offer."

They continued to eat and talk about current events, avoiding the topic of marriage altogether. When the plates and glasses were empty, Jack gathered them up and took them to the kitchen. Noelle laid back and watched him move around her place, thinking again to herself how well he fit in her space.

Jack had discarded his jacket and loosened the pinstripe tie. Damn, he was so freakin' sexy; and just looking at him was making her panties wet, which was nothing new. It seemed to be the constant state Noelle was in whenever she was in his company. It made her angry how much of her emotions were invested in a man, that before this week, barely knew she was alive. She thought he would address the topic of marriage again, but instead he was examining her table.

"Don't you just love it? It was a gift from Uncle Ian along with the bookcase." Noelle pointed to the corner where the beautifully carved bookcase stood. Jack turned to look as she continued. "I've been in love with some of the pieces of furniture at his house for a couple of years now; the day that I moved in here, he surprised me with them. The craftsmanship on both pieces is stunningly unique. From what I understand, the carpenter works on commissioned items only and is in very high demand. I don't even want to think about what Uncle Ian paid for them," she said with a mock shudder.

Jack smiled enigmatically. "They're really nice pieces and compliment your space, which I really like by the way. It suits you perfectly." Noelle blushed and murmured thank you. There was a moment of silence, and she realized by his patient look that he was waiting for her to bring up the subject of marriage again.

"So Jack, how would this work? I mean, do you really think we could pull this off?" Noelle asked seriously.

Jack answered carefully. "Monday, we go down to the court house and have a quick ceremony. Afterwards, we'll send the certificate to my contact so he can put things in motion overseas. In the meantime, to give our relationship some

credibility, I think it would be best if we were seen in public together as frequently as possible. I can spin a credible story for those who know us; but honestly, the less we say about our relationship to family and friends the better. That way, the chances of us getting caught in a lie will be slim to none. We would need to stay married at least six months. I know a really good lawyer that can draw up a pre-nuptial agreement to protect our investments.”

“Six months is a long time. Won’t this cramp your social life with your revolving door of women? I don’t think there’s a stick big enough to beat off your hundreds of admirers with,” Noelle said giving him a saccharinely sweet smile that quickly turned into a frown when he grinned smugly.

“This is actually a situation that would be beneficial to me as well. In my line of work, my job is to fix things for our clients so that their lives are interruption free and that they are seen in the best light possible. I frequently encounter women who see me as a knight-in-shining-armor type and concoct ridiculous situations where I’m left wishing someone would just rescue *me* instead. If I were taken off the market, I wouldn’t have those problems anymore and could just focus on doing my damn job,” Jack said simply. He gave her a woeful look. “Won’t you help a poor lil’ country boy out and say yes?”

She gave an unladylike snort. “Maaan, please! Don’t give me that crap. You think being married would stop these thirsty chicks from pressing up on you? Your voice alone could convince women to drink your bath water,” Noelle imitated him by deepening her voice and adding a country twang. “This here dirty ass bath water is the best you’ll ever taste. Why, the dirty bubbles just melt on your tongue”

Jack howled with laughter, and Noelle joined in, enjoying the deep booming sound as it filled her home and did crazy things to her tummy.

“Marriage might make some of them go away, but I doubt it,” she mused; looking at her hands, particularly her empty left ring finger.

“So does this mean you’re considering my offer, Noelle?” Jack asked, still chuckling over her teasing. It was the kind of shit he took and gave to his brothers. Add funny to the growing list of traits he realized he liked about her.

“Possibly... So when the coast is clear, the marriage will be annulled, correct?” she asked. Noelle knew the deal and resented him for it. Jack’s firm went above and beyond to protect their clients, and the Kramer’s were very good clients. *Of course he’s going to get rid of you as soon as possible! Why would someone like HIM go for YOU?*, her inner voice taunted her. Gritting her teeth, she did her best to ignore it. At his raised eyebrow, she carried on dryly. “Of course we’d get an annulment. I mean look at us. It’s not exactly like we’re each other types,” Noelle waved her hands between them.

Jack sat up straight, all traces of humor gone and fire blazing from his hazel eyes as a slow flush was crept up his face. “Yes, what exactly am I, Noelle? What, white? Or is it because your family comes from money? What exactly is it, Noelle??” Jack asked very precisely as she recoiled from him like he’d slapped her.

The thought that she might be color struck and averse to having an interracial relationship had never entered his mind. A sharp pain ripped through his chest. Fuck that shit! He *would* fight for them to have a chance and overcome any objections she might have if that was her concern. Although they lived in the most diverse city in the world, he was well aware that racism still existed. He’d grown up with a father who deliberately exposed his family to it daily.

Noelle stood up quickly. “How dare you try to imply I’m some sort of snobby racist bitch? It just gets better and better with you doesn’t it? First I was a whore, and now this shit. Fuck you and your offer, Jack Sullivan!!” Noelle sneered. Jack also stood up and got in her space.

“Well what the fuck did you mean exactly? Besides, I wouldn’t know if you were a ho or a racist because you always run away like you’re afraid of your own shadow whenever I come around, Noelle.” Jack stated harshly. She opened her mouth to retort in anger but opted to take a deep breath instead before continuing in a more reasonable tone.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that you’re this great-looking successful guy whose career is on track. And well there’s....me. The Kramer screw-up destined to wind up living with a hundred cats, if my mother doesn’t get her way. Why would you want to tie yourself to someone like me?” Noelle asked with a tinge of bitterness.

Jack felt his heart start to calm down, but his anger remained; only this time it was directed at her mother. “Someone like you? You’re fucking joking right? Someone who’s funny, smart, and gorgeous? Someone so kind that she lets the chef take credit for her amazing meals?” he shook his head in disbelief. “Don’t sell yourself short, Noelle; you most certainly are a catch. Just ask your artist friend,” he finished with a sense of irritation. Yeah, he was still mad as hell behind that shit.

“And in regards to an annulment, if it’s still an option, maybe you’ll be able to get one,” Jack murmured; looking at her sexy lips before raising his smoldering gaze to meet hers and allowing her to see the unguarded lust in his eyes. “Or just

maybe you'll like being married to me too much to consider one."

Sexual tension crackled between them, and Noelle sucked in her breath. *Holy. Sheep. Balls.* Jack Sullivan wanted her. The realization made her panties wetter. She looked down and even the dark fabric of his slacks couldn't conceal the massive erection he made no attempt to hide. Confidence mixed with elation surged through her; making her feel higher than any 'good shit' Theo had ever given her. She was definitely going to have to throw these panties away because they were beyond ruined.

"I'd expect you to be faithful," she blurted out and flushed at his raised brow. "If ...if we did do this, I certainly wouldn't want to be blindsided by any indiscretions and made to look like a fool."

"That's not a problem for me, and I'd expect no less from you. There will be no other men. Are we clear?" Jack wondered what Noelle would say if he told her that from the day they met other women had ceased to exist for him. As far as other men were concerned when it came to her, his mind was in a *Game of Thrones* state where all threats needed to be eliminated. "Another thing I should clarify is that while there won't be any other women, I certainly will not live like a monk. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He wanted them to sleep together. She would get Jack as her husband and get to sleep with him. Noelle looked around wildly for an unseen fairy godmother. Licking her lips, she said in a husky voice, "I understand, but can you even hear

how crazy this sounds? We barely know each other and would be fooling nobody. What about our likes and dislikes? We might not be compatible...”

Swiftly Jack closed the distance between them, pulling her soft body into his hard one as his large hands framed her face. He watched her gray eyes widen in awareness as his erection pressed against her stomach.

“Let me show you what I like okay, Noelle? I can show you better than tell you.” He said thickly hovering above her lips. His warm breath tickled her face and she clutched at his shirt, dizzy with desire for him.

In her family’s eyes, she might be a loser, but this was a chance to be with the guy of her dreams. She would not screw this moment up. The lyrics to Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” started running through her head; but unlike Rabbit, she wouldn’t toss her cookies. They were on her turf now and suddenly she could see everything crystal clear. All she would ever want was on the other side of her fears. It was now or never. She yanked his head down and his lips met hers in a searing kiss.

Chapter Eight

Her lips, so soft and full, were addicting and his favorite part of her body. Jack gently coaxed her mouth open and slid his tongue in to meet hers. *Heavenly*. Noelle tasted spicy-sweet and her tongue was like satin sliding against his in an erotic tango. The kiss deepened, and Jack pressed her body closer to

him as she wound her arms around his neck. Noelle broke the kiss to nibble greedily at his lips, and her shaking hands lowered to swiftly undo his tie and unbutton his shirt. Jack sucked on her bottom lip as he slid his hands under her shirt and cupped the smooth full globes of her ass. She moaned softly into his mouth as his warm hands palmed her bottom and his magical fingers caressed her.

Jack swallowed her moan and continued to devour her mouth. Scratch the decision about her lips being the best; it was her sexy derriere that was perfection...or was it her lush breasts pressing into his chest? No, it was her flawless, silky, brown skin. Okay, it was just her. Period. Every fucking single thing about Noelle was perfect.

The fire between them raged out of control as he hoisted her up into his arms; and she wrapped her legs around his waist, grinding her center tightly against the granite-like hardness in his pants. The friction between her thighs increased tenfold; and Noelle threw her head back, allowing Jack access to lick the sensitive nerves on the exposed column of her slender throat. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he moved with her, pressing his straining cock against her core.

“You like that don’t you, baby? You’re so fucking wet, I can feel you through my pants,” Jack whispered throatily against Noelle’s ear as she clung to him weakly. Breathing deeply, he inhaled her womanly scent and knew he wouldn’t be able to leave her untouched tonight. He walked over to the velvet chaise and placed her on it, kneeling in front of her. Quickly he yanked her shorts and panties off. Her tantalizing scent wafted up to him, making him animalistic. “Scoot up love and bend your knee. Leave the other one on the floor. I want to see your pretty pussy.” He ordered harshly, desire thickening his voice and making his southern drawl even more pronounced.

Noelle shivered in anticipation and did as she was told by leaning up on her elbows. She watched as Jack sat back and stroked his dick. His intense gaze was centered on her pussy, and again she marveled at his perfection.

His tan skin was smooth, and through his shirt opening she could see his six pack. While in his arms, she'd felt all muscle from the strength of his carrying her, to the firmness of his thighs and butt. Noelle bit her lip and watched him move his hand over what promised to be a good time. She moaned, shifting in anticipation of his next move. Damn, she wanted Jack in her. Whether it was her pussy or her mouth, which she'd never tried despite what those pics showed. She just wanted to *feel him moving in her!* His breathing was harsh as if he was struggling himself, and she watched lustfully as the bulge in his pants grew impossibly bigger. But Noelle didn't want him composed. She wanted him to be wild as fuck and out of control, as she was.

Sliding her fingers down between her thighs to her glistening, puffy lower lips, opening her legs wide, she gave Jack a show. His eyes flew to hers, and she held contact as she masturbated in front of him. His face was stark with desire— for her, Noelle Kramer. Stroking up and down in a steady rhythm before circling her pleasure button, she closed her eyes and arched her back. Long, loud moans escaped her lips as she felt pulsing tingles in her core before sliding her fingers inside, touching herself the way she did whenever she thought about him.

The room was quiet except for the sounds of their heavy breathing and the wet sounds coming from her pussy as her fingers moved in and out of her hole at a frantic pace. Then she heard the sound of him unbuckling his pants. Noelle's eyes flew open to watch him extract himself from his underwear. She let out another moan. Jack's dick was the stuff of women's dreams everywhere; at least ten inches long and three inches

thick. The head was an angry red color glistening with precum.

Jack knelt in front of her and pulled her wet fingers out of her core. Noelle watched as he took them, coated in her essence, into his mouth and sucked every, milky drop, teasing her with his warm tongue. His eyes closed, he groaned in pleasure. “Jesus, you taste good. Taste yourself, baby.” He leaned down to kiss her, and she sucked on his tongue, tasting the sweet tanginess of her arousal. She loved the way his lips felt as he explored her mouth expertly. Jack thrust one of his long, thick fingers into her wetness and proceeded to finger fuck her; slowly at first, then faster as he added another digit. Noelle moaned into his mouth and thrust her hips to meet his fingers. His other hand plucked at her turgid nipples through her shirt.

“Unbutton your shirt, Noelle.” he commanded against her swollen lips. Weakly, she did as he said, having no will to defy his orders. He continued to kiss her as his fingers masterfully fucked her. Jack broke the kiss off to stare at the most perfect pair of breasts he’d ever seen. Full and high with dark brown nipples that were begging for his attention. Bending his head, Jack captured a tip in his mouth, swirling the hard nub with his tongue. Noelle shuddered and gushed even more around his fingers. She protested loudly when they left her pussy; but it quickly turned into a wail of ecstasy as Jack slid down to replace his fingers with his tongue.

Never had Noelle felt anything like this before. Her nerves were tingling all over; and she became more aroused with each stroke and twirl of his long tongue as he tunneled through her wetness. Jack’s fingers gave exquisite pleasure to her swollen button, and Noelle thought she would pass out as she writhed frantically against his tongue. “Baby, baby, baby, you taste so damn good,” he crooned.

Noelle could feel her orgasm building when he switched up and latched onto her clit while his fingers dove in and stroked her g-spot. “Don’t...stop, Jack. I’m gonna...aaaaagh!!!!” Pleasure exploded through her body in waves as she experienced the most intense orgasm of her life. Her hands gripped his hair, and she ground her center into his face offering even more of herself as he expertly lapped up all of her juices.

Noelle lay there spent, trying to catch her breath. She was a shuddering mass as Jack rose tall and majestic before her. He hastily shucked off his pants and boxers and Noelle felt her body come back to life as she watched him stroke his manhood. She couldn’t take her eyes off of it, standing so erect with a slight curve. Large and swollen, the blunt head glistened with the pearl-colored liquid of his excitement. Noelle licked her lips eager for a taste of him, which shocked the hell out of her because giving head was something that she’d never done nor had a desire to. Her eyes flew to his and found him watching her through hooded lids burning with satisfaction.

“Since we’ve already covered one of the sex acts that you’d never indulged in, we might as well kill two birds with one stone.” Noelle sat up and his shaft became level with her face as he walked toward her. *Was it strange to think it was beautiful?* Noelle wondered reaching out to touch it. Although she could feel the veins underneath the skin, it felt like warm, satin covered-steel in her hands. Jack groaned as she tentatively stroked him from the base all the way to the tip. Taking it as sign that he liked what she was doing, she did it

again, but with more confidence. More pre-cum appeared at the tip, Noelle looked up at Jack to find him watching her.

“Taste me, Noelle,” Jack ordered hoarsely and held his breath in anticipation as he watched her luscious lips, waiting to feel them surround him.

Obediently, she opened her mouth and tongued his essence from the bulbous head. It was sticky, salty, and absolutely delicious to her. Noelle opened her mouth and took his thickness in. Jack swore harshly as the feeling of her lips and tongue suctioning him almost brought him to his knees. He mentally counted backwards starting from one hundred as she took him deeper still. Instinctively his hands came up to gently grip her head and guide her. What she couldn't fit into her mouth, she stroked up and down with her hands. More of his nectar appeared, and she eagerly swallowed; swirling her tongue round and round as if she were licking a lollipop. Jack groaned and started to push his hips forward while gripping her head tighter. She hollowed her cheeks and drew her mouth up and down. “Mmmmmmm....”

Jack was about to lose it as the sound vibrated around his dick. He felt a tightening in his balls and the blood roared through his ears. *Don't cum, don't cum* he chanted in his head. The sight of her sucking his dick was the sexiest fucking thing he'd ever seen. Her eyes were closed and her expression was pure bliss, as if giving him a blow job was exactly what she wanted to be doing tonight. All of his senses were on overload, and he needed to feel her pussy on his cock right now. He pulled her back by her hair gently and stepped away, when her lips released him with a wet *pop*.

Jack quickly dropped back to his knees, in front of her, and yanked the shirt from her body. He gripped her waist and dragged her down so that she was now in his lap, legs draped

over his thighs. Her saturated pussy rubbed against his hardness, scorching him with her heat. He bit her nipple and licked away the sting. Noelle threw her head back and let out a low moan as she writhed in abandon as he enjoyed the view of her naked beauty while fighting a losing battle for control.

“I can’t be gentle right now, darlin’,” he warned harshly. “Are you sure you want to?” Jack watched as she dazedly nodded her head, her eyes stormy with need. “Then hold on tight.” She sat up and wrapped her arms around him, licking his ear and sending a jolt of desire up his spine.

Groaning, Jack gripped Noelle’s head and fed her hungry kisses while reaching between them to angle his cock at her opening. He stopped kissing her long enough to look down between them. *Beautiful*. The sight of their skin melding together, hers a dark bronze and his paler hue was so erotic to him. He plunged into her beautiful brown body and nothing had ever felt as perfect as her dripping tightness.

“Jesus, Noelle!” Jack breathed raggedly. Not an overly religious man, he prayed for control. “Your pussy’s fucking golden. Are you sure you can take this?” Jack wasn’t being cocky. His desire was an unleashed beast that couldn’t be reined in. There was none of the cool, calm, and collected lover that he was with other women. Noelle had officially ruined him for anyone else. He belonged to her and she to him as it should be.

Noelle sighed with pleasure into his mouth as her body adjusted to the heavy fullness throbbing inside of her. “More, Jack. I want more,” she pleaded; aching to be fucked by him. Knowing he wouldn’t be able to last long in this position, he pulled out and turned Noelle over on her knees to lie across the chaise. Turning her head back to look at him, she beseeched, “Take me, Jack. Please fuck me now!”

“Hold onto the other side and spread your knees wider,” Jack instructed urgently; shrugging his shirt off, while watching her sexy behind dip and roll. The rest of his clothes quickly followed. Waiting until Noelle did as instructed; he grabbed her hips, angled his cock, and thrust into her. Going balls deep, he proceeded to fuck her without mercy.

The purring noises Noelle made grew louder and louder as she threw her ass back to meet every powerful thrust, liquid pleasure running down her thighs. Sweat glistened on their bodies as they came together over and over again. Jack was working her over good, leaving no doubt that he owned her pussy. Their guttural sounds of pleasure filled the room, and the air was permeated with the musky scent of their lovemaking.

Jack leaned over her to grip the chaise, bracing himself as he moved deeper and deeper into her. He ran his tongue down her skin licking the beads of moisture from her back. *So. Good.* Grabbing her damp hair, he turned her head to access her mouth and bit the plump bottom lip, before slowly sucking it. His other hand slid between her slick legs to capture her swollen clit in his fingers, stroking it in time to his thrusts. Noelle broke the kiss crying aloud at the unbearable pleasure she was receiving, shuddering as tiny ripples started in her toes and spread up.

“Does my baby need more?” Jack asked in her ear while tugging gently on her clit, before smacking it lightly. The orgasmic waves were tsunami-sized as they crashed over her body and swept her away in an all-consuming climax. Noelle was drowning in sensation, as her orgasm went on and on causing her to jerk back against him uncontrollably. Being with Jack was unlike anything she’d ever imagined, far surpassing her wildest fantasies. The pleasure pain her throbbing pussy was receiving from him was an exquisite

torture that she was now addicted to. He handled her body like he'd always known it.

Every plunge through her swollen tissues rubbed her against the sumptuous velvet of the chaise, stimulating her already oversexed body. Jack's kisses were heady and addicting, and Noelle couldn't get enough of them. And his dick...Lord, his dick was her fucking kryptonite. She held on even tighter to the chaise as another orgasm swept her away. Jack's large hands moved to grip her hips tightly as he too caught the wave. With one last thrust, he stiffened as he spilled himself deep inside of her. "Holy shiiit!!" he groaned collapsing over her.

When they finally recovered, Jack carried Noelle into the master bath and drew a bubble bath in her gigantic tub. Noelle lit her Seda France candles then lay back against his muscled chest, cradled between his powerful thighs and allowed the warm water to soothe her deliciously aching body parts.

"Middle name?" she asked drowsily, tracing circles on his strong thighs that were covered in fine dark hair.

"Conall. Yours?" he whispered against her ear. She shivered and felt her nipples go hard as he traced the delicate shell with his tongue.

"Lynette. Birthday?" She could feel him hardening against her lower back. Anticipation was making her girly parts tingle again. Oh dear.

“May 15th. Yours is January 18th.” So his birthday had just passed, and he was a Taurus.

“Ooooh Happy Belated Birthday! Favorite food?” Sighing, Noelle leaned back to enjoy his ministrations. Jack played her body expertly, knowing exactly what and how she liked it before even she knew.

“A dish my ma would make. I’ve yet to find anyone who cooked it as perfectly as she did. Every Sunday after church she’d make it. My brothers and I would just inhale it. I haven’t had it like that in forever...” he trailed off. *Hmmm. Traditional and loyal good to know.*

“Is that her name tattooed on your arm?” Adorning his left arm was a beautifully done tattoo. It was the name “Moirra” with angel wings on both sides and a Celtic flag flying behind it. Across his back she’d discovered another tattoo that read “**Ní neart go cur le chéile.**” She certainly hoped it was his mother’s name, because jealousy had reared its ugly fat green head upon discovering the artwork and refused to go away, even though everyone is entitled to a past. *Please say yes. Please, please...*

“Aye.” And the way his deep southern voice took on an Irish lilt was too hot for words, she thought, smiling as the green-eyed monster disappeared. His firm lips were now trailing soft kisses down the side of her neck. Noelle tilted her head to the side to give him better access, and he rewarded her with a bite to the spot where her neck and shoulder connected, soothing the sting with a languid lick of his warm tongue; causing Noelle to grip his thighs as goosebumps spread over her body.

“And the ...one on...your back?” Noelle gasped as his lips wreaked havoc on her weak spots.

Jack paused his gentle assault to slide his hand in between her tender nether lips. His fingers rubbed against her swollen clit sensuously, jacking her pulse rate up even higher. “Strength in Unity”.

“F-Favorite color? Mine is J-jade g-g-green,” she stuttered, finding it hard to catch her breath and form a sentence. His mouth was back to working overtime on her neck; one hand was cupping her heavy breast, teasing the swollen peak by squeezing and pinching it; while his other hand...God bless his multi-tasking skills.

“I like brown, darlin’. Not just any shade of brown either. Nope; my favorite brown is the color of your skin, all rich and shimmery like brown sugar; you’ve got me wanting to taste every inch of it.” His words sent Noelle over the edge as he increased his motions tenfold, and she rode his fingers with her hands gripping his thighs tightly for stability. Water sloshed over the edge of the tub as she succumbed to the powerful orgasm, bucking uncontrollably and mewling like a kitten.

Jesus, he was going to kill her. When Noelle could finally catch her breath, she fell back against him relaxed and sated. Jack laughed silently, aware of the effect he was having on her. Judging by his rock-hard penis that felt like a sharp knife trying to pierce her back, the feeling was mutual.

“Stand up, love. We’re not done yet,” he urged; and though she was tired, Noelle did because her body was no longer hers to command. She felt something cool slide down her back, and the scent of her favorite lavender and citrus bath wash filled the air. She moaned in ecstasy as Jack gently nibbled on her

booty as he bathed her. The torture of having his skilled hands and lips caress her body was exquisite. When he rinsed her, she tried to turn and face him, but he stopped her by holding her hips firmly.

“Noelle, do you trust me?” She didn’t hesitate to nod her head yes. “Brace yourself against the wall and spread your legs slightly, darlin’.” Jack trailed a finger between her full cheeks, causing goose bumps to spread over her body as she assumed the position. “I wanna taste you again. Will you let me, sweet Noelle?” His deep southern voice was like dark thunder; desire threaded through it. He cupped her bottom and gently spread her cheeks, blowing cool air on her private areas and she shivered. Her pussy clenched in response. “Can I, Noelle?”

And just like that, the girl who’d once been accused of being an uptight prude was deliciously rimmed by Jack Sullivan’s masterful tongue. Noelle found herself bending over until she was gripping the sides of the tub with her shaky legs spread as far as they could go as he finger-fucked her pussy and frenched her star. The sinful decadence of the taboo act and his superb skills brought her to an earth shattering climax that left her quaking and once again, gasping for breath. With an arm around her waist to steady her, Jack rose up behind her and helped her out of the tub.

Noelle sat on the toilet drunkenly as Jack dried her. Through the entire process, she couldn’t take her eyes off of his dick, swaying with his every movement and hypnotizing her. It looked so red and painful in its aroused state that she felt a surge of empowerment knowing that she was the cause. He caught her looking and gave her a sexy wink.

Noelle blushed but wasn’t ashamed to be caught looking. Slyly she said, “I think my new favorite color is red.” Jack shook his head and laughed at her. When he was finished

drying her, Noelle returned the favor. Taking her time to trail kisses down his spine and laugh with delight when she bit one of his firm buttocks and he clenched them tightly. She ran her hands sans towel all over his heavily muscled body licking up droplets of water everywhere; but he refused to let her touch him *THERE*.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, sugar, if you put those sexy lips on me again,” Jack said kissing away her pout and leading her to the queen size bed where he tucked her in. Leaning down, he gave her a heart stopping smile before gently kissing her forehead and getting dressed under her admiring eyes.

“Jack, wait! I just realized we didn’t use any protection,” Noelle said, her voice slightly panicked as she sat up in bed. How dumb could she be?! A wave of horrified embarrassment mixed with shame swept through her. “I’m on the pill, and my last OBGYN appointment was three weeks ago. I got tested, and I swear I’m clean.”

Jack gave her a serious look. “That’s good to know. I’ve never had unprotected sex before tonight, but if it will reassure you, I can get tested.”

Jack didn’t add that it wasn’t important, because once they were married, he planned to stay married; so using no protection wasn’t a big deal to him. The sooner he could knock her up the better.

ASSHOLE! His conscience screamed but he pushed it to the back of his mind.

“Jack, have you ever been in an interracial relationship?” Noelle asked curiously, her eyes dropping to the sky-blue eyelet duvet cover as she plucked at the pattern absentmindedly. “I mean, I know you want to help me out; and

trust me I appreciate you doing it, but are you sure that this is the right course-”

“Look at me.” Noelle’s head snapped up at Jack’s hard tone. The savageness in his hazel eyes made her want to draw the sheet around her protectively. “If someone expresses their opinion to you on us; a matter that doesn’t concern them anyway, please bring it to my attention. Do you understand?”

Jack’s tone implied that he would welcome anyone stupid enough to try. Speechless, Noelle nodded her head in acquiescence as he continued. “I will never let anyone hurt you or come between us. As my wife, you will be shown the utmost respect. I know we live in a world that likes to think it’s far more progressive than it actually is, and yes racism unfortunately still exists; but you need to understand my background to know the color of your beautiful skin matters to me only because I can’t get enough of seeing and touching *you*.”

Noelle blushed at his words. “That’s good to know, and thank you for the compliment. I just had to know; when you’re a person of color, the world *does* see you differently. Hell, even as well-liked and popular as Daddy is, the ton of racist hate mail he receives is mind-blowing. It certainly makes me hyper-aware of how unkind the world can be.”

You should try being the son of Patrick Sullivan, Jack thought to himself, even as he gave her a reassuring smile. Stiffening slightly, he said, “I’m not worried in the least; are you? About being associated with a white guy?”

Noelle heard the challenge in his tone and threw him a speculative look. “I’m more worried about being tied to someone so good-looking and all the drama it will bring from the ladies than his being white.”

Jack felt the tension ease from him and flashed a smile. “Let that be the least of your worries, darlin’. As long as I want you, whoever wants me isn’t even a factor. It’s time for me to go. I hope tonight showed you how compatible we are. I’ve told you I want to pursue all aspects of marriage, but I give you my word that we won’t sleep together unless you come to me and say that’s what you want too. I do want to warn you that I won’t stop touching you unless you tell me to stop.” His hooded gaze ran over like a caress and her nipples pebbled underneath the covers in response. “I promise you won’t regret marrying me. Meet me at City Hall, Monday morning at eight sharp. I’ll lock up behind me. Sweet dreams, Noelle,” Jack said kindly.

After he left, Noelle slid under the covers, exhausted and dazed. “I can’t really marry him can I? It’s such a crazy idea. I’ll tell him no tomorrow.”

Noelle yawned and started to drift off to sleep, knowing she wouldn’t tell him no. *Damn Jackson Conall Sullivan and his Svengali-like hold on me*, was her last thought.

Chapter Nine

Friday afternoon, Noelle was waiting patiently for her two closest friends to arrive at the Crabby Shack in Brooklyn. It was one of their favorite spots to eat because the food was simple and fresh. Since she arrived first, she placed their usual order of Alaskan snow crab and spicy steamed shrimp with corn and potatoes for sides.

While waiting, she allowed herself to drift back to her evening with Jack. Noelle was so lost in her reverie that she didn’t

notice the tall, dark beauty heading her way. She gave a small shriek when Sidra Barton plopped down in front of her, causing her friend to give her a quizzical stare.

“Hey, babe. Everything ok? You were really zoning out there for a minute,” Sidra’s voice sounded a lot like Alicia Keys and always had the opposite sex hanging on her every word; even when she was telling them to kiss her ass. It worked well with her striking looks. Skin the color of milk chocolate complimented her perfectly symmetrical features in an oval face that was framed by a shoulder length bob of jet black curls laced with streaks of indigo and dark purple streaks. She had wide whiskey colored eyes with short thick lashes. Her eyebrows and cheeks were high delicate arches, and her mouth was a perfect full bow. A delicate, pointed chin rounded out her ethereal appearance. Sidra’s body was lean and lightly muscled with high perky breasts and a well-toned ass. Already standing at five feet nine inches, she absolutely adored high heels and dressed like she just stepped off of a rocker chic runway.

Women envied her, and men wanted to be with her; but behind the vibrant personality and looks was one of the sharpest minds and tongues Noelle knew. Sidra was their high school valedictorian and graduated college Suma Cum Laude from Cornell University. Although she currently worked with *R.R. & S. Public Relations* in what she called the “Wining and Dining” department, Sidra was making a name for herself in the world of dee-jaying; a skill that she honed to perfection in college to pay for her expenses; because unlike Avery and Noelle, she didn’t come from money but was granted a full ride to the fifteen colleges she applied to.

“No, just thinking about some things going on at work. What’s up with you, babe?” Noelle gave her friend a smile. Today Sidra was wearing acid washed skinny jeans, paired with a white muscle t-shirt with the words ‘Wild Child’ scribbled

across the front. Her hair was in huge rolled curls and oversized black sunglasses pushed them away from her face while red and black bangles adorned her wrists. Noelle glanced down; admiring the four-inch, red stilettos on Sidra's feet.

“Well the firm just took on two more clients. One of them is Dominick Harris; you know, the indie rocker with all the tattoos? I met him the other day, and the man is sexy as all get out in person, girl. I invited him to attend a firm event in D.C. next week. He looks like the kind of guy who'd show you a good time. Want me to hook you up? I know it's been a minute on your maintenance, mama,” Sidra said with a devilish smile on her fire engine red lips as she reached for her glass of iced lemonade.

Noelle coughed, feeling color creeping up her cheeks. Sidra put the glass down with a thud causing a little bit of the tart beverage to splash onto the table. “Oh. Hell. No. You look just like Sylvester when he swallows Tweety Bird! You got some didn't you?”

“Got some of what?” A soft polished voice asked from behind Noelle. *Saved by the bell*. She looked up to find their other bestie Avery Monroe standing by the table. She gave Sidra a light smack with her oversized flower printed clutch, and received an irritated look for her action, before Sidra scooted over. Avery slid in and kissed her cheek while grabbing Noelle's hand and giving it a warm squeeze.

“Sorry, doll. You know I love you, but the thought of sitting across from you as you inhale food like its air and not gain a pound is depressing; especially to someone who only has to *think* about food and five pounds appears on *each* hip,” Avery said with a warm smile, ignoring the frowns she received from her friends.

Standing at five feet-two inches tall, Avery was the smallest in height of the group, but not in size. She was a size twelve; and to hear men say it, built like a “brick shit mansion” with curves for days. Her large, firm full breasts, small waist with ample hips, and rounded ass made Nicki Minaj look like Olive Oil.

In high school and college, Avery had been obsessed with reduction surgeries, and she'd only worn oversized clothes that made her look dumpy as not draw attention to her body. Eventually she started to accept her body shape and embraced a very feminine, classic modern look with full midi skirts and dresses. While her friends were model striking, Avery was pretty and became more so the longer you were in her company.

If you weren't initially distracted by Avery's body, then it was her smile that drew you in. She had a wide, generous mouth, and her whole face lit up when she blessed you with that dazzling smile. It made you notice how her large dark brown eyes sparkled with gold flecks and high cheekbones glinted in her upside down triangle- shaped face. Her copper skin glowed and was only enhanced by her long dark brown wavy tresses. She was a genuinely friendly, kind, and caring person, without a mean bone in her body.

Men usually missed all of these wonderful attributes since they were too busy trying to get to know her from the neck down; and by the time it dawned on them that there was more to her than just a sexy body, there was a hand in their face before she graced them with a complimentary view of her thick backside while she walked away from them.

Although Avery had grown resigned to the fact that her curves weren't going anywhere, she tried to keep them under control. While Noelle liked to run and do Pilates and Sidra liked kickboxing, Avery hated to exercise; so instead she dieted; obsessively. She'd tried them all and was always on the lookout for the latest fad.

“Well dish, honey. Don't leave us hanging,” Avery urged in her soft voice. “I wasn't aware you met anyone new.”

Noelle cleared her throat as they started to eat. “Nothing's going on; and no, I haven't met anyone new. How's Pierce doing? Does he like his new job, Ave?” She was referring to Pierce Wesley, Avery's boyfriend. There was silence at the table, and Avery looked up to find both of her friends staring at her as if she'd grown a third eye.

Suddenly Sidra pointed the crab leg she was trying to crack open dangerously close to Noelle's face, making her jerk back. “Uh-uh. See that right there? Humph. That's the kind of shit that lets us know you're holding out. Avery knows we don't give two shits about her “stick up his ass, name droppin', social climbing-”

Avery interrupted her before she really got started.

“WOW. Really??? That's how you guys really feel about the first guy that's not trying to get in my pants?” Avery was pissed. “Pierce is a really sweet guy who happens to be a complete gentleman. I like the fact that when we're together, it doesn't feel like I'm wrestling an octopus all damn night!” she hissed to Sidra, who just rolled her eyes in response.

Noelle attempted to soothe her ruffled feathers. “Calm down, Avery. We didn’t say that we disliked him.” Although if she were honest with herself; she did find Pierce Wesley to be very shallow. He seemed to be more interested in the fact that Avery’s family name could be traced back to the Mayflower than Avery herself.

Sidra snorted rudely and turned in the booth to give Avery a hard stare. “Well, I’m saying it. I don’t like him, and I think you can do way better. Since I’m already going there, you need to get over this obsession with your body and eat some damn food! Look at your plate! You have three shrimp and a child-size serving of corn and potatoes. Last I checked, this place didn’t serve kids meals; and *you* sure ain’t a damn kid! You are a fine, full-figured, bodacious woman that needs to accept it; move on from Pierce; and find a real man that will work you over so good in bed that you won’t need to worry about dieting. Or, you can just take your big apple bottom to the gym with me and Noelle.”

Noelle held her breath as she watched Avery’s hands clench and her left eyebrow twitch. Sidra was the type to bust your balls and call it a day. Noelle just went with the flow until she could no longer. But Avery, although well-mannered and ladylike, had a terrible temper. Slowly, she turned to face the expectant Sidra and took a deep breath.

“Why don’t you save the ball-busting for the men who are interested in you? You know, the ones you go all ‘Solange in an elevator’ with if you feel like there’s a chance you might like them? Why don’t you give someone a chance to know your beautiful, kind heart? It’s because deep down inside you know you’re scared of being rejected.” Avery countered sharply. “Please don’t act like I’m the only person in this booth with scars.”

Sidra looked like she was going to stab Avery with the crab claw she was gripping so tightly in her hand. Avery raised an eyebrow as if to say ‘I wish you would’ The restaurant grew quiet, and the manager nervously had her hand on her phone ready to dial 9-1-1. Noelle knew they didn’t know that Sidra and Avery loved each other fiercely and would turn on them in a heartbeat if they tried to jump in and assist. But the topics being discussed were too close to their hearts for hurt feelings not to be involved; so she did the only thing she could do to distract them.

“Guess what? I slept with Jack Sullivan and we’re getting married. Surprise!” Noelle said brightly, taking in their shocked open-mouthed expressions as they turned to her. Well at least they weren’t arguing anymore...

Chapter Ten

Jack stood looking out the window of his office, not seeing the perfect, cloudless blue sky. Normally he could appreciate the view of the Manhattan skyline, but not today. Today he couldn’t function because victory was within his grasp. He’d had a taste of Noelle; and the reality was so much better than his fantasies, changing everything he thought he knew about sex.

He wasn’t a prude but Jack didn’t partake in pussy-eating with every female he slept with either. But with Noelle, he couldn’t get enough of her taste and wanted to stay buried between those silky thighs forever, lapping up her cream. He’d almost come just from her exploding in his mouth. Then the feel of those pillow soft lips inhaling him, and her silken tightness clenching around his cock...*Jesus*. All he could think about was her touch, taste, and the way she looked when he fucked

her. So yes, the reality was better than the fantasy; but it was also worse because he couldn't think of anything but her. Nothing was getting accomplished today; that was for sure.

The ring of his cell phone shook Jack out of his reverie. He pulled it out of his pocket and glanced down to see it was his middle brother Darby returning his call. Earlier he'd called and had to leave a message on his new sarcastic voicemail.

“You’ve reached Jackson Sullivan’s Pussy Delivering Service. If you are a damsel currently associated with my big brother and in distress, please leave your name, phone number, and address so that I may drop whatever the hell it is that I’m doing to come assist you and take you wherever you need to go. That’s right folks; damn how important my shit is I am here for YOU. Y’all have a nice day now.”

He pressed the accept button with a smile. “Still got your panties in a bunch, lil bro?”

There was a slight pause before Darby gave a low chuckle. “I don’t, but pretty, little Ms. Inez does. She was lookin’ to blow off a little steam from the pageant scandal and was pissed that yours truly wouldn’t oblige due to your “No Involvement with Clients” policy; which to me totally contradicts the “Keep Them Happy” policy. It’s a fine line to walk, ya know? I mean, I’d hate to be the one to put your firm’s spotless reputation at risk because of a *dissatisfied* client....”

Jack clenched the phone but remained silent, refusing to take the bait. Growing up, Darby loved to push people’s limits and was pretty good at it; but Jack refused to be pushed. All he had to do was remain silent and Darby would eventually tip his hand. The silence stretched, two minutes passing. Jack picked up the framed picture on his desk of him, Darby, and Casey; taken the last time he was home. Just looking at it made him

smile. He and his brothers were as close as could be and would die for each other; if shit went down, they would always have each other's backs.

Jack also knew that on the other end of the phone, Darby would be wearing that maddening grin while he waited for him to respond. Casey and Darby were like oil and water; and it took very little for Case to fly off the handle with him. But not Jack. By the time he was four, he'd perfected the waiting game; hiding quietly for hours when Patrick Sullivan was on one of his drunken rants. Three more minutes passed; and after seeing he wouldn't be getting the rise out of his older brother that he was looking for, Darby gave a sigh. "Well lucky for you I found a solution where your firm and its client came to a... ahem...mutual satisfaction solution."

"And what pray tell was that?" Jack's extremely polite tone was the only indication that he was not as calm as he would have his brother think. Darby chuckled again, and this time it had a little evil twist to it.

"Nothing, Jackie." Darby said using his childhood nickname. "We had a nice drive down to Baymoor, Maryland. That town is really pretty, almost putting ours to shame. It was pretty quiet though; so I had to find ways to keep myself busy until Eli got there." That last part was said almost too innocently. "Anyhow, enough about me. What's goin' on?"

Still suspicious of Darby's seemingly innocent remarks, Jack decided to give Inez a call later and do some backup damage control because he knew his brother too damn well. A childhood image popped into his head.

"Darby Liam Sullivan! I know ya ate the brownies for the church picnic. You've still got the chocolate smeared around

yer mouth!” Moira Sullivan scolded furiously as she hurriedly wiped his face clean.

“It wasn’t me, Ma! I swear it!” Darby insisted dramatically, which earned him a plucking from his mother. “Ow! What was that for?” he asked rubbing his ear as Jack and Casey struggled to hold in their laughter.

“Oh ya swear do ye? Fer shame, looking me in the eye and lying right to m’ face! Yer never going to get to Heaven’s pearly gates being full of blarney, Darby Liam Sullivan! Jackie, help yer brother to get cleaned up. I see Father Vincenzo talking to yer Da. Oh Lord...be quick about it!”

Jack blinked away the memory. “I called because I need you and Casey to come to New York. I’m getting married, and I’d like for you guys to stand up with me,” he said nonchalantly. His statement was met with silence. For once, his smart ass brother was speechless. “Darby? You still there, bro?”

“Hold up just a damn minute!! Did I just hear you say married?!” Darby shouted incredulously.

Jack smiled, pleased to finally get a rise out of him. “Yes, I’m getting married to Noelle Kramer on Monday so-”

Darby interrupted him “Wait a minute. Isn’t that Ian’s goddaughter?” he asked sharply. Before Jack could answer, Darby continued on. “Does he know about that? She’s that fine ass filly with the pretty gray eyes and banging body?” He gave a long wolf whistle. “I ain’t mad atcha, brother. Seen a pic last time I was in Ian’s office and thought about taking it along on one of my breaks to the bath-” This time he was interrupted.

“Careful, Darby. That’s my soon-to-be wife that you’re talking about,” Jack said in a tone that promised deadly repercussions for his brother if he didn’t shut his mouth.

“So it’s like that huh? Well let me hurry up and catch the next flight out. I can’t wait to greet my sister-in-law all nice and proper like,” Darby said lasciviously.

“Piece by piece I’m going to take you apart, Darby,” Jack vowed solemnly, and his brother hooted with laughter before hanging up. He called Casey and left him a message regarding weekend plans, before replaying the voicemail Noelle had left for him earlier.

“Hey, it’s Noelle. Soooo... remember that thing about keeping this private for our friends? Well I kind of let it slip to Sidra and Avery; and to make a long story short, they want us to celebrate with them tomorrow. I just don’t think I’m going to be able to keep them away from City Hall either. So I figured tomorrow is as good a start as any for us to be seen in public right? We’re doing the charity fundraiser at the Blue River Country Club, and I would love it if you could make it. Sorry about the short notice. Starts at seven p.m. so don’t leave a girl hanging, ok? Bye.”

Just the sound of her low, melodic voice got him hard. Of course he would make it. Nothing and no one was going to keep him away from her.

He wasn't going to show, Noelle thought despondently. It was now seven forty-five in the evening, and the event was in full swing. It was a fundraiser to raise awareness for hungry children in America. According to the chairwoman of the foundation, *On a Whim* had done a fabulous job with the *Take Me to Thailand* theme, and she couldn't thank them enough. As soon as she walked away, Noelle and Avery did a discreet fist bump which was their ladylike way of jumping up and down for joy.

They'd transformed the club into a lush, tropical paradise filled with various types of floral arrangements that included orchids, hibiscus, lilies, bougainvillea, and the country's national flower, Ratchaphruek. Candles were placed in the middle of huge lily pads that floated in the enormous pool. Two large golden Buddha statues were placed at each end of the pool; a perfect complement to the sleek, white modern furniture. The servers were dressed in authentic *Chut Thai*, the formal national Thai costume; and the soft background music was a mixture of *Bong Lang*, the traditional northeastern music of Thailand and *Luktung*, Thai country music. As a thank you gift, guests in attendance would receive lanterns to write messages or sentiments on and release into the air at the end of the night.

"Stop with the sad face," Sidra ordered crisply from behind her. "You are looking way too good to be sitting on the sidelines. That man should be horsewhipped for standing you up."

Noelle winced and rolled her eyes before turning to smile at her friend who was on point in a tropical print fuchsia Diane Von Furstenberg wrap dress. Her hair was flat-ironed into a sleek bob, and the silver strappy stilettos on her feet were a sexy contrast to her chocolate skin. "Nobody's sad, doll. Just maybe a...little disappointed. Besides, it was a last minute

invitation anyway.” Sidra rolled her eyes at Noelle’s lame excuse.

“Noelle, you can’t fool me,” she said bluntly. “Besides, I’m still mad at you for dropping that little bomb yesterday. Are you sure about this? I mean you can’t even rely on him to be here for this event,” Sidra shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I like Jack. He’s cool and a great boss; but you’re my girl, and I hate the fact that you’re here looking like a million bucks, but feeling like someone just died!”

Noelle flushed. It was true; she *had* dressed with Jack in mind. The navy blue satin crop top she wore was sleeveless, with a plunging neckline that showed a tasteful, yet teasing amount of cleavage that just came in under ladylike. Her full, knee-length skirt was white with an intricate pattern of fuchsia, navy, and light blue feathers splashed throughout. White heels completed the look. She wore diamond studs in her ears; a delicate silver chain that lay against her collar bone; and a silver and diamond cuff on one wrist. Her hair was a heavy curtain of black waves flowing around her shoulders.

Noelle was about to deny Sidra’s claim; but a movement over her friend’s shoulder caught her eye, and any protest she was going to voice died in her throat. Jack had just entered the pool area and was busy scanning the area while nodding and shaking hands with people he knew. Noelle noticed the whole time he conversed with those around him, he never stopped looking around. *For her*, she realized with satisfaction. His eyes finally met hers, and Jack offered a private smile that made Noelle’s heart do triple somersaults as she smiled back.

Sidra turned to look behind her. “Well, I guess I’ll just cross him off of my shit list. Damn, that man looks at you the way I look at bacon. How the hell did I ever miss that?” She turned to look at Noelle who was still staring at Jack with a goofy

smile. “You are so far gone. Just keep in mind that you have to think of relationships in terms of shopping at Sephora. Is he the kind of man who’ll have you running to replace your lip gloss? Or is he a jerk that’ll have you replacing your mascara?”

Noelle watched Jack’s confident swagger as he strolled towards her and people quickly got out of his way. She noticed plenty of women and even a few men were feeling him; but he only had eyes for her, Noelle Kramer. It was hard to do but, she pulled herself away from his hypnotic gaze to glance at Sidra. They smiled at each other before saying simultaneously: “Lip gloss.”

Jack reached them, his eyes still focused on Noelle. He passed Sidra, acknowledging her presence with a murmured “Hey, Sid”; and pulled Noelle into his arms. His mouth slanted across hers assertively. The kiss was brief but sweet with a tease of tongue action, and Noelle clung to his jacket lapels, wanting to devour him. His eyes gleamed with promise as he pressed his forehead to hers.

“Sorry I’m late. My brothers decided to fly in tonight, and they insisted on coming with me.” Jack brought his lips down to Noelle’s again; and she opened up, allowing him to explore her mouth as she pressed her body closer to his; needing to feel more of him. The hardness pressing into her midsection let her know he was just as affected as she was. He cleared his throat and stepped back but kept an arm around her waist possessively. “Forgive me?”

“Of course. Where are they? I’m dying to meet them.” Noelle wanted to ask him how much they knew about their arrangement but knew now wasn’t the time.

Beside them, Sidra interrupted sarcastically. “Ummm...hi, Jack. Nice to see you too. How am I doing? Why I’m doing just fine and you?” Jack gave her an apologetic grin and opened his mouth to apologize, but Sidra’s gaze sharpened, and she threw her hand up at him.

“Wait a minute. Did you just say that your brothers were here? As in plural?” She asked suspiciously.

Jack grinned and winked at her. “Yes, both of them are here. Please play nice with Casey. I think maybe you guys just got off on the wrong foot, and I’m sure he’d love the chance to smooth things over with you.”

Noelle looked behind Sidra as she gave a groan to see two extremely handsome men were coming their way and drawing a great deal of attention. Both were equally good-looking but complete opposites of each other. The broader and taller of the two had dark, wavy auburn hair. His strong jawline was covered in a neatly-trimmed beard. With dark green eyes, a straight nose, and sensually full lips, he looked like a bottle of sin served straight up. He stood at about six feet-eight inches, and Noelle could tell that underneath his well-cut suit, he was heavily muscled. Although the suit was supposed to make him look gentrified, she could feel his wildness itching to get out. No one had to tell her he was an untamable heartbreaker; the wink he gave her confirmed it.

The other man was leaner and about six feet-four inches, and... well...beautiful. There really was no other way to describe him. His dirty blonde hair was short on the sides but longer on top. It was tousled as if some lucky woman had the pleasure of running her fingers through it. Thick, straight, dark brows framed his sleepy-looking hazel eyes with long dark lashes that curled at the ends. His runway-model looks boasted high cheekbones and square jaw faintly covered in stubble,

and his mouth was full, soft looking and kissable. Where the other man was pure testosterone, this one was angelic.

Noelle gave her friend a warning look to hopefully stop what she suspected was coming next, but Sidra was off and running. “I sincerely doubt that, Jack. Don’t get me wrong; Darby is cool as hell, but that other one? I like dealing with him as much as I like dealing with the stomach flu. I know he’s your family and all, but he walks around like he’s got one of my Louboutin’s stuck up his ass.”

At that, the bigger of the two men threw his head back and gave a booming laugh, causing Sidra to jump and turn around. The other one’s eyes were shards of ice as he stared at her with disdain. To her credit, Sidra didn’t flinch; she just smiled sweetly at him before turning back to Jack. “Add sneaky to my list.”

“Oh Ms. Sidra, it’s always a pleasure to see you. Gimme some sugar, darlin’.” The laughing giant got himself under control and opened his huge arms which Sidra went into with a genuine smile; completely ignoring the other man whose death glare remained trained on her. Finally, he spoke to the back of Sidra’s head as she remained cuddled in Darby’s embrace.

“Sidra, don’t you look like the epitome of class? Pity the illusion is ruined when you open your mouth,” he said disparagingly in a low southern drawl.

Noelle gasped, and Jack stepped forward with a frown on his face. The other man holding Sidra gave him a dirty look. “I think your mama raised you to have better manners than that, Casey.”

Casey replied, “You’re right, man.” Then he turned a dazzling smile on Noelle. “Ms. Noelle, I’m Casey Sullivan; and I’m absolutely delighted to meet you. Please forgive me for pointing out that your friend has no class.”

Before Jack and Darby could jump on him further, Sidra stepped out of Darby’s arms to look up and meet Casey’s glare, dead in the eye. “Casey, what an unpleasant surprise. I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight. Love your suit. It complements the blackness of your soul.” She turned her back to him again. “I’ll catch up with you guys later. Darby, we have to kick it before you leave okay? Ciao.”

Sidra walked away, leaving them to watch her fierce strut as she disappeared into the crowd. Casey’s jaw was clenched and his cheeks were stained red. He looked like a beautiful avenging angel about to smite the path that Sidra was walking.

Darby continued to look amused as Noelle and Jack looked at each other in bemusement. They both knew Sidra never backed down from a confrontation, and Jack was amused because Casey never had problems with the opposite sex. This was a first for both of them.

Clearing her throat, Noelle addressed both gentlemen. “Hi, I’m Noelle Kramer. It’s very nice to meet you both.” Jack squeezed her waist and gave her a raised eyebrow when she looked at him. “I’m also your brother’s fiancée.” Jack winked at her, and she felt heat creep up her face as the brothers smirked knowingly at them.

“Damn, you’ve got it bad, Jackie! Well Ms. Noelle, I’m Darby Sullivan, and it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Don’t just stand there; let me give you a hug to welcome you nice and proper-like to the family.” Darby opened his arms again with a friendly smile. But when Noelle moved to hug him, she

found herself bound to Jack's side, his arm a steel band around her waist.

She gave him a look that said *really?* But he was too busy glaring at Darby. "Piece by piece," he promised his brother who smiled back innocently at him.

"Christ, Darby; you know you're bad when your own brother won't trust you with his woman. Ms. Noelle, welcome to the family," Casey finished smoothly, giving her a warm smile. Unlike his brother, he didn't attempt to touch her.

"Thank you both very much. What do you say we go mingle and enjoy ourselves?" Noelle suggested. She muttered to Jack under her breath, "I know I could really use a stiff drink." It was going to be a really loooong weekend if the drama between Sidra and Casey escalated.

Before they could leave, Avery rushed up to them, a vision in a coral colored maxi dress that skimmed her voluptuous curves. Her hair was piled atop her head in a chic topknot; and around her neck, complementing her generous cleavage, was a gold multi-layered necklace with tiny gemstones weaved throughout.

"Hey guys. What's wrong with Sidra?" she asked concernedly, reaching up to kiss both Jack's and Noelle's cheeks. "I said hi to her, and she walked right passed me. One of her exes didn't show up did they? I triple-checked that list myself; and if that's the case, keep her away from the utensils and anything flammable." Suddenly Avery became aware of the two men standing there; two *very attractive* men. Smiling brightly at them she said, "Oh my, sorry I didn't mean to interrupt."

Casey gave her a slow smile that caused her to blink owlishly at him, while Darby nodded his head at her politely. Jack raised an eyebrow as he caught his loud-mouthed, shit-stirring, smooth-talking brother's eye. There wasn't enough money in the world to *pay* Darby to be quiet about anything. That he was strangely silent in the presence of a woman was unheard of. Darby never missed an opportunity to flirt with a woman. Short, tall, fat, skinny, young, old, pretty or ugly, he simply didn't discriminate.

"Avery, I'd like you to meet my brothers, Casey and Darby Sullivan," Jack said. Noelle grinned at her friend as her head swung back and forth like a pendulum between the brothers before she turned a wide-eyed gaze to Noelle.

"All of this hotness in one family? Is that even legal?" Avery shook her head dazedly as Casey and Jack laughed. Darby just continued to stare at her intently, causing her to blush profusely.

"The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Avery," Darby murmured and Noelle thought Avery would have an orgasm on the spot. She certainly wouldn't blame her. The Sullivan brothers with their good looks and southern charm were detrimental to a girl's libido.

"Jack Sullivan, you are so forgiven for stealing our girl away; but not for hiding your good-looking brothers," Avery said flirtatiously as she gave a melodramatic sigh and pressed a hand to her bosom. Noelle noticed how Darby's eyes followed her hand. She caught Jack's smirk; and before he could tease Darby, Noelle grabbed his hand. "Come on guys, let's mingle," she said leading him away.

Chapter Eleven

The rest of the evening progressed smoothly, especially with Casey and Sidra studiously avoiding each other. The group dined on a variety of wonderful dishes Noelle had selected such pork vindaloo, curried duck fritters, steamed mussels in lemongrass, and assorted grilled meats in Thai spices. Next was a performance by traditionally-dressed dancers performing in Lakhon, the graceful, sensual, and fluid dance that portrayed different emotions. Noelle, who was wrapped in Jack's arms, noticed that Darby's eyes followed Avery as she swayed along with the music. She also noticed Sidra glaring at Casey, who was ignoring a group of women who were attempting to get his attention as he watched the dancers.

"I think one brother likes my friend and the other one isn't safe around my other friend. What do you think?" Noelle said wryly, twisting her head back to look up at Jack. He smiled looking down into her large gray eyes. *I could stare at her for the rest of my life*, he thought, tightening his arms around her and looking at his brothers and her friends.

"I think that I'm having the best time that I've had in a long time, so I won't worry about them and neither should you. I know it's short notice, but after we get married, I'd like for us to go away for a week. Can you spare a little time off from work? I want to take you to my hometown if you can, okay?" he asked in a low undertone before giving her a kiss on the side of her forehead. Jack pretended not to notice the way his brothers smirked at him and wondered if Noelle thought he was a creeper because he couldn't stop touching her. Although she always looked great to him, tonight she was glowing, and the men in attendance were definitely taking notice. Several times tonight he'd stared down every man attempting to catch her gaze, ready to beat the shit out of them on a moment's notice. Subconsciously he pulled her impossibly closer.

Noelle smiled and nodded her head in agreement to his suggestion. Being in Jack's arms, enclosed by his strength and the masculine scent of his cologne, was nothing short of heaven to her and she would have agreed to anything. Not to mention, that he recognized that she was a business owner and as such respected that enough to be considerate enough to ask, not demand, anything of her. At the end of the night everyone received a lantern to write a message on. Noelle quickly wrote her message and noticed Jack appeared to be deep in thought before finally writing on his lantern. Then hand in hand, they went to stand with everyone else and released their lanterns into the sky.

Saturday morning Jack was in his master bath contemplating shaving. Last night when they walked the ladies to their cars, he'd pulled Noelle close, nuzzling her neck and breathing her scent in. She'd laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck, at first complaining that his shadow was scratchy. She then sighed and ran her fingers through the longer hair at his nape causing bolts of desire to run up and down his spine.

“You don't like it? It'll be gone tomorrow,” he promised, dropping a kiss on her nose. Noelle's eyes were filled with lust, as her fingers lightly scratched his scalp. Jack looked down her top to see her amazing breasts cupped by some frilly bra that was the same color as her skin tone. His hands itched to pull the front of her top down and bury his face in her cleavage. “I don't believe I mentioned how beautiful you look.” He leaned close to her ear, licking her lobe sensuously and whispered huskily, “You're wearing the hell out of this outfit.”

“Well thank you; and on the contrary, I find this look to be quite sexy on you,” she said breathless at the hungry look in his eyes that was making her nipples ache to be suckled by his warm, wet mouth. Noelle licked her lips as his heavy-lidded gaze fell to her chest.

“I aim to please, ma’am,” he growled, leaning forward to trail soft kisses along her jaw, causing her fingers to grip his hair more aggressively. Jack felt his eyes roll back in his head with pleasure. Christ, she had him so whipped; it was scary and didn’t his brothers just know it...

“Shit Jackie, did you just purr like a cat?” Casey asked incredulously before he and Darby started cracking up.

“Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit! Our big bro’s got it bad, huh, Case?” Darby teased mercilessly, laughing even harder as Jack turned red and gave him the finger.

Noelle tried to stifle a pleased smirk at the slow flush creeping up his cheeks. “I think I’ll say goodnight now.” He watched as she walked to the car her hips swinging enticingly, silently calling his name. Jack shoved his fists in his pocket and willed himself not to follow her home.

Casey came in and sat down on his bed, and Jack shook his head at his brother’s perfect appearance. Even as a child Casey, could never look ruffled. He always looked as if he were airbrushed. Only Jack and Darby knew the turmoil his looks caused him. He was bullied first by their prick father who did it in public which kids picked up on. No one dared do it while his brothers were around; but when he was by himself, the other kids teased him cruelly.

It wasn't until Casey was in the seventh grade and shattered a senior named Grady Calhoun's jaw that people stopped fucking with him. Jack could stop conversation with a look. Darby's size was his weapon. But Casey had a rage that few people could comprehend. It was born from feeling helpless against a parent that loathed him and abandoned by the other that he loved more than life itself.

"You're up early. Somethin', or should I say someone, on your mind?" Jack asked with a small smile meeting his brother's stormy eyes in the mirror as he plugged in his electric razor.

Casey snorted. "Hell no. I'm just a light sleeper." He paused and looked down at his clenched hands.

Wait for it... Jack said to himself. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five...

"What's her deal anyway? I've only had two conversations with her, and most of it was just helpful advice on how she could improve her job performance," Casey burst out with a scowl. Although he didn't like the attention his looks brought him, the fact that someone from the opposite sex had been immune enough that she'd told him in no uncertain terms how he could exactly kiss her ass was baffling to him. From the minute he'd laid eyes on the dark-skinned beauty, he knew she was trouble. Her lips were just a little too pouty; eyes sparkling a little too brightly.

Casey's meeting was just getting underway when she'd strutted, not walked into the conference room like she owned the damn place. His dick sprung to life so fast at the sight of her that he'd had to place the presentation papers he was holding in front of his pants. With a deep scowl on his face, he noticed how every man, young and old, in the conference room

followed the high roundness of her ass that was covered in a form-fitting black pencil skirt.

She settled into a chair closest to where he was standing and pulled out a notebook. Casey continued to talk, but was acutely aware of the beautiful woman whose crisp, short-sleeved, white button-down shirt strained a little against her breasts. And although her hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail, nothing detracted from the subtle blue and purple streaks running through it, which seemed to bring out the richness of her chocolate complexion. He watched from the corner of his eye as she appeared to be looking for something.

Then Dante Johnson, the firm's resident player, leaned in and handed her a pen; and she smiled gorgeously, murmuring thank you in a seductive voice that shot straight to Casey's balls. No woman had ever caused a reaction so visceral in him; and the fact that Johnson had a smile on his face like he was going to get a piece of her as he winked and mouthed "no problem" shot the usually cool and collected lawyer straight off the deep end.

"Could the two of you flirt on your own time? There are others in here that are taking this meeting seriously and would appreciate not being distracted by idle chitchat. Miss, I suggest you come prepared to my meetings or don't come at all."

The minute he finished his rant, Casey regretted the harsh words. You could hear a pin drop in the conference room. Johnson flushed deeply and quickly mumbled an apology, backing away from her as if she were now contagious. Casey watched the beautiful, young mystery woman push her chair back and slowly stand to her feet and gather her things, her gaze never leaving his. Although her outward expression was serene, her eyes promised him a fiery death. All eyes were on

her again as she strutted back towards the door. He opened his mouth to say he was sorry, but the words wouldn't come.

“It’s not your place to tell her how to do her job. She doesn’t work for you, she works for the firm and was there to take important notes for Vivienne. If Vivi knew how you’d spoken to Sidra, she’d rip you a new one. She fucking adores her witty personality.” Jack taunted him knowing how badly it would get under Casey’s skin. Although she was his business partner, Vivienne Romankov was also a mother figure to the brothers, stepping in immediately to help raise them alongside Ian when their dear friend Moira was murdered.

“Vivienne adores Sidra? You’re fucking kidding me right? What’s there to adore about her? Pit bulls with menstrual cramps are nicer than she is!” Casey stated derisively.

Jack frowned as he finished lining his jaw. “That’s enough, Case. Not only is Sidra an excellent employee, she also happens to be Noelle’s very good friend. Just keep your distance if you can’t get along. The last thing I need is for Noelle to think that any group events we have will be stress-filled and get cold feet about marrying me,” he said warningly to his brother.

There was a short silence before Casey changed the subject. “I was thinking about going to see Dr. Klaus when I get back to D.C.”

Their parent’s tumultuous marriage, the pain of losing their mother, and rage towards Patrick Sullivan had left the boys barely able to function. It was Vivienne that introduced them to Dr. Laura Klaus. She explained that after their mother died, she had so many unresolved feelings bottled up inside, that she thought she’d go mad if she didn’t work them out. Since they were feeling the same way, they agreed to go with her. The

first five sessions were brutal and heart-wrenching; but after that, each visit got just a little bit easier.

Dr. Klaus was patient, firm, and blunt as hell. She knew that Jack blamed himself for being the eldest and not being able to take care of their mother; that Darby harbored resentment because Jack hadn't allowed him to back into the house to protect their mother; and how helpless Casey felt being the smallest and the target of their father's abuse.

Dr. Klaus knew all of that; but she also told them that in the end, they were kids who'd been severely let down by parents who failed them. Darby, blinded with fury, had punched a hole in the wall and needed to be sedated when she said that Moira Sullivan should have left Patrick a long time ago, especially for their safety. She had friends who would've helped her; but all Jack could think was that he'd let all of them down, which pushed him to try harder to make everything perfect for his loved ones.

"Something wrong, lil bro? You can tell me," Jack said, watching his brother closely. Already he was thinking of how he could rearrange his schedule to support his brother. Casey shrugged his shoulders while he struggled with his words. Finally, he spoke. "There's this case I'm working on...it feels too much like our childhood. I feel like I should excuse myself from it because it's getting *too* personal for me. But if I don't do everything in my power to put him away, he *will* kill her, Jack. It's only a matter of when, if he doesn't go to jail. The signs are all there."

"*Christ!* Case, you're a damn good attorney. If anyone can put the bastard away, it's you. But I don't want you going all vigilante on me by taking matters into your own hands. Let's put a detail on her. I'm sure Darby wouldn't mind," Jack suggested.

“Darby wouldn’t mind what?” their middle brother asked suspiciously from the bedroom doorway before stumbling in and flopping on Jack’s bed. “Please tell me what you’re setting me up for now? You boys must think I sit around all day just scratchin’ my ass waitin’ by the phone for your calls.”

“I don’t think you just scratch your ass all day, D. I’m sure you’re a little more productive and manage to get your balls too,” Casey deadpanned as Jack laughed.

Darby gave them the finger and said slyly, “I’ll tell you who’s got a set of balls— the beautiful Ms. Barton, that’s who,” he smirked. “I could listen to that woman rip you a new one all day, and look fine as hell doing it.”

Casey narrowed his eyes at him. “You done? If not, maybe I should just call Ms. Avery over here to shut you up. Good lord, did you get a look at them curves though...” he said giving a long wolf whistle. “Now that’s an hour glass with more than a few extra minutes!”

Darby sat up and punched Casey’s arm twice, causing Casey to wince before punching him back. Before they could take it further, Jack intervened.

“Y’all are too much for me on an empty stomach. Let’s go get some breakfast. We’ve been invited out again tonight. Avery said they’re going to some club tonight.”

Darby looked up at Jack with speculation in his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about somethin’ since you told me you were gonna get married. How’d you propose to Noelle? Was it a grand gesture of undying love?”

Jack stiffened, surveying his brother coolly. “As a matter of fact, it was.”

“Yeah...bout that,” Darby drawled, watching his older brother like a hawk. “I wasn’t even aware the two of y’all were seein’ each other.” His eyes lit up at seeing the tick in Jack’s jaw, which indicated he was annoyed with the conversation. “I mean, you never even mentioned her at all like you did with Vaughn or the other chicks you were rumored to be hooking up with.”

Jack struggled to control the giveaway tick. He knew Darby would be all over him like a shark smelling blood if he sensed anything out of the ordinary. “Since when do I ever really go into great detail about any female I’m associated with? With Vaughn, you guys asked who she was, and I told you her name. Everything else about her you found out on your own like the gossip whore you are, dickhead.”

Darby scratched his beard, eyeing Jack. “Huh...methinks he doth protest too much.” He turned to Casey. “What say you, baby bro?”

“I think that there is definitely a mutual admiration between them, but I am also curious as to know why her name has never been mentioned,” Casey said slowly. “Does this have anything to do with her ex?” he asked curiously. “I mean does she know what happened with him?”

“She knows what that shithead is capable of,” Jack said in a short tone that warned his brothers to drop the subject. Tension filled the room as Darby and Jack stared at each other.

“I hope you’re not playing some kind of game with her heart, Jackie,” Darby said carefully. “That gal looks at you with stars in her eyes. If ya don’t feel the same, you should probably say somethin’ before you fuck shit up.”

Casey added his two cents. “She seems like a really good girl, Jack. As long as you’re marrying her for the right reasons, I’m cool with it. Does Ian know that you’re gonna be defiling his precious god-daughter on the regular?” he joked, trying to lighten the mood; but Jack needed to let them know how serious he was.

“Noelle Kramer is going to be my wife,” Jack’s voice rang with cold finality. “Anyone who has a problem with that needs to shut the fuck up. Now let’s go get something to eat.”

And he would destroy anyone who dared to take her from him, he vowed silently, walking out of the bedroom, leaving his brothers to look at each other with concern.

Chapter Twelve

Noelle parked her silver Mini Cooper by the servants’ entrance of her parents’ home. She was hoping to get in, out, and undetected by her mother’s keen radar. This morning, Chef Martin had called frantically, saying he was having no success trying to recreate her chocolate torte for Alicia’s dinner party tonight, and that he desperately needed her help.

It was a setup, Noelle realized as soon as she walked into her parent's kitchen and saw her mother looking immaculate in tennis whites, calmly sipping a cup of tea at the breakfast nook. She was perusing a newspaper with her reading glasses perched elegantly on her slender nose. A meal of eggs benedict, roasted asparagus, and mixed fruit lay on the table behind her. The table was set for two.

Noelle quickly cut her eyes at the chef who turned red, offering her pleading eyes before going back to hastily chopping vegetables at the massive marble island. Quickly she contemplated backing out of the room before her mother could see her, but today was not her lucky day.

“Oh don't be mad at him, darling. I think he was just taking pity on an old woman for having to tell a lie to get her own daughter to come see her,” Alicia Kramer said sweetly as she folded the paper in two and met Noelle's gaze. She smiled pleasantly at both of them. “After all, Martin is a culinary genius. Why would he need *your* input?”

That last remark let the other two people in the room know that Alicia was aware of Noelle's secretly cooking for the family and that Martin was getting paid for work he didn't do. *Shit!* Noelle had a sinking feeling that Martin's days were numbered in the Kramer household. Red-faced, he quickly excused himself from the kitchen, and Noelle hoped he was going to go work on updating his resume. If he did get terminated, she would help him find some other place to work.

“Come sit down and eat. It isn't every day that I get to see your pretty face. Of course, if you still lived here, then I wouldn't be experiencing this problem now would I?” Alicia finished with a moue, tilting her cheek towards her daughter. Noelle leaned down and kissed the offered cheek before

resignedly pulling out the chair across from her mother and sitting down.

Noelle felt her mother's eyes assessing her appearance. After the frantic call this morning, she'd only had time to put on a pair of black leggings and a short-sleeved, fitted denim shirt with black ballet flats. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun without a curl in sight, and diamond studs were her only accessories.

"Don't you think it's a shame when a mother who spends seventy-two hours in labor with a baby that turns out to be colicky, prone to eczema, and refuses to sleep, hopes to spend time with that child as an adult, only to find that said child has abandoned her?" Alicia murmured mournfully, continuing the guilt trip as she fixed them both plates. "At least now I know who will be the one to sign off on my room at the nursing home in my old age."

"Please stop exaggerating, Mother. I'm really sorry that I haven't been by; it's just that I've been really busy with work. How are you and Dad doing?" Noelle asked politely as she accepted the plate of food from her mother and mentally rolled her eyes. A small portion of eggs benedict, cut asparagus, and a piece of fruit; four ounces exactly she was willing to bet. *Gaaaah*. Under her mother's watchful gaze, she picked up her fork and began to cut into her asparagus.

"Oh we're fine, dear. He's actually back in Washington working on some committee, and I'll be joining him next week. You know that town is just crawling with eligible young men. You really should come with me, and I can introduce you to some of them. Perhaps you'll find someone you share the same interests with. That way, you can quit your hostess job and focus on being a wife," Alicia suggested in a sickeningly sweet voice.

Noelle set her fork down with a thud and met her mother's cool gaze. "I'm not interested in being some kept woman, Mother. I like my life the way it is. As for my *career*, I happen to enjoy it very much. I'm sorry it's not mention-worthy at your soirees, but it suits me perfectly," she said firmly, picking her fork back up to spear the cantaloupe viciously and take a bite. *Relax; don't let her get to you.*

As she chewed, Noelle watched her mother shuffle through a pile of papers next to her plate, and the name of Jack's firm caught her eye. "What are you working on?" Noelle asked casually, not wanting to appear too interested in anything pertaining to Jack. Not much got past Alicia; and if she even suspected there was something going on between her daughter and Jack, she would do everything in her power to sabotage it.

"Oh, nothing; just reviewing our contract with Ian's firm. Lately I've been unsatisfied with the limited coverage our family has been getting. I think it's time to possibly look elsewhere. I'm finding Jack to be underqualified in anticipating our needs. Good help is so very hard to find," Alicia sighed heavily before continuing. "Then again, what can you expect from someone with a background such as his...?"

Noelle's hackles rose in Jack's defense and a warning bell went off in her head as she met her mother's piercing stare; but she refused to take the bait and forced herself to appear unaffected. "Well, I'm sure there are plenty of PR firms that will understand your healthy affection for Michelle Obama and find a way to accommodate it," she smiled innocently as she finished the small bite of fruit, watching as her mother stiffened slightly at the subtle dig.

“Hmmm, I suppose you’re right darling. Well, enough about that; tell me what’s new with you? I ran into Anita Hernandez at the club this morning, and she mentioned that her aide saw you cozied up with some handsome man at an event last night. I told her that such news was rubbish. I would certainly know if my daughter was dating anyone worthy of her time and name,” Alicia said pointedly, looking at her daughter over her glasses.

Noelle bristled at the insinuation that Jack wasn’t good enough for their family. “It was a work event; I didn’t bring a date,” she said evenly; which was technically true, as Jack had met her there. “Besides, even if there was someone, do you really think I’d bring them around to get the Kramer Inquisition?”

“Is it so wrong to want the best for you? We can’t help but worry. Don’t take this personally darling, but it just seems like you constantly struggle in all aspects of life. All of us are very concerned about you. You don’t date; you’re not interested in obtaining a time-worthy degree; and you shy away from all family social functions. We’ve all been wondering...are you a lesbian?” Alicia asked with more than a little concern. “I’ve heard homosexuality could be hereditary; and while it’s not something that we’d be thrilled about, we could certainly turn it into a positive and use it to our advantage in your father’s career.”

Noelle stared at her mother incredulously. “Are you hearing yourself? Why would you think that? Because I don’t bring anyone around you guys? Why, so you and Dad can interrogate them to death? No, I’m not a lesbian; but even if I was, it would *still* be none of your business who I date. This right here...,” she gestured between them. “This orchestrated event is exactly why I left home. You try to manipulate me, *and* you suffocate me. It makes me absolutely crazy!” she took a deep breath before slowly releasing it. “On that note, I think

I'll head back home." Noelle stood up and kissed her mother's cheek.

Alicia's hand shot out to capture her wrist in a firm grip. Noelle looked down in surprise, meeting her mother's steely gaze, her words a clear warning. "I'm not sure what's going on exactly with you and Jack Sullivan, but he is not for you. His bloodline is tainted; and in the end, he will only hurt you or worse. That's all a Sullivan man is good at. For once, you need to listen to me, little girl."

How did her mother know about her and Jack? And what the hell did she mean tainted blood? Noelle shook her head slowly at her mother before pulling her arm away. She wasn't going to let anyone hold her back anymore. Not in life and especially not in love.

"Thank you for breakfast. The next time you want to spend *quality time* with me, just call. Tell Daddy I said hi. Goodbye, Mother." Without a backward glance, Noelle walked out of the house and immediately felt freer. She got in her car and picked up her phone. There were two unread text messages.

Avery: I had a great time last night. Don't forget we're meeting downtown. Luxe Fit 8 p.m. sharp! Trying to convince Pierce to go. XOXO

Sidra: You've been warned that I ordered a body bag in Casey Sullivan's size if he gets out of hand. The bonus is that it also fits Pierce if he makes Avery upset. See you tonight. Mwwah!

Noelle laughed aloud and shook her head. Where would she be without her girls? As she looked up to start the car, she noticed her mother observing her from the kitchen window. With a wave, she drove off and didn't look back. There was no point because she wasn't headed in that direction.

The line outside of the club was ridiculously long. Luckily Avery had reserved a booth that the guys were already waiting at inside. As they followed their hostess to it, Noelle felt butterflies in anticipation of seeing Jack again. After leaving her parents' home, she went to see Avery's hairstylist for a blowout. Even though he hadn't said he would, she kept hoping Jack would call just so she could hear his voice. It was silly because she knew with his brothers in town, they were probably out doing guy things and catching up; so she wouldn't sweat it.

When they arrived at the booth, the hostess got a look at the handsome trio waiting and went into man killer mode, blatantly ignoring the women as they stood behind her waiting to be seated.

“Are you gentlemen being taken care of? If not, my name is Sophia, and I'll be happy to see that all your needs are met,” she purred, leaning in close to the table and exposing her cleavage as all three men stood up.

Avery rolled her eyes. Casey stared at Sophia's cleavage with a look of interest as he sipped his drink. Jack ignored her and walked around her to stand close to Noelle. He looked dangerously handsome in all black; and her body felt overheated at the look of desire in his eyes as they leisurely looked her up and down.

Darby grinned devilishly at Sophia and leaned in closer, his head practically resting in her surgically-enhanced bosom. “All my needs, Sophia?” His question was heavy with innuendo. “I don’t know. I’m kinda needy, darlin’.”

Before she could answer, Sidra stepped up to the hostess. She tapped Sophia on the shoulder; and when she turned to face her, she gave her a brilliant smile and said, “I hate to fuck your world up with some truth, but your skankiness is showing, and it’s extremely overrated. Be a good girl and tuck it back in.”

Casey choked and spat his drink out, causing Sofia to jump back from the table. Jack, Darby, and Noelle tried to hide their smiles while Avery shook her head with a frown. “Come on, Sid. It’s not that serious.”

Sidra flashed Avery another megawatt smile as the hostess stared at her angrily. “I disagree. I’ll be damned if I’m going to stand here waiting to be seated while she gets her prostituting on. If I wanted to wait this long, I would have stood outside in that long- ass line.”

Then Sidra turned back to Sophia. “Close your mouth, boo. You know I’m right and just a word of warning: You can’t out bitch me; so don’t even try.”

Jack finally spoke. “We have someone already helping us, Sophia. Besides, you’re blocking my fiancée from entering.” This last part was said with a cold look at the hostess that had her scurrying away.

“Well damn, Ms. Sidra...there’s never dull moment with you around,” Darby said with a rakish grin, looking handsome in a purple dress shirt and well-fitting gray slacks. He took in her

pouty, red lips and the black form-fitting leather dress with cut outs at the waist she wore. “Lookin’ beautiful as always. Did you have an extra shot of feisty in your coffee today?”

Sidra shrugged prettily at him and murmured demurely, “Nope. I was just born with a big dose of hella-awesome-dopeness. What can I say?”

While everyone else laughed, Casey rolled his eyes, causing Sidra’s eyes to narrow evilly and lean in towards him her hand on her hip. Avery quickly shrugged out of her black silk blazer, revealing an oyster-colored, shimmery tube dress that accentuated every voluptuous curve. The neckline was heart shaped and she wore a simple diamond pendant nestled in her bosom. Jack noticed Darby’s jaw about hit the floor.

“Casey, let’s dance,” Avery said hurriedly, fearing for his life as she tossed her jacket on the table before yanking him by the arm and pulling him toward the crowded dance floor. They left a scowling Sidra and Darby to glare after them as they hit the floor.

Noelle kept Jack’s gaze, slowly removing her black wrap to reveal a bronze- colored bandaged wrap mini-dress. It was formfitting but had a modest boat neck and $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch sleeves. She knew that the fabric against her skin made her look nude and laughed to herself as she watched Jack’s eyes darken even further, a flush creeping up his neck. *Bet he wouldn’t NOT call her again*, she thought smugly as she turned her back to him to reveal the large cutout in the back of the dress that ended at the dip above her ass.

“Feel like dancing?” Noelle asked Jack over her shoulder seductively. He was at her side in an instant, hands gripping her hips possessively and pulling her back to him

“That’s not all I feel like doing, sugar,” he growled in her ear and she shivered as goosebumps broke out across her skin.

“Why do I have the feeling that someone’s gonna lose tonight?” Darby groaned, causing Sidra to laugh uproariously as they stepped on to the dance floor; David Guetta and Nicki Minaj’s bass thumping “Hey Mama” shaking the club walls.

Jack pulled Noelle into his arms, and she pressed herself as close to him as possible. They stared into each other’s eyes and moved in perfect precision to the beat. Noelle crooned the lyrics in his ear as she seduced him with her moves. He wasn’t surprised that his girl had rhythm. Not because she was black, but because she was always so graceful in her movements, despite the killer heels she was wearing.

Jack made a promise to himself that the next time they made love, she’d only be wearing those and a satisfied smile. He admired the way her hips twisted and dipped to the beat, her hair swinging like sharp black blades around her shoulders as he spun her around and pulled her back in, close enough that she could feel his arousal pressed between them.

“Nice moves, Sullivan,” she said admiringly, wrapping her arms around his neck and grinding into him. Jack groaned internally; Noelle was so fucking hot, and he was so hard. All he really wanted to do was back her into a dark corner and slide into her silky heat.

“I aim to please, ma’am,” he said, watching as Noelle’s eyes moved to a point beyond his and widened in recognition. Jack felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around. A tall, black man, dressed in all white with a thick gold chain around his neck stood behind him. His bald head was covered in tattoos; and when he smiled, a big diamond gleamed in his front top tooth. On either side of him were two huge men dressed in all black.

“What it do, Sully? I thought that was you with this fine young thang.” The man gave Noelle a lecherous once-over that made Jack grit his teeth. Normally, he didn’t mind Raymond Sway’s, otherwise known as “Big Thang” in the hip hop industry, behavior, but this time it was directed at his woman; and Jack didn’t play that shit.

“What’s up, Raymond?” Jack asked shaking the other man’s hand while pulling Noelle closer to his side with the other as Raymond continued to look her up and down.

“Nothing. I was just chillin’ in the booth passing time before the studio was available. You know I do my best work at night, homie,” Raymond smiled again and the gleaming diamond flashed. “Well, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Noelle, I’d like you to meet Raymond Sway. Raymond, my fiancée Noelle.” He put heavy emphasis on fiancée as his hand slid down to rest on her stomach. He could feel her gaze on him and wished he knew what she was thinking. *Not tonight motherfucker*, Jack thought as his grip tightened even more around her waist, listening as they exchanged greetings and taking note of how the jackass was eating Noelle up with his eyes.

“Hey Jack, do you mind if I steal Noelle away for a dance?” Raymond asked licking the lips that made all the girls swoon.

Jack opened his mouth to say yes he fucking minded, but Noelle, laying her hand on his chest, said to Raymond, “Actually, we were just going to have a seat. Please excuse us.”

She grabbed Jack’s hand to lead him away and Jack gave Raymond a curt nod as he walked past. Behind him he heard Raymond mutter, “Stuck up bitch”.

Jack clenched his jaw but kept moving forward. It looked like Darby’s premonition would be coming true.

Avery finished her dance with Casey and excused herself to go to the ladies’ room. She was glad that she decided to go out despite the argument with Pierce earlier. He’d fussed over her dress and refused to be seen in public with her.

“Don’t you think you should cover all that up?” he asked and for a brief moment, Avery considered it. Then she thought fuck it. Standing proudly, she addressed Pierce.

“Why are you so offended by my body, Pierce? We have sex in the dark with me covered up and in one position all the time! Also, you look positively green during foreplay,” she stated angrily. “I’m sorry that I’m not a size two with a stick figure, but there are other men out there who appreciate women with curves. So why don’t you find yourself a child-size bride, and I’ll find myself a real man. We’re done here.”

Soon after Avery left, Pierce was blowing up her phone with calls and apologetic texts, all of which she ignored before deciding to turn her phone off. As she studied herself in the mirror, she gave a sad smile. Oh sure she knew she was attractive; but it was times like this that she wished her body wasn't so voluptuous, and that the man she was with could look passed it. With a sigh, she reapplied her lip gloss and left the bathroom only to collide with a hard body.

“Excuse me! Are you okay?” she cautiously asked the man who was staring at her like she was a pork chop as he eyed her up and down.

“Oh no, mama. *Excuse me*. Damn girl, you're really wearing that dress!” he smirked, his eyes meeting hers. She recognized him as rapper Big Thang, and while he had a large female following that loved him, he did nothing for her personally except give her the creeps as he stepped into her personal space. Avery continued to meet his gaze but took a step back and brushed against the wall.

“You know who I am right?” he asked smoothly, and she nodded her head in acknowledgement. “How about you and me get out of here and talk business? I'm shooting my new video, and I could really use a girl with your... assets in it,” he finished, looking her up and down, licking his lips lewdly.

Avery curled her top lip in disgust and shook her head. “I don't think so. Excuse me,” she said firmly and started to push past him, when she felt his hand brush her bottom and give it a squeeze. Furious at the violation, she whirled around and slapped him upside his head with her clutch. “Asshole!”

He lunged at her, but ran into a brick wall as Darby Sullivan quickly got between them and gently slid Avery behind him. “I believe you owe the lady an apology,” he said in that southern

drawl of his that was normally friendly; but this time Avery could hear dark rumbling undertones.

“Ayyy man, back the fuck off me! You know who the fuck I am? I’m Big Thang, you overgrown country mouse!” the rapper shouted, trying to push at Darby; but it was like pushing against a brick wall that wouldn’t budge. Avery coughed to cover her laugh; and Darby, being the charming rascal that he was, looked over his shoulder to give her a wink, causing her to smile at him. A pleasant warmth spread slowly through her stomach. She couldn’t help but think that if she was with Pierce, he would have been upset with her for drawing attention to herself. Immediately she felt guilty for having that thought.

“Listen here, lil’ man. I may be just a country mouse to you, but where I come from, nobody disrespects a lady. Now you’re either going to apologize or-”

“What’s going on here?” Jack’s voice boomed down the hallway, interrupting Darby and causing all three of them to turn and look at him as he strode towards them. Avery could see from his expression that he was pissed. Looking at him, she really couldn’t blame her friend for falling for him. Jack oozed boss swag and was extremely good looking to boot. He gave her a concerned look before turning to the two men.

“Nothing; Just a country mouse trying to teach a city mouse some manners. This one here was bothering the lovely Ms. Avery. Called himself having the right to touch her bottom,” Darby said with a growl, his tone downright deadly now.

“Yo, Jack; you know this freak show? I was trying to talk with ol’ girl, and this giant ass hillbilly got all up in my face! I want him thrown outta here!” Raymond shouted, wiping the sweat

from his bald head as he warily took in the size and muscle that was Darby Sullivan.

Jack coolly assessed him. “This young lady you assaulted is a dear friend of mine, and I’m sure my brother was doing nothing but defending her. You’re extremely lucky he didn’t crack your fucking skull open, Raymond. I recommend that you don’t try to step to him.”

Raymond gulped and took four steps back from Darby, warily keeping an eye on him. Darby grinned at him again. “Apologize, sweetheart.”

Avery tried very hard not to laugh when the supposedly hardcore rapper quickly turned to her and mumbled an apology; she acknowledged it with a curt nod.

Jack stepped forward smoothly. “One more thing, Raymond; a woman has the right to say no, and her choices should always be respected whether you like them or not.”

With lightning fast reflexes, he sucker-punched the other man in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him and leaving him gasping on the floor, struggling not to vomit. Avery grimaced, and Darby laughed that big, booming laugh that echoed down the hallway as Raymond lost the battle and tossed up all the alcohol he’d consumed tonight, soiling his all white outfit.

“Client or not, if I ever hear you refer to my woman as a stuck up bitch or any name other than Mrs. Sullivan, I will END you and your career. I’m releasing you from your contract with *R.R. & S.*, and I trust there will be no back blow behind my decision, correct?” Jack stared down at him dispassionately as he straightened his jacket. The ill-feeling rapper was too busy wallowing in his self-created misery to answer him.

“Have a good night.”

Chapter Thirteen

They were married, and she wanted to shout it from the rooftops — that *she*, Noelle Kramer, was now Noelle Sullivan. She couldn't stop staring at the hammered gold band with the huge diamond in the center. It had tiny diamonds sprinkled on either side, and the inside was inscribed with today's date. It was created by an up-and-coming jewelry designer named Vixen, and Jack had surprised her with it this morning by placing it on her left ring finger during the brief ceremony witnessed by Avery, Sidra, Casey, and Darby in Jack's good friend, Judge Marcus Harold's private chamber. When the girls saw the ring, they shrieked with joy, much to the amusement of the Sullivan brothers. Noelle explained to them that they each had several pieces of Vixen's jewelry, and that her pieces were wildly popular and highly-coveted. They rolled their eyes when the brothers seemed even more amused by that statement.

Although it was supposed to be a simple business arrangement, Noelle couldn't help but to get caught up in the moment. She'd worn a spaghetti strap, white eyelet dress with a sweetheart neckline. The dress was knee-length with a full skirt. Her feet were encased in SJP white, high-heeled sandals, and the outfit complimented her bronze complexion perfectly. Her curly hair was left free, with a simple rhinestone barrette pinning the curls off of her forehead. She'd kept her makeup limited to bronzer and coral lip gloss. The short denim jacket she'd slipped on after the ceremony was over. Jack, scruff free, was handsome in a light-colored suit that he filled out to perfection.

After the ceremony, they celebrated with lunch at the River Café in Brooklyn. The gorgeous restaurant sat right on the water, and it was where the trio of women celebrated all special occasions. They gorged themselves on foie gras, mushroom wellington, branzino, and strip steak. For dessert, they had the two cakes that Noelle had made from scratch. The first was a small champagne wedding cake with strawberry filling; the second, a decadent chocolate Guinness cake with Bailey's Irish cream frosting, was for Jack's birthday, much to his surprise. It was a wonderful meal, and they felt blessed to be sharing it with friends and family.

Now the married couple, along with Casey and Darby, were flying on a private jet to Whiskey Row, but making a pit stop in D.C. first to drop off Casey and Darby. Jack also needed to do a brief touch base with his other partner Vivienne. Noelle sneaked a glance at him to find him staring at his gold band, a satisfied smile on his lips as he rolled it around on his finger. She looked across the aisle to find Darby and Casey grinning at them and blushed before turning to look out the window with a small satisfied smile of her own.

The plane ride was short and smooth, and they arrived in the nation's capital in no time. It was a perfect afternoon in D.C., weather-wise, and as they drove through the city. Noelle was delighted to see that the famous cherry blossoms were in full bloom, coloring the streets in gorgeous shades of pink, red, and white. They pulled up to a distinguished-looking six story building in Georgetown and took the elevator up to the top floor, occupied by *R. R. & S. Public Relations* and the law offices of *Sullivan and Associates*.

Casey leaned over to give Noelle a quick kiss on the cheek, leaping out of the way before Jack could punch him while chuckling at his brother's thunderous expression. "This is my stop, sis. Feel free to stop by if you get bored over there or if

Viv scares you, and you need a place to hide; whichever comes first. Congratulations again, bro. Coming, Darby?”

“Nah, go ahead. I’m gonna chop it up with the “Dragon Lady” for a while. I’ll catch up with you this evening,” Darby said as he held the door open for Jack and Noelle.

“Bye, Casey. Thank you for everything,” Noelle said as Jack clasped her hand in his when she would have given his little brother a hug. She narrowed her eyes at him, and he gave her a bland smile, motioning her through the door before him. As she passed through the open door, Noelle heard Darby say to her new husband under his breath, “Fucking relax, man.”

Inside the office was full of women in all sizes and ethnicities, wearing brisk expressions as they bustled about; but Noelle could hear one voice in particular barking orders over everyone. The atmosphere soon changed as the women noticed the good-looking brothers. Tense expressions relaxed into flirtatious ones. The pretty, dark-haired receptionist whose nameplate read Marcella gave them a frazzled smile as she hurriedly answered and connected calls.

As busy as she was though, she did pause long enough to give Darby a sultry gaze and a private smile when he lingered at the desk. Jack just shook his head and placed his arm around Noelle’s waist, guiding her down the hallway to where the barking voice was getting louder and louder. Noelle braced herself as they turned the corner expecting to see an ogre.

Instead, Noelle saw a petite, black woman with a dark honey complexion. Her shoulder-length, black hair was thick and styled in big curls. She wore a well-cut, short sleeve, hot pink sheath that molded to her slender curves and pair of paler pink high heels. Her delicate, arched brows, eyes the color of molasses, short straight nose, and full mouth epitomized pretty, despite the tongue-lashing she was administering into her Bluetooth. Vivienne Romankov was absolutely gorgeous, and from what Noelle was hearing, hell on wheels.

“Go on in,” Jack urged softly. “I’m going to grab us some coffee.” He placed a brief kiss on the back of her neck, before walking towards the coffee station located at the end of the hall. Noelle turned back to the fireball of energy frantically pacing up and down the length of the huge, modern office decorated in shades of white. She took in the large, framed pictures of the Sullivan brothers at varying stages in their lives along with photos of a stunning girl of mixed heritage.

“Well, what the hell are we paying you for if the press junkets are a no-go? You’re either going to move forward with them or give us back our damn money plus interest, as you obviously didn’t read the contract. Don’t screw with me, Marvin,” she warned in a softer tone; it was almost seductive, and Noelle found herself leaning forward, captivated as she imagined Marvin on the other end doing the same thing. “Or I will sue your ass for everything you’ve got!” And with that, Vivienne disconnected the call.

She caught sight of Noelle in the doorway and raised an eyebrow as she looked her up and down. “Okay... a couple of questions: One, do you always eavesdrop on peoples’ conversations? Two, how did you get back here? And three, who the hell are you??? If you’re the new receptionist, you obviously didn’t get the dress code memo, sweetie.”

Noelle stiffened her spine at the woman's blunt approach and decided to meet it head on. "One, I wasn't eavesdropping. I could hear you as soon as I entered the offices. Two, I walked back here with my husband, Jack Sullivan. And three, my name is Noelle, not 'sweetie'."

Vivienne's eyes went wide, and then she went *off*. "You're *married* to Jack?? Oh no he didn't have a wedding and not invite me! That little shit! I helped to raise that boy, and this is the thanks I get?! Wait a minute. Noelle? As in Kramer? You're Harvey's niece, which makes you Ian's goddaughter! And Alicia, your mother?" The last was asked with a sour expression, before a thought occurred to her. "Wait. Does Ian know you and Jack got married?"

"Ummmm...well no. The thing is...well ..."

Noelle fumbled over her words, and judging by the sparkle in Vivienne's eyes, she was enjoying her discomfort. A lot. The tiny dynamo, with her quick wit and 'don't fuck with me' personality, made her think of Cookie from that hit show *Empire*.

"Cut it out, Vivi," Jack ordered pleasantly as he entered the room with a tray of cappuccinos and set it on a beautiful, dark wood console, before passing Noelle a cup. Noelle breathed a sigh of relief as he grabbed her other hand and held onto it. He walked forward and gave the other woman a brief kiss on the cheek, before handing her a cappuccino and leading Noelle to sit next to him on the baby blue sofa. His arm was stretched out behind her possessively.

Vivienne stared at the two of them with pursed lips. It was strange to see her normally unflappable godson being affectionate with a woman. Although he dated, Jack was not one for PDA. This pretty young thang had him wrapped around her elegant little finger, and from the looks of it, was

clearly unaware of this fact as she sipped her cappuccino and he played with her curls.

“I never thought I’d see the day...,” she murmured gleefully, before taking a sip of her own frothy, caffeinated beverage. Jack shot her a warning look, and she found herself wishing her best friend was here to witness this in person. *Oh Moira, I hope you’re watching*, she thought wistfully. *Our little Jackie’s got it bad!*

“And I’ll do no such thing,” she retorted in response to his look. “Not until you admit that taking on Inez Gaines was a mistake. That woman could ruin a wet dream. Her ex is having all of his boys come forward to say that she was distributing. She has a horrible temper and keeps doing crazy things like throwing eggs at reporters who get too close to her. Why is she carrying eggs around in her Gucci bag anyway?! It’s Gucci for Christ’s sake! Bless her heart; she doesn’t even *realize* how crazy she is!”

Jack gave a deep laugh. “I’ll admit she may not have been my best idea, but we can still fix it. I’m not leaving her hanging.”

“Humph, well that was Marvin Sinclair with *Modern Girl* cosmetics. They’re trying to break her contract and cancel her press tours. I think I threatened him with enough lawsuits to keep him at bay. If that doesn’t work, I want Casey to hand me his balls in a blue and white Tiffany’s box after they’re turned into earrings for me,” she said with enough relish to make Jack wince and cross his legs as Noelle laughed. Vivienne winked at her before continuing. “So, I’m sure there’s a story here that I’m missing. Why don’t we go to Public Trust for dinner and you can fill me in? How long are you guys in town for?”

“How about Clyde’s instead? We’re here for the night, and then I’m taking Noelle for a visit to Whiskey Row. Wanna

go?” Jack asked casually, even though he knew what the answer would be, watching as her eyes turned emotionless.

“You know damn well I don’t,” she replied in a matter of fact tone. “Please send Kat my love and let her know that she can’t put off a visit forever. She seems to think that she can hide out there.” Vivienne pursed her lips in dismay, and Noelle got the feeling that she was extremely agitated. The laughter of several women could be heard from the front of the office and quickly diverted the older woman’s attention. “Is your good-for-nothing, womanizing brother out there?”

“I’m sure Darby would be hurt to hear himself described like that, Viv; but yes, he is up front,” Jack said cheerfully as he stood up and helped Noelle to her feet before entwining their hands together.

“Oh Lawd! You left him at the reception desk with Marcella? Do you know I had to threaten to fire her because she wouldn’t stop Googling his ass?” Vivienne shook her head and hurried down the hallway. “Darby Liam Sullivan, stop that flirting right now, or I’m going to smack you silly! Why the hell is everyone gathered around the reception desk? I’m not paying you all to stand around and look pretty! Get back to work!”

Dinner was a lively affair with Vivienne entertaining Noelle with stories of the boys and the mischief they’d gotten into growing up. She could see what a close knit unit they were and found herself enjoying the camaraderie they shared over crab cakes and pasta. Outside of the restaurant, they exchanged

goodbyes; and Vivienne pulled Jack closely for a fierce hug, quietly saying, “Your mama would be so proud.”

She gave Noelle a big hug as well. “It was a pleasure to meet you. You’re just like Harvey, and I can see why Jackie is so taken with you. Look after my boy, and let’s stay in touch.”

To Darby she simply said, “Baby, stay out of trouble and have your sister call me.”

Darby responded with a hug that lifted the petite woman off of her feet and spun her around. “Relax, Mama Bear. She’s a good girl.”

After making sure Vivienne and Casey got into their cars safely, Darby went back into Clyde’s to hang out. Noelle couldn’t help but notice that the receptionist from Vivienne’s office was smoothing her hair and hurrying towards the entrance of Clyde’s as she and Jack got into a cab.

The cab took them to a small, nondescript hotel that barely had a sign. The inside was another story, however, decked out in lavish opulence. The lobby and bar were filled with well-dressed guests; while they waited to check in for the night, Jack informed Noelle that it used to be owned by an infamous madam. The elevator ride up to their room was filled with physical awareness as they realized they were alone for the first time today.

Jack thought Noelle had never looked lovelier. Her eyes sparkled partly due, he was sure, to the alcohol she'd consumed; and her cheeks were flushed. He let his gaze travel down to the swells of her breasts, framed enticingly by wisps of lace, to her long legs, down to the palest pink shimmer on her toes. He wanted to pull her close and explore the softness of her sexy mouth; maybe slide the dainty straps of her dress down, lower his head, and feast on her plump breasts. His dick was painfully hard; and he leaned back against the wall, watching her eyes drift down and linger between his legs. Jack smirked as she bit her bottom lip and looked away.

Noelle was feeling some kind of way about her sexy-ass husband and struggled to compose herself, before glancing his way again, taking in his relaxed pose as he stood across from her. He'd loosened his tie, and his black hair was slightly ruffled. She admired the way his broad build filled the suit out before her eyes dropped to the long hardness pressing against his zipper. The evidence of his desire started a throbbing between her legs, causing her to press her thighs together to control it. Her eyes caught his, and he gave a knowing smile that made her stomach flutter in response. Drawing in a sharp breath, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind other than doing him.

“So what’s the deal with your little sister?” Noelle blurted out loudly, and Jack smiled warmly.

“Her name is Katerina Romankov; and as she likes to tell us, she’s not so little anymore,” Jack said chuckling fondly. “She’s actually Vivienne’s twenty-one-year-old daughter with her estranged husband Alexei. We call her Kat for short; and in our opinion, she’s growing up way too fast. She divides her time between school and her parents; but from what I gathered, she’s been avoiding her mama. I’m thinking it has something to do with a boy.” Noelle grinned, watching his eyes narrow in displeasure at the thought.

“Tell me about Vivienne,” she prompted, because she was curious about his family dynamic. Clearly his parents weren’t in the picture, and she could sense a story behind it.

“She’s our second mom. We were raised by her, Ian, and Alexei. Growing up, we divided our time between D.C. and Tennessee.” Jack’s face and voice were devoid of emotion as the elevator reached their floor and opened up to the penthouse. He made a sweeping motion with his hand for Noelle to precede him.

Well damn, Noelle thought, wondering about his sudden mood change. She stepped into the lavishly decorated scenery with the huge California king bed that dominated the room. There was also a sitting area with a desk and a large window. Jack brushed by her, and she felt burned by the heat of his brief touch. Briefly Noelle closed her eyes and struggled to control her breathing as he pulled the curtains back. The sexual tension was killing her, and it was all she could do to control the urge to rip her clothes off and beg him to take her.

When she opened her eyes, Noelle gasped in delight, for the opened window revealed a stunning view of the Washington Monument and Potomac River glowing against the evening sky. She moved across the room to stand close to Jack and take in the view. “How beautiful,” she said softly, amazed by the beauty of D.C. illuminated at night.

“Absolutely stunning,” Jack agreed softly, his hot eyes riveted on her rather than the scenic view outside. Noelle turned to look at him, and he closed the brief space between them. His arms encircled her waist and slid down slowly to caress her bottom, pulling her dress up while drawing her up against his hardness until she could feel his heavy erection pressing on

her belly. His hands cupped her lower cheeks that were easily accessible thanks to the thong she wore.

The fullness of her behind in his hands made Jack even harder, and he had to fight back a growl; the need to possess Noelle was growing fiercer every day. Staring into her wide gray eyes, he slowly lowered his head, giving her time to accept or decline his kiss. Her eyes closed, and her mouth parted in invitation. That was all the encouragement he needed as their lips touched softly. Once. Then twice. And the third time, clinging together.

“I want you so bad that I ache, Noelle,” Jack murmured seductively against her lips. She could barely hear him over the thunderous beat of her own heart as he pulled her thong to the side. Her body was already wet and tingling in anticipation.

Eagerly Noelle sought more of his addicting kisses as her hands slid up and around his neck to hold him in place. The heat from his hands as they rubbed on her booty was doing her in. With each stroke, his strong fingers slid between her cleft and caressed her forbidden hole, while his tongue tangled with hers. The sensations overwhelmed her; and soon ripples were coursing through, then overtaking her body. Noelle had to wrench her mouth away to gasp for air as she shook uncontrollably. She attempted to clench her thighs together to stop her release from running down her legs.

Jack was breathing harshly as he pressed his forehead to hers and looked deep into her eyes. “Did you just...?” he started to ask but stopped when she averted her flushed face and nodded her head jerkily.

Noelle wanted to die from embarrassment at her body’s reaction to Jack’s talented ministrations; she was such a

rookie! More than anything, she wanted to feel him moving inside of her again, making her burn hotter than the sun. She pulled his head back down to hers with one hand and kissed him, while the other hand slid down between them to softly stroke his shaft through his trousers.

Jack's body jerked in response to her boldness. His hands gripped her thong and yanked it down. He smacked one ass cheek, and Noelle moaned into his mouth raising one of her legs to curl around his muscled thigh. His thick fingers found their way into her wet heat and gently thrust inside of her. Noelle sobbed and bit his lip. Jack pulled his fingers out to smack her ass again and then put them back in to feel her fresh arousal as she gushed with each swat.

“You like this don't you, baby?” Jack whispered hoarsely as she stroked him feverishly. He was going to come if he didn't get a hold of himself. She nodded her head eagerly and traced his lips with her tongue teasingly licked his lips. Jack repeated the action and Noelle's legs shook, causing her to let go of his dick and cling to his jacket lapels as she rode his hand hard. He hooked his fingers against her G-spot and devoured her lips, swallowing her scream as another climax rocked through Noelle's body and over his fingers. Slowly he withdrew them and put the glistening digits up to his lips. Jack's gaze stayed locked with hers as he opened his mouth and licked them. His eyes closed, and he groaned at the heady taste of her.

The sight of Jack tasting her cream and enjoying it was the most erotic thing Noelle had ever seen, and she wanted to give him the same pleasure he'd just given her. She dropped down to her knees and quickly unbuckled his pants. He attempted to stop her and pull her up. “Noelle, you don't have to...”

Noelle gave him a steely look. “Shut up, Jack.” His hands dropped to his sides, and she smiled at the surprised look on

his face. And because she was raised to have manners, she sweetly added, "Please."

Quickly she pulled his pants down and stared at the huge bulge trying to break free of his boxers. Gently she reached into the opening of his boxers and pulled out his engorged penis. *It was truly a work of art*, Noelle thought, her memory of it not doing justice to the real thing. Thank God she'd done some research on blowjobs last night. She'd read articles, watched YouTube videos; and even though they were very informative, she decided to just go with the flow.

The broad, plum-colored head was already oozing pre-cum, and the veins running all over it, covered in pink skin, felt like smooth satin. Noelle wrapped both hands around the base and started to stroke up and down. Jack's hands clenched her curls to hold her in place. She looked at his face and found him watching her in pained concentration.

Noelle licked the liquid from the tip and closed her eyes, savoring the taste of him as the fingers in her hair clutched tighter. "Mmmmm, that's good, Jack," she said throatily, opening her eyes to meet his hooded gaze again.

"I want more," she whispered naughtily and closed her plump lips over him, gently suctioning the head. Jack muttered a curse and bit his lip as he tried to restrain himself from ramming his dick down her throat. *Noelle literally had him by the balls, and it was pure heaven*, he thought, feeling her delicate fingers caressing his sac while sliding her mouth up and down on his shaft, deep-throating him as far as she could, her tongue swirling round and round. What she couldn't take in, she stroked feverishly. He groaned feeling the pressure building inside of him. Jack told himself that he would have to stop soon. But Noelle surprised him by pulling her mouth completely off of him.

“I know you’re holding back with me, Jack Sullivan,” Noelle stated, a defiant gleam in her eye. “Maybe I’m not as experienced as some of the other women you’ve been with, but I am a big nerd, and nerds like nothing more than doing their homework and studying; especially the art of *fellatio*. So stop holding back and fuck my mouth,” she ordered wickedly and then took him in again sucking with vigor as she cupped and massaged his balls lovingly.

Who was he to argue with her? Jack kept his hold in her hair gentle as he fucked her mouth with increasing speed. Noelle stayed with him; slurping, licking, and fondling him, her eyes locked with his until he could bear it no more. The pull of her voluptuous lips, talented tongue, and fingers drove him to the brink with embarrassing speed. When that time came, he threw his head back; eyes closed, shouting out hoarsely as his seed exploded into her mouth. While Noelle swallowed every drop until there was no more, Jack was thanking the heavens above for studious nerds.

Chapter Fourteen

Slowly he pulled out of her swollen lips and sank to his knees in front of her. Noelle was gorgeous with a satisfied glow, and her hair a wild mess from his roaming fingers. His eyes drifted down to rest between her legs. Though she was covered in layers of tulle, Jack could smell her arousal, and it was making him ravenous for her.

Jack reached up and yanked his tie off. Next he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. Noelle's gray eyes filled with lust, and he spoke through clenched teeth. "Get on the bed, Noelle. Spread your legs far apart and grab onto the headboard. I told you I wouldn't fuck you until you came to me and said that's what you want. And I won't, because I like to think that I can keep my word. But tonight we're going to indulge in "Almost". Tonight I'm going to feast on your delectable pussy until your voice is hoarse from screaming, and you pass out," he promised, enjoying the way her eyes went wide in response to his bold statement.

Jack watched as Noelle scrambled to her feet and leaped onto the bed, eager to do his bidding. Then he stood up kicking off his pants but pulling his boxers back up over his hardening member, before walking over to the bed and sliding between her thighs.

The flight to Knoxville, Tennessee was a smooth one; and Noelle spent a great deal of time making notes in her planner for Tarik's party, and how she should organize her closets and drawers when she got back home. She did just about anything to avoid looking into the dreamy, hazel eyes of the man sitting next to her.

"Pick up sock clamps? What are sock clamps?" Jack asked in amusement over her shoulder, his minty breath caressing her face. Noelle turned to look at him and immediately felt her heart flutter in response. Their faces were scant inches apart. He hadn't shaved, and the dark stubble covering the lower part of his face was ruggedly sexy.

She ached to reach out and caress his jaw. His thick dark hair wasn't perfectly gelled and he'd exchanged his suits for a pair of dark denim jeans that did wonderful things to his firm ass and thighs. A long-sleeved, plaid shirt that he'd left open at the neck and rolled up, exposed the muscles on his lightly-tanned arms covered in a light dust of fine, dark hairs.

"They're..." Noelle croaked, and then cleared her throat before speaking again. Jack smiled at her sinfully, and she could feel the smugness radiating off of him. He definitely had her nose wide open. Last night he'd made good on his promise and brought her to multiple orgasms that had her wailing and carrying on until the night manager placed a concerned call up to their room because they were disturbing other guests.

Exhausted, Noelle almost felt relieved about the call from downstairs, until Jack flipped her on her stomach and told her to bite the pillow if she had to. They'd indulged in 'Almost' until the wee hours of the morning when she finally passed out. Lord, the things that man could do should be illegal. He'd licked, sucked, and nibbled all over her body; rolled her onto her stomach, rocking his cock between her ass cheeks while his fingers played in her pussy as he whispered wicked, wicked things in her ear about what he wanted to do to her. When she came, so did he all over her backside.

Noelle blushed hotly as she remembered him straddling her at one point so that she could take him into her mouth as he gripped her hair tightly. Never in a million years would she ever have dreamed that she would love being so wanton and she loved how Jack played her body. He was an adventurous and generous lover that could be rough in the most pleasurable ways possible. There had also been a lot of foreplay around her ass; and she suspected that if given the chance, he would introduce her to pleasure there as well. Somehow the thought

wasn't as horrifying as she thought it to be when 'Remy the Dickhead' had suggested it.

"Look at me," Jack ordered thickly, one hand gripping the headboard His face was a harsh mask of desire as the other hand tangled in her hair while he slowly fed her his cock. Noelle watched him watch her swallow his thickness inch by inch, and it was such a turn on that when he came, she was surprised to find that she did too. Afterwards he slowly pulled out and laid down drawing her close as she gave a big yawn. He gave a hoarse chuckle. "We're not done, darlin."

For a big man, he moved fast; and a surprised Noelle found herself on her knees, with her pussy hovering directly above his face. She bent to look down at him between her thighs, feeling a fresh stream of wetness coating them. "Feed me, baby," Jack commanded, his sexy southern drawl making her giggle with a renewed burst of energy.

With a moan, she gripped the headboard and lowered her sensitive pussy slowly on to his sinful mouth. His powerful hands caressed her thighs before sliding up to grip her hips and hold her in place. Noelle could feel his warm breath on her weeping slit and it made her quiver uncontrollably in anticipation. Then she felt the barest flick of his silky tongue run along her seam, causing her to shudder. "Please stop teasing me!" she begged, reaching a hand down to part her slick nether lips in invitation. Jack gave a devious chuckle before shoving her down and thrusting his skilled tongue high into her wetness, deliciously alternating between tongue-fucking her and nibbling on her clit while a finger slowly teased her anus before pushing inside. With a scream, Noelle shattered under his skilled onslaught.

"They keep your socks together," Noelle muttered, giving him a glare. Jack laughed and slung his arm around her, nuzzling her neck with his whiskers; and she laughingly pulled away. "You're going to give me beard burn, Jack!"

He, too, laughed and pulled her close to whisper in her ear. “At least it’ll match all the other places that you have it,” he teased in a low whisper, sending her into a state of arousal all over again.

“How are we doing over here? Can I get you anything else?” The perky blond flight attendant asked; and although her words were aimed at both of them, her blue eyes were trained exclusively on Jack. Noelle looked over his shoulder and narrowed her gaze at the little hussy, noticing another button had come undone on the woman’s uniform that now exposed an indecent amount of cleavage.

“We’re fine thanks. Just trying to enjoy our privacy,” Jack’s tone was dismissive as he kept his gaze trained on Noelle’s face. Earlier when he was leaving the restroom, the little blonde was waiting outside trying to engage him in flirtatious conversation. It was a waste of time because he only had eyes for his wife. His wife. *Damn that sounded real good*, he thought. Noelle was finally his, and he was going to do everything in his power to keep it that way. An unwanted image of his father’s enraged ruddy face popped into his head.

“Yer mine, Moira! Ya hear?? I’ll never let you go!!”

Jack blinked as Noelle’s soft hand touch his clenched jaw, and he saw the look of concern in her eyes. “You okay, Jack?”

He caught her hand and pressed a quick kiss into the middle of her palm. “I’m fine.”

After the flight landed, they picked up their car rental and started the scenic drive to Gatlinburg. Noelle enjoyed the clean fresh air and the lush views of the mountains. They stopped several times for her to take pictures, and Jack enjoyed how taken she was being surrounded in nature because she looked highly out of place with her stylish jeans, crop top, and high-heeled ankle boots.

The sunlight caught the gleam from her multi-layered gold necklaces and aviator shades hiding most of her face. He watched the other male tourists surreptitiously checking her out, their female companions giving her the side-eye; and Jack felt a burst of pride knowing she belonged to him. *My chick's badder than yours*, he smirked to himself. They lunched at the Peddler Steakhouse before hitting the road again.

“So tell me a little bit about your hometown, Jack,” Noelle said as she flipped through radio stations. “Oooh I love this song!” she exclaimed and turned up Otis Redding’s “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay”.

Jack looked at her in surprise. “What do you know about Otis? That’s for grown folks, missy.”

Noelle snorted as she snapped her fingers in time to the beat. “Puh-lease. Ian and my uncle used to have the best barbeques, and they would play the skin off of old albums.” She sighed with contentment, “Those were some good times. Did you know my uncle?”

Jack shook his head. “Unfortunately I never had the pleasure. Growing up, we weren’t even aware that Ian was gay until Casey was fourteen, and we were allowed to visit him in New York City. We were orphans and spent our time divided

between two residences after our parents died. Ian would always come for us during the summer, and we'd go off on some cool adventure. School was spent on 'The Row' except for winter and spring breaks which were spent in D.C."

"D.C. and New York have some of the most prestigious schools in the nation. Why wouldn't you get to go there instead of a school in the mountains?" Noelle asked curiously, and Jack looked at her in amusement. "Damn, that sounded snobby. I'm sorry."

"I got a pretty good education in the mountains, Noelle," Jack murmured as he switched the station and Kid Rock's "All Summer Long" came pouring through the speakers. Again he was surprised when she started singing along; and together they belted out the words as the vehicle sped deeply into the heart of the Smoky Mountains.

After the song was over Jack turned down the music for a minute and gave her a brief glance before turning his eyes back to the road. "Can I ask you a question?"

Noelle gave him a wary look but nodded her head. "Ask away."

"Why did you let the chef take credit for your work?" he asked curiously. On more than one occasion he'd been highly annoyed by the way her family went on and on rewarding the little punk while she sat quietly in the background. "I mean, it's obvious that you're way better at cooking than him, and yet you said nothing."

Noelle was silent for so long that he thought she'd changed her mind about answering. Finally, she spoke. "I've always loved cooking, but I love my family more, even though they can be a

bit critical of me. That's just who they are. Don't get me wrong; at times it can be very stressful, but finally after years of seeking their approval, I finally decided I didn't care about it anymore and just wanted to be left alone." She shrugged her shoulders. "So when my parents first hired Martin, I could tell he had charmed his way in and there was a lot he didn't know; so I decided to help out. Why not, you know? I had recently graduated from culinary school and wasn't doing anything with my skill set. Why not be of use? He needed help."

Noelle paused to take a sip of her water. "Besides, I liked the challenge of cooking for my family. Their expectations are really high; so if could please them, then I know I could please the POTUS if he ever came to dinner. Anyhow, I don't need them to validate me. Validation is for parking anyway."

Jack glanced over to see Noelle looking out the window; and he wished he could take away the hurt still lingering inside of her that was painfully obvious in her voice. An image of the night he first saw her popped into his mind. "I used to think sometimes that you were being smothered alive. You seem like the kind of girl, that if no one was looking, would slide down that long spiral staircase."

Noelle giggled and realization dawned on him as he looked at her. "Holy hell, you did it, didn't you?"

The car filled with the sound her musical laughter as she looked back at him and confessed. "Every chance I got, I was sliding down that staircase. Until Mother caught me, and I spent a month pruning the garden and polishing all the silverware by myself."

Jack laughed again and silently vowed to get her to loosen up again on this trip.

Chapter Fifteen

Jack's hometown was not the small hick town Noelle expected it to be. Nestled at the base of the Smoky Mountains not too far from Gatlinburg was the small, but prosperous town of Whiskey Row, with a population of 10,000 according to the welcome sign. It was founded in the late 1870's by European and Asian immigrants who found the overcrowded, larger cities such as New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia too competitive to live in. Because it was at the edge of the mountains, they cleverly called it Mountain's Edge. Blacks eventually moved in; and for a while, racial tensions ran high as the many cultures collided, but eventually everyone found a way to co-exist for the most part.

In 1915, a Russian named Petr Romankov, while exploring, discovered an old, abandoned mine further up the mountain. He had a good feeling about the place and convinced his brothers Ivan and Sergei to explore it with him. They agreed and down the mine shaft they went; not telling anyone but their wives where they were going. The brothers were gone for three days before only Sergei and Peter were seen again. Ivan had met a terrible fate in the mine when it collapsed and the remaining two brothers were lucky enough to make it out alive.

A week after their return, the brothers left town again; and when they came back much to the astonishment of the townsfolk, they brought with them the deed to the land the town was settled on. The Romankov brothers didn't stop there.

They bought as much land up the mountain as they could and then began to restructure and expand the town, adding a bank, more schools and businesses. The year after Prohibition ended, they opened up distilleries, a winery and brewery. With all the alcohol being made and sold, the Romankovs decided to change the town name.

Whiskey Row was now a little resort town, a mix between Aspen, Colorado and Park City, Utah but with a larger range of ethnicities from what Noelle could see. The tree-lined town was filled with specialty boutiques, hotels, and restaurants. There was a huge, elegant beauty spa, an old-school type of barbershop, and a tattoo parlor that was next to a dance studio. There was also a livery and blacksmith. The town was Rustic Americana at its hippest; and Noelle instantly fell in love with it, relieved it was nothing like the movie *Deliverance* or that Animal Planet show *Mountain Monsters*.

As they drove down Main Street, Noelle saw people stopping to stare. Jack nodded to some and the greeting was returned. In the rearview mirror, Noelle could see people stepping out into the street to get a better look at their vehicle. It seemed his presence was causing a stir. She glanced at Jack and would have thought he was unaware of the reaction they were creating, but his hands were gripping the steering wheel a little too tightly for him to be relaxed.

“It’s a beautiful place, Jack,” Noelle said sincerely; and he nodded but didn’t turn to give her his signature grin. He seemed very deep in thought as they continued to drive, and Noelle decided she wouldn’t push it, for now. Instead she turned her head, continuing to absorb the gorgeous scenery.

The diversity in this small space was shocking. She saw people from all walks of life: cowboys, hipsters, rockers, bikers, prepsters, and business geeks.

Jack continued to drive south into what appeared to be the residential area of town. Then he made a right, and they were cruising down a long driveway towards a huge Chateau-style white, mansion, which was surrounded by a tall, black gate. Outside of the gate was a guard booth where they paused and Jack rolled down his window. He nodded to the huge, stone-faced security guard that stepped out, and Noelle could see the gun holster under the man's suit jacket. The man nodded back then pressed a button to open the gates, granting them access.

As they pulled into the huge circular driveway next to a crystal water fountain, Noelle took in the exquisite landscaping of the grounds and the guards with leashed Caucasian Ovcharkas patrolling them. It was a beautifully designed fortress, she decided. Jack got out of the driver's side and walked around to open her door. With guarded eyes on the enormous, Russian bear dogs, she slipped her hand into Jack's warm one and warily allowed him to help her out.

"Ummmmm... is this your home? And did I see a helicopter landing?" Noelle asked, looking around suspiciously. "And if you say yes, is public relations really code for something else?" Jack's broad shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"No this is actually –" he started to speak but was interrupted by the front door opening, followed by a loud squeal of excitement. A tiny girl with a huge, reddish-brown, curly afro and a peanut butter complexion shot out of the entrance and down the steps. She launched herself at Jack, pushing Noelle out of the way in the process. He caught her, twirling her around as she shrieked with laughter.

What. The. Fuck. Noelle went from zero to a hundred real quick as she contemplated how she was going to kill Jack and this little hussy still wrapped around him like a fucking boa constrictor. She curled her hands into fists and took a step forward. They were too caught up in their moment to realize that imminent death would soon be upon them, bear dogs present or not. A deep, slightly-accented voice behind her stopped her in her tracks.

“Please excuse my daughter. She hasn’t seen her favorite brother in months. Don’t tell Casey and Darby I said that, or I will be forced to deny it.”

Noelle turned towards the voice and found herself staring into a pair of gorgeous, ink- blue eyes. They belonged to a giant god whose wavy, shoulder-length black hair was lightly threaded with silver. He was older; but his face was barely lined and not an ounce of fat could be found on his insanely fit body from what she could see as he walked towards her. His looks combined with that voice made him downright lethal. “It must be the water,” she mumbled to herself.

First the Sullivan brothers, then the girl in front of her, and now this strapping god. There really could be no other explanation for the freakishly good genes in this town. He reached her and held out his hand. Noelle found herself responding to his warm smile as she took his large hand. “I’m Alexei Romankov. And that unruly, wild child is my daughter Katerina.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Mr. Romankov. I’m Noelle Kr- er Sullivan.” She said sincerely feeling her blood pressure go down considerably now that she knew they were all family. So this was Vivienne’s husband? The woman was completely certifiable to have left a man this fine!

“Please, just Alexei or ‘Lex’. No need for formalities, eh? May I call you Noelle?” She nodded yes and went to pull her hand back but he held on, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Forgive me for staring, but you are a very beautiful woman.”

Suddenly her hand was pulled out of Alexei’s grasp as Jack yanked her against him. Noelle turned to look at him and found him giving the older man a menacing stare. “Stop putting the moves on my woman, you old commie bastard.”

Noelle gasped at Jack’s rudeness, but Alexei and his daughter found the hostile comment to be uproariously funny. While they laughed their heads off, she gave her husband (*oh how she loved that title!*) her best bitch face. “Jackson Conall Sullivan, that was completely uncalled for.”

Jack looked at her mischievously and pressed a hard kiss to her lips, making her gasp again in surprise. “Damn woman, I love it when you full-name me. Do it again; that was hot,” he drawled, and Noelle blushed furiously.

Still chuckling, Alexei rubbed his chin and looked at Jack speculatively. “So *Yakov*, the rumors are not just rumors, *da?*”

Katerina stepped forward and Noelle was taken aback at her exquisiteness. It made sense that the offspring of two great-looking people would look like this. Her facial features were all delicate and fine-boned with full bow lips. Except for her eyes. They were huge on her heart-shaped face and molasses

in color with an exotic tilt, like her mother's. She was a pocket Venus with a curvy, petite figure; Noelle felt like a giant standing next to her.

“Forgive me, Noelle. My Papa is right, and I've been incredibly rude. It's just that Jackie hasn't been home in so long, I couldn't control myself when Mikhail announced that it was him,” she said in a soft musical voice before pausing to take a breath. She gave Noelle an impish grin and continued.

“My name is Katerina Romankov, but you can call me Kat. It is an absolute pleasure to meet *the* Mrs. Jack Sullivan. I can't believe that I've finally got a sister! Yaaaay!!!”

Katerina launched herself at Noelle, who automatically caught her and thought *what the hell?* Amidst Jack and Alexei's laughter, she spun Katerina around and around also.

Chapter Sixteen

He was late and Vivienne was going to kill him, Casey thought as he got out of his silver Jaguar XFR and hurriedly walked up the sidewalk to her D.C. townhouse. His phone was buzzing in his pocket, but he just ignored it. He carefully balanced the bags of wine bottles and cheese in his arms so he could ring the doorbell. As he waited for the door to open, he heard another car pull up. Then a door opened and slammed with a woman's porn-worthy voice cooing, “Thanks! Keep the change, baby!”

Why did it sound familiar? Casey wondered and turned to look; but the door opened, and he was quickly pulled inside by

his irritated godmother, who looked madder than a wet hen as she scolded him. “You’re late! What took you so long?”

“Oh, I don’t know; maybe it was someone’s insistence on needing to have a Blonde Lillet. You know Cheesetique was the only place in town that currently has it in stock right? And I’m sure you also know that it’s nowhere near my office?” he retorted, giving her a kiss on the cheek. Casey felt a presence behind him, so he stepped aside and turned around only to be enveloped in a cloud of flowers with a hint of apples as Sidra breezed past him to give Vivienne a hug.

“Sidra, I’m so glad you could make it! I hope the flight wasn’t too bad?” Vivienne cooed as they exchanged air kisses.

“So, so sorry, Viv! There was a slight delay on the tarmac, but I’m just glad I made it. Fabulous dress! Marc Jacobs?” Sidra asked, deliberately ignoring Casey.

Casey was in shock to see his nemesis here at Vivienne’s home. He’d spent way too much of his free time thinking about her and her smart-ass mouth. He gritted his teeth, realizing that his night had officially gone to shit. Reluctantly, Casey admitted to himself that she looked damn good. Her wild, just-got-fucked curls framed her beautiful face, and the short, clingy black and white geometric patterned dress flattered her body. Extremely high, black heels almost put her at eye level with him.

“Hello, Sidra. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” He would not say it was good to see her or some other untruthful bullshit. Although a certain part of his anatomy proved him to be a liar, as he discreetly shifted the bags in his hand to cover the front of his tented pants.

“Casey. You’re looking uptight as usual,” Sidra said in a honeyed voice. *If uptight meant fine as hell*, Sidra thought to herself. She just couldn’t resist needling the smug lawyer. It helped her to resist being one of the thousands of women in his fan club. Although she would never say it out loud, Casey Sullivan was easily the best-looking man she’d ever seen in her life. She just knew the pickup line about heaven missing an angel was inspired by him.

Even now as Casey looked at her with distaste, Sidra’s reaction to his ire-filled gaze as they swept over her caused a tingling sensation in her lady parts. He lifted a hand to rake through his thick, dark blond hair in frustration, and she longed to replace his fingers with her own. To yank on the silky strands as he pleased her. Damn, now the panties were wet also. *It was going to be a long night*, she thought, but not without irritation.

Vivienne’s delicate cough did not quite cover her laugh as she slipped her arm through Sidra’s and pulled her along. Watching them, Casey’s scowl increased tenfold. “Why yes, it is Marc Jacobs, Sidra. No bickering tonight, children. Come on and let’s mingle.”

Casey had no choice but to follow, ignoring his phone as it vibrated in his pocket once more.

The networking dinner was a great success; and after dessert, guests moved to Vivienne’s parlor to mingle. Casey stood in the corner, sipping a vodka tonic as he observed the room. Well, he was actually watching one person in particular; and

she was having the time of her life, wrapping everyone she came into contact with around her little, itty bitty finger. He was annoyed to see one particular individual brave enough to linger in her presence without fear of his soul being sucked out of his body.

Casey's fingers clenched hard around his glass as Sidra threw her head back and gave a lusty laugh at something Dominick Harris, the lead singer of Bison Blue, was whispering in her ear. The sound alone made Casey's groin tighten with lust in response. When Sidra laughed, her whole face lit up, making her even lovelier than usual. Entranced, Dominick stepped closer to her, effectively using his body to block any other males from poaching on what he considered to be his territory, as he touched a blue curl.

Succubus is what she is, Casey thought sourly. He'd seen the envious looks on the men in the club when Sidra jumped on a low table to dance by herself, her body twisting, bouncing and turning with the thumping beats. She'd drawn a crowd of admirers who egged her on; and he'd watched it all from afar, wishing it was only him she danced for. *Why was he even thinking about her???* He didn't even like the bossy, demanding harpy. But he did want to fuck her. Yeah, he really wanted to fuck her, especially her mouth because for once she'd have to be quiet. He shifted his stance to again accommodate his growing hard on. He was going to have to do something about that and mentally he ran down his list of women that he could hook up with on a moment's notice. There were plenty of prospects, but he wasn't keen on fucking a substitute. *What would it take to get Sidra in his bed?* Casey wondered.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Mr. Sullivan?” a soft voice asked from his left, breaking his train of thought. Casey reluctantly dragged his eyes away from Sidra to glance down into a pair of shy, blue eyes. They belonged to Anna Dayton, a cute pit

bull lobbyist who worked on Capitol Hill. In the past they'd attended a lot of the same functions, but before tonight had never really interacted. He looked down at her almost empty wine glass and back up to her flushed cheeks as she swayed to the music in her head.

"Indeed I am, Ms. Dayton. How about you?" he inquired politely. She laughed, and the high-pitched sound grated on his ears as he wondered what the fuck was so funny; but he forced himself to laugh with her. At least she was laughing, so apparently he hadn't lost his touch completely; unlike Sidra, whose face looked like she smelled shit whenever she saw him.

"Yes I am, and please call me Anna. You are just the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on, Casey Sullivan. And I can honestly say that if I hadn't had three glasses of this wine for Dutch courage, I doubt I'd be over here talking to you," she finished wistfully, tucking a strand of her long, blonde hair behind her ear. So he *was* losing his touch. Now women had to drink themselves damn-near silly to talk to him. *Great.* Casey watched as her face turned red with mortification at her admission. His phone vibrated once, and he pulled it out to read the text.

Please call me! I'm worried about you and won't stop calling until I know you're okay Casey!

"Well, thank you for the compliment, Ms. Anna. It was a pleasure speaking with you, but I'm afraid I have to make a call," Casey said gently before excusing himself and walking away.

Cursing to himself, he left the room and stepped out into the garden, shutting the French doors behind him. Casey dialed a number, and it rang twice before someone picked up. He

didn't give the person on the other end a chance to say anything other than hello.

“Stop calling me; I have nothing else to say to you! What happened earlier didn't mean a damn thing! I'm not coming back, so stop fucking begging to try again! Do you get it? The calls stop now!” His words were low and threatening. There was silence on the other end; and he hung up, knowing that the caller had finally gotten the message.

Casey shoved his phone back into his jacket pocket and leaned his head against the stone wall fighting the urge to smash something. His emotions were on overload and clawing to get out. Coming here tonight and attempting to be civilized after his session with Dr. Klaus had been poor judgment on his part. The case he was working was too close to what he'd experience as a child, and today he'd broken down and cried like a baby. Dr. Klaus insisted that it was the long, overdue breakthrough he needed to move on, but Casey felt too raw and vulnerable to go on with the session. He'd gotten the hell out of there, and she'd been calling him ever since. A tingle at the base of his neck made him realize he wasn't alone; he whirled around to see Sidra glaring at him. Slowly she started clapping. “*Wow*. You are one cold hearted bastard. Whoever she is, she should be lucky that you were heartless enough to end it.”

The look of disgust on Sidra's face as she looked him up and down before turning away broke his restraint. Casey rushed towards her and grabbed her arm. Shocked, she narrowed her eyes and yanked back, but he wouldn't let go and only pulled her closer. “You don't know a damn thing about me. Do you hear me? Not a damn thing!”

“Get your hand off of me before you draw back a bloody nub, you fucking psycho,” Sidra hissed; speaking slowly, venom

dripping from each word. What a fool she'd been to be attracted to this cold-blooded son of a bitch. He chewed women up and spit them out like it was nothing and had the nerve to be mad at *her* for calling him on it. Casey's hazel eyes blazed fire and his full lips were pulled into a snarl. Even now she should be able to resist him, but found she had to still her body from swaying towards his.

Casey glared at Sidra. Up close she was even lovelier—flawless dark skin flushed with anger and eyes glittering like diamonds; but her sexy, glossy lips were pursed together like she'd been sucking on lemons. He pulled her closer and felt her body shift. He knew that she was going to swing; so he moved first and used both hands to jerk her against him and out of the light, backing her up against the side wall of the house. He brought his lips down on hers, channeling all of his anger, frustration, and desire into a searing kiss.

Sidra was stunned as Casey's firm lips covered hers. His tongue invaded her mouth, familiarizing her with his minty taste as he dominated her. Then the kiss softened, and she found herself drowning in sensations. What started out as punishment turned into pleasure, making her helpless to resist him as she met his tongue stroke for stroke. *This is really happening*, she thought dazedly as he expertly caressed her mouth and swallowed up every cry she whimpered. She could feel his long hardness pressing against her middle; and she pulled him even closer, running her hands through his hair like she'd always longed to do.

Casey groaned into her mouth, wishing he could stop kissing her but he couldn't. Now that he'd tasted Sidra's soft lips, he was officially under her spell. Gently he bit her bottom lip

before sucking it into his mouth. She tasted like ripe berries. He could feel his dick leaking; he was so turned on by her fingers in his hair and the feel of her soft body pressing into his. The time for sanity had come and gone. He'd rather die than walk away without knowing what her pussy felt like wrapped around his cock.

They continued to exchange fervent kisses as Casey lifted Sidra's dress and yanked her panties down. They fell around her ankles, and the musky scent of her arousal drove him wild. She stepped out of them, and he yanked at his belt then unbuttoned his pants letting them fall around his knees. Sidra licked her lips and placed her hand on him, causing him to jerk back as if burned. "No, I won't last if you touch me. I need to fuck you now, Sidra. Turn around and put your hands on the wall," he demanded; and she willingly complied, her pussy quivering in response to his command.

Casey stared at her magnificent ass, thinking that it was a true work of art. Although Sidra was naked, save heels from the waist down; in the pale moonlight he could see how round and firm the satiny, chocolate globes were. Her waist was tiny, and her legs long and toned. He stepped up to her, and his dick was cushioned by the cleft of her ass and coated by her arousal. He was so turned on by the sight of his paler skin against her darker skin that more pre-cum oozed out as he rubbed himself against the lips of her soaked pussy. Sidra moaned at the sensation, clawing at the wall in front of her and arching her ass out, silently pleading for him to take her.

"Spread your legs," he ordered through gritted teeth, torturing them both by stroking his shaft up and down her dripping slit. Casey's eyes rolled back in his head, knowing he wasn't going to be able to last. Shit, he wasn't even in yet, and it was fucking amazing. Sidra was panting heavily and going stir crazy in anticipation. "Are we gonna fuck or what? Let me know because I have a potential suitor who could probably do

what you're doing...maybe even better," she taunted, anxious to get a response out of him. If he stopped now she felt like she would die. Casey saw red at the thought of someone being with Sidra like this and shoved into her with a powerful stroke. She jerked forward onto her tiptoes gasping, "Aaaah!"

Casey gave her a moment to adjust to his girth, gnashing his teeth at how right it felt to be in her overly-saturated walls. Then he started to move, pulling Sidra closer as he thrust deeper and deeper into her. Casey pressed her closer to the wall, grasping both of her wrists in one hand high above her head. His other hand drifted between her legs to massage her swollen clit.

"You think that you're gonna get this somewhere else?" When she didn't answer he thrust even harder, causing her to coat his dick with more of her arousal. The moan Sidra emitted was long and low. "You think he's gonna fuck you like me? No baby, you ain't finding no one else who's gonna be balls deep in your sweet pussy like this."

Sidra was trembling as she willingly took his big dick over and over again. *Damn, the lawyer could fuck. Who knew all this fire lay beneath the uptight prim and proper esquire?* And the shit he was talking in her ear was turning her on even more. Casey's long, thick fingers rubbing on her clit were magical, and she couldn't get enough. She spread her legs even more, giving him better access to her pussy. "More! Fuck me harder! I'm almost there!" she demanded breathlessly, clamping down hard on him and squeezing as his dick put the fiercest of beat downs on her pussy, continuously hitting her g-spot oh so right. Casey dropped her wrists and yanked her head back for a bruising kiss, sucking on her tongue as he fucked and rubbed her. Sidra reached behind to hold his head in place as they exchanged sloppy kisses. Together they were wildly out of control.

Sidra was going to combust; the pleasure was too unbearable. Her legs started to shake harder; and then she was splintering from the inside out as her body exploded so hard, she squirted all over Casey's hand. He was coming too, shoving her right leg upwards and holding it in place to delve deeper into her quaking pussy. Filling her tunnel up with his cum to the point that it was overflowing and running back down her leg, Casey loosened his grip as they fell against the wall gasping for breath.

Reality set in shortly afterwards. Silently, Casey pulled out of her, and they attempted to adjust their clothes. As he buckled his pants, he watched Sidra intently as she attempted to ignore him. She looked beautifully undone to him as she stumbled to pick up her panties; feeling satisfaction at the way she tentatively moved around, and Casey could feel himself hardening again. Idly he wondered how long they could stay gone before they were missed.

Sidra just wanted to get the fuck out of Casey's presence, still incredulous of the dick- down he'd put on her. Her body was aching for a repeat performance, but she wouldn't be the same fool twice, she vowed silently. Avoiding his eyes, she hurriedly bent down to pick up her underwear and paused as something wet trickled down her legs. She stiffened at the same time that Casey saw the pearl-colored fluid as well. They looked at it and then each other before simultaneously exclaiming, "Fuck!!!"

Chapter Seventeen

Dinner with the Romankov's was a lively affair. The food was excellent, and the wine even better. As the designated driver, Jack limited himself to one glass, but encouraged Noelle to

enjoy the finest that the Romankov Wineries had to offer. Before they left, Alexei promised to pack a crate of wine for them to take home. Jack was glad to be home because it gave him a chance to catch up with his sister who proved to be evasive in answering any of his questions. He smelled bullshit and was going to get to the bottom of it. Alexei had been oddly quiet during his subtle-as-a-bull interrogation; and in the end, Noelle had cut the conversation short by asking Kat where she got her necklace from. Kat sent her a grateful look for the diversion, and beaming proudly, she said, “I made it! I’m going to school for fashion, but I really love making jewelry.”

Noelle studied the hammered gold design of Kat’s necklace then glanced down at her wedding ring. She looked up to find all three of them watching her, and it clicked. “Oh my goodness, are you Vixen?! You made my ring didn’t you? Girl, my friends and I love your work!” Noelle raved as Katerina laughed in delight, Jack and her father looking on with pride. “I did! And I told Jack that if he didn’t drive you crazy enough to leave him, I’d make the matching bracelet for your one-year anniversary.”

Noelle glanced at Jack, and he smiled at her enigmatically knowing what she was already thinking: that they didn’t have a year, and their wedding was just a big hoax. She glanced, with a wistful expression, at the ring again, taking in the beautiful design and gorgeous stones, before turning to Kat. “It’s very beautiful, and I love it. Thank you for taking the time to do it. You’re amazingly talented,” she said simply, not willing to address the fact that there wouldn’t be an anniversary to celebrate. Jack shook his head. Poor Noelle. She had no idea the lengths that he would go to ensure there would be plenty of anniversaries.

The only awkward moment of the evening was the mentioning of Vivienne’s name. Katerina went as still as a statue when

Jack said that her mother was annoyed that she was avoiding her.

“I’m not avoiding her,” she mumbled, stuffing food into her mouth; a clear attempt to avoid talking. Alexei turned a sharp glance to his daughter.

“Katya, is this true?” he asked with concern; and she shot Jack a mutinous glare before shrugging her shoulders and meeting her father’s quizzical stare.

After Kat finished swallowing her food, she said firmly, “Papa, I’m not avoiding her. She would like for us to take our annual summer trip, but this year it’s not possible for me. I have...things I’m working on. Mom should understand that as a fellow business woman. Did I complain when I spent all my time with her at the office instead of hanging out with my friends? No, I didn’t. We can still go; just not this summer. I would rather be here with *you*.”

Alexei was silent for a minute as he surveyed his daughter who could be just as stubborn as her mother, before nodding his head. “If that is your decision then I will respect it, *milya moya*.”

Jack was surprised that the older man did not insist Kat contact Vivienne, but he kept his mouth shut. As Jack and Noelle prepared to leave, Alexei motioned for him to hang back and allow the women to walk ahead of them.

“How is she?” he asked in a low voice; the “she” in question being Vivienne. Jack sighed, the feeling of guilt weighing in his chest as it always did whenever he thought of Alexei and Vivienne’s estrangement.

“She’s good, busy with work. Or her book club. Or her mentoring program. You know Vivienne she stays busy,” Jack said neutrally. He watched as the big, powerful man he’d looked up to his whole life allowed his shoulders to sag in defeat for a moment, before his gaze hardened, and he focused ahead on the women.

“I cannot change what happened that night years ago; and for that, I am truly sorry, *Yakov*. It will haunt me until the end of my days. But enough is enough. This thing between Vivi and Katya will not be smoothed by me. If Vivienne wants to see her daughter, then she will need to come here. It is time,” Alexei said, his deep voice ringing with finality.

Under Jack’s skillful driving, the SUV shot down the two lane road smoothly, shadows cast in the pale moonlight from the tall trees on either side falling all over it. It was if every star in the sky had come out to welcome him home. Chase Rice’s version of “Ride” played softly on the radio as Jack replayed the evening over and over in his head. Other than the obvious avoidance that Kat was showing towards her mother, something was really off. It had something to do with the way that she was overly attentive to her father. Her hovering over Alexei’s every move was suspicious to him, and he made a mental note to ask Darby about it the next time he saw him. Noelle’s yawn drew his attention back to her. “How long before we’re there?” she asked sleepily.

“Not long, another ten minutes. Did you have a good time?” Jack asked, thinking how adorable she looked snuggled in his

leather jacket. Although it was mid-spring, the temperature was still cooler due to the mountain's higher altitude.

"I did; they're really nice people, and Katerina is incredibly talented. Jack..." Noelle hesitated, struggling to find the right words without sounding how she felt, which was pathetically grateful. "Thank you very much for the ring. I promise I'll give it back when this is all over with. Words can't express my gratitude to you for helping me out with everything and just being a really good sport about the whole thing."

Jack took his eyes off the road for a minute to look at her. "Noelle, you don't have to thank me. I wouldn't have done any of this if I didn't want to. As far as I'm concerned, the ring is yours forever."

They passed a sign that read "Devil's Hill", and Noelle saw Jack's fingers clench the steering wheel tightly. She reached over and touched his arm, and his muscles were tense. She rubbed in slow circular motions until she felt the tension leave his body; he heaved a sigh, before shooting her a tired grin.

Fifteen minutes later they were pulling up to a huge, three-story, white rustic farmhouse with modern touches that was hidden by huge weeping willow trees. The greenery surrounding the house was overgrown, wild, and lush with azaleas, hydrangeas, gardenias, magnolias, and varying perennials. About three hundred feet from the house was a modern industrial-looking wood and steel building. Behind it, the mountains seemed to go on forever and ever.

This time, Noelle didn't wait for Jack as the car came to a halt. She quickly jumped out, spinning around to take it all in as the scent from the flowers filled her nostrils. She felt Jack standing behind her, and his masculine scent blended right in with the heady aromas of nature surrounding them. She could

feel Jack's eyes on her as she visualized little children, their children, running around with wild curls, and the huge double kitchen windows thrown open with pies cooling on the sill. Lazy weekends filled with family and friends, maybe a pool where Jack would teach their babies how to swim. She wanted that dream so badly it became hard for her to breathe. Finally Jack spoke, "Welcome to my-"

"Home," she finished softly; because she knew in her heart of hearts that was what it was and where she truly belonged.

The inside of the house was large and spacious with blonde wood floors and huge windows. There were four bathrooms and six bedrooms. It had a dreamy, romantic feeling, and Noelle could easily picture it filled with a mix of feminine and male touches, like; floral patterns, velvet, leather, and wood. With the exception of a huge dark brown leather sectional sofa and coffee table in the family room, the only other room with furniture was the kitchen with its exquisite, wood dining set. Noelle spent at least ten minutes oohing and aahing over the detailing.

"This is amazing! Look at the colors in the wood and the pattern on the table legs. This is a four thousand dollar set easily. The style makes me think of my table and bookcase back home. Is it the same person? How'd you get your hands on it? Uncle Ian said the designer only makes one of a kind pieces," she fired off questions as she walked around the elegant piece. Noelle narrowed her eyes as Jack shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

“On top of just being a good guy, I’m pretty well connected, darlin’. Who wouldn’t want to be nice to me?” he smiled, blinking at her slowly with those gorgeous hazel eyes. Noelle was instantly suspicious that the designer was a woman and gave him a skeptical look. As if reading her mind, Jack laughed that deep, wonderful laugh, causing her belly to do flip flops.

“Relax, Mrs. Sullivan. The person in question is a he, not a she,” Jack laughed again as Noelle turned her nose up at him and turned away to hide her smile at being called his missus.

“What are you going to do about furniture?” she asked curiously as she continued to inspect the kitchen. Jack leaned his big frame against the doorway and put an arm over her, effectively trapping Noelle with his body. His nearness made her heartbeat increase and nipples harden as his scent filled her nostrils. His eyes focused on her parted lips for a moment before they slowly rose to meet hers. The air between them was charged with sexual tension.

“Tonight we can crash on the sofa; it has a pullout bed. I’ve got some pieces being delivered the day after tomorrow, but I was hoping that we could go into and Nashville to pick up some things. I’ve been meaning to make it look more like a home, but never seemed to have the time,” Jack said in a low husky voice that sent shivers down her spine. “Since you’ve got excellent taste, maybe you could help me pick some stuff out?”

Pick some stuff out and leave her mark all over his home so that he would be reminded of her when she was long gone and another woman would be made aware of her presence? “I would love to,” Noelle said sweetly.

Jack pulled back to wrap a strong arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead as they walked out. “Why don’t you take a shower and relax? I had Kat come over two days ago and fill the master bath with toiletries and towels. There are some sheets and blankets in the closet off of the living room. I’ll grab the bags from the truck.”

Noelle started towards the stairs. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Oh, and Noelle?” She turned around to look down at him with a questioning look.

“Anything Kat might have put in there for you that’s small and lacy please leave outta sight. I don’t think my poor heart could take it if it was just for show,” Jack said seriously, eyes full of heat before walking out the door. Face burning, Noelle hurried up the stairs for a cold shower, certain it was going to be a *long* night.

Jack couldn’t sleep. He looked over at Noelle and she was face-down in the pillow, knocked out. Being with her was so easy that he knew bringing her here was the right choice to accomplish his goal. She kept the demons of the past at bay. After bringing their luggage in, he went upstairs to also take a quick shower and spied the La Perla bag in the middle of the master bedroom floor. “Christ,” he muttered, resisting the urge to explore the bag’s contents.

When he came back downstairs, they stretched out on the sofa Noelle had set up with blankets and caught up on their

respective messages. Jack deliberately ignored the emails he received from Ian and Alicia, instead focusing his attention on reading the bios Margaret had compiled on two potential clients that requested representation from the firm. One prospect was an Italian-French chef with her own cooking show. Jack was convinced that, with her ambition, she could be the next Martha Stewart. The other prospect was a young, social media tycoon who just wanted to make the world a better place. Ian voted yes to the tycoon and no to the chef. Vivi wanted both to come on board, but Ian was adamant that the chef would be even more trouble than Inez was already proving to be. Jack had the deciding word and would be meeting with both candidates when he got back to New York.

Noelle occasionally asked Jack's opinion in regards to promoting Tarik's party as she typed away on a new business plan that she was drafting. She confided to him that she and Avery were hoping to expand the business to include a floral and gift arrangement division. She was too cute, with her curls pulled into a sloppy bun and large, black- framed glasses that hung on her nose, waving her hands animatedly as she spoke. Finally, the day's events caught up with her. One minute Noelle was talking about what to put in the baskets, and the next she was snoring. Unfortunately, gorgeous girl that she was, her snoring was horrifying. She would kill him if he ever mentioned that her snores were as loud and grating as a chain saw.

The night hummed with nature's choir. The frogs croaking, crickets chirping, and the occasional bird calls had soothed Jack to sleep when he was a little boy; but now all he heard was his last conversation with his mother playing over and over in his mind; his guilt for not doing more eating away at him. Jack hated the feeling of helplessness; of wishing he was bigger and stronger so that he could have taken on Patrick Sullivan. Late at night, after putting his brothers to bed, he'd take his shower and let his tears of grief mix with the warm water.

This house was Jack's tribute to his mother. The flowers and trees planted outside were her favorites, and she'd often told them that she longed for the farmhouse that was her home back in Ireland. He glanced at the stone fireplace where the barn beam mantle laid over it. Her name, birthday, and zodiac sign were elaborately carved into the wood. The tribute to his bastard father was him putting the "Devil's Hill" marker by the road that led up the hill to where the bastard's body was buried.

Noelle rolled over, and he looked down at his sleeping beauty, watching as a tiny frown marred her lovely features. He pulled her close to him, and she snuggled closer, pressing her body to his with her face in his neck. Her black curls sprawled over them, and the frown disappeared. Jack sighed contentedly before soon drifting off into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning, Noelle woke to the delicious aroma of bacon tempting her nostrils. She blinked at the bright light coming through the windows and looked over to the now empty spot where Jack slept last night. Being in his strong arms, with his heartbeat as the lullaby beneath her ear, had been nothing short of heaven. She could hear low voices in the kitchen and decided it would be best to go and make herself presentable.

Eager to get the day started, Noelle quickly relieved herself, showered again, and brushed her teeth. After applying moisturizer and some mascara, she shook her hair around, applied sea salt spray, and scrunched it into beach waves. *Now what to wear.* She decided on a white, off-shoulder tee with

layered gold and silver necklaces and light denim cutoffs. White sandals completed the look.

As she headed to the kitchen, Noelle could hear Jack and another man's voice that she didn't recognize. The country drawl was even deeper than Jack's, but there was a hint of something else; Spanish perhaps? When she entered the room, all conversation stopped, and both men stood up to greet her; but she only had eyes for one.

Jack was dressed in a dark green t-shirt that clung to his sinewy muscles and made his tan appear deeper and blue jeans. Brown, worn, country boots adorned his feet. His hair was ruffled; and although he hadn't bothered with shaving, the scruff covering the bottom of his face was such a turn on that Noelle didn't mind one bit. Gone were the tailored suits and gelled hair; the only thing left on him that was city slick was his Hublot watch. He'd turned into a country boy overnight, and it just made him even sexier to her. *Goodness gracious*, Noelle thought as he smiled warmly at her, his eyes traveling up and down her body before saying, "Mornin', darlin'. How'd you sleep?"

Slow, heat unfurled in her belly, and Noelle felt her body respond to his appreciative gaze. "Morning; fine thanks and you?" she responded huskily; and hearing the need in her tone, Jack's hazel eyes clouded with lust.

"Like a baby." Jack's voice was a low rumble that let her know exactly what was on his mind. Sexual tension filled the air between them as they stared at each other. Self-consciously, Noelle licked her lips, and his eyes burned brighter as they intently followed her tongue. He moved towards her and she to him, but the spell was broken by someone clearing their throat nosily. Embarrassed that she'd quickly forgotten someone else was there, Noelle glanced to her right and couldn't help but

wonder aloud “What the hell kind of Kool Aid are the people in this town drinking?”

The stranger raised a perfect, black eyebrow and quirked his sumptuous-looking lips, before speaking in a deliciously low, slightly accented voice. “I’m afraid that I have no idea as to what you’re talkin’ about, Mrs. Sullivan. I’m more of a Bourbon man than a Kool Aid one myself,” he finished with a wink.

As far as Noelle was concerned, he could have been telling her to jump off the side of the mountain for all the attention she paid to his words. Standing before her was one of the most beautiful men she’d ever seen. He was at least at least six feet-four inches of lean muscle and bore a striking resemblance to the male model Willie Cartier. Where Casey was blonde and angelic, this olive-skinned man with freckles on his face was darkly beautiful and sensuous. His straight black hair hung to his elbows. Thick slashing brows, an aquiline nose, and high cheekbones dominated an angular-shaped face that managed to be delicate and masculine at the same time. Sweeping black lashes covered almond-shaped black eyes that burned bright with mischief, and those sinfully sexy lips were framed by a Fu Manchu.

He could have been a poet, renaissance man, vampire, warrior, or the leader of a drug cartel; his look was that versatile. Hollywood would salivate to get their hands on a man who looked like this. Masculine and lithe, like the artist Prince, he was a walking contradiction and packaged far too sexily for his own good. Noelle knew she was staring and that her beloved Jack was starting to get antsy, but she couldn’t help herself. Then the tables were turned as the stranger subjected her to the same thorough scrutiny, making her blush. *Oh my.* Jack finally broke the silence by walking over and pulling her close to him possessively, and giving the other man a territorial look.

“Baby, I’m gonna give you a pass; because there ain’t a woman alive who hasn’t had the same reaction when they were introduced to Guiles Keetoowah-Marquez, the handsomest son of a bitch in the state. My wife, Noelle,” Jack grudgingly said, his voice laced with irritation. Apparently it was too much to ask that Noelle be immune to his friend’s good looks he supposed. Women had been making fools of their selves over that good-looking bastard since he was born.

Noelle held her hand out, and the other man smiled devastatingly as he reached out to take it; but Jack conveniently chose that moment to direct Noelle towards the table. Gritting his teeth at the knowing chuckle behind him, he pulled out the chair closest to his, and pushed it even closer before gesturing for her to sit. Ignoring her look of irritation at his high-handedness, he gestured towards the plate in front of her. “Are you hungry? I made bacon, eggs, and toast. Let me get you some coffee, too.”

Noelle shook her head in exasperation at Jack as he placed a heaping plate in front of her, before looking at Guiles. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Guiles.”

The other man smiled at her. “My friends call me Guy. Forgive me for starin’, but it’s a pleasure to meet the beautiful woman that finally captured ol’ Serious Sullivan’s heart. I wasn’t aware such a gem was hiding in New York.” The last was said in a lower tone rife with sensual promise that Noelle instinctively knew was meant to irk Jack. Jack walked back over to the table and placed the steaming mug of coffee in front of Noelle, who murmured thank you while cautiously taking a peak at him. He didn’t even notice as his hard eyes were trained on Guy who was staring back at him with amusement as he sat down across from Noelle.

“Do you remember when we were kids and we jumped out of that big tree on Huckleberry Lane? And your britches got caught on a branch? How you were stuck cryin’ and hollerin’ because of that mighty wedgie you were gettin’?” Jack asked pleasantly, watching as Guy’s skin flushed red with embarrassment and his smile disappeared. “Who would believe that your lady-catchin’ voice could have hit a note so high-”

“Rude, Jack! Rude!” Guy shouted as Noelle laughed and dug into her meal. Jack snatched a piece of bacon from her plate only to have it disappear as she snatched it back twice as fast, putting it on the far side of her plate.

“Do not play with me when it comes to bacon,” she said in a serious tone, shaking her head at his gall. Guy laughed at Jack’s puppy dog look, and Noelle took pity on him and scooped up some egg and grits, offering him a bite.

“So tell me about yourself, Noelle,” Guy said in a friendly tone. “Never thought I’d see the day this one here would settle down. Hell, you’re the first girl he’s ever brought home. Congratulations on the wedding by the way; how’d you two meet?”

Noelle blushed, and Guy was enchanted by the heightened color in her cheeks. A sharp pain in his ankle made him wince as he broke his gaze from her and looked over to find his childhood friend giving him a death glare. Silently, Guy vowed retribution as he leaned down to rub his injured ankle.

“Well, I co-own an event planning company with one of my best friends. I’m sure you know Jack’s partner Ian?” At Guy’s nod, she continued, “I’m his goddaughter, and my family are clients of their firm. We met four years ago at my birthday party.”

“Was it love at first sight for you?” Guy asked teasingly, and Noelle shifted uneasily in her chair. Now how exactly was she supposed to answer that? With the truth? Jack would freak and divorce her if he thought she harbored any type of feelings for him. Jack, sensing her discomfort, responded for her.

“What’s with the twenty questions? All you need to know is that she is married, married, and married. Got it?” he said in a hard tone as he held the pot of coffee towards his friend. Guy shrugged and held his cup out to be filled.

“I’m just sayin’. How many southern boys do you know, Noelle? We are a unique breed to experience and savor. You can’t just up and marry the first one you meet and...*owww shit!*” Guy yelped and yanked his leg out from under the table to rub his ankle furiously while glaring at Jack who was innocently eating his breakfast. Noelle hid her grin behind her coffee mug as she took a sip.

“So...how far do you guys think the Grizzlies will get in the playoffs?” Noelle asked.

The conversation quickly turned to the Grizzlies, then football, and finally hockey. Noelle was surprised to find out that Darby played with the Nashville Predators for four years before a knee injury forced him into retirement.

“Wow, I didn’t know that about him, but I guess I could see it,” she said easily picturing the largest brother causing mayhem on the ice and talking shit to opposing teams.

“Oh, you shoulda seen “The Blade”, Noelle. He was quick on his skates. We used to all go down to his games and, there

would be rink bunnies wanting to party with us. Man, Jack, remember that one girl ...” Guys voice trailed off at Noelle’s raised eyebrow and Jack’s pointed look. “Of course that was waaaay before he met someone of your beauty and caliber. Thank you again for upgrading my friend,” Guy backtracked with a sweet smile at her before turning back to Jack.

“Anyway, it’s good to have you home, Jack. Been way too long. When you get a moment, I’ve got some new wood for you to take a look at, some sand-blasted Manzanita and Tectona Teak that is amazing for furniture making. People are going to go crazy for it,” Guy said confidently as he finished his breakfast. “The pieces you requested are out on the porch, coffee table, end tables, and-”

“Wait a minute. Are you a carpenter? Did you design this table?!” Noelle interrupted him, excitedly tapping the table they were sitting at. Guy looked at Jack in confusion. Jack ignored him and scooped up another forkful of eggs from Noelle’s plate for himself.

“I am a carpenter and designer-” Guy said slowly, but she interrupted him.

“This table is fantastic! You did the coffee table and bookshelf that my Uncle Ian gave me didn’t you?” Noelle asked enthusiastically. “I’d love to see more of your work. We were just talking about decorating last night and I think-”

“Yeah, I am familiar with the pieces,” Guy said, interrupting her as he tried to catch Jack’s eye again; but he was too busy drinking his orange juice. Noelle looked at Jack who smiled pleasantly at her and then back at Guy whose brow was furrowed in concentration as if trying to figure something out.

Abruptly, he stood up. “Well, I’d better get going. Thanks for the breakfast, man. Like I said come, check out that wood. Noelle, it was a pleasure to meet you. See you around.”

Noelle murmured, “Likewise.”

Jack stood up as well. “I’ll walk you out.”

Hmmmm, the people in this town are as weird as they are good-looking, Noelle thought. She reached for her phone to call the girls. They were coming to visit at the end of the week, and she wanted to reassure them that the people in Whiskey Row weren’t like the hillbilly friends from the Looney Tunes cartoons.

Outside of the house, the two men walked in silence until they reached Guy’s red vintage Chevy pick-up. It was a classic that he’d spent many hours restoring and never allowed anyone else to drive.

“Hey, thanks for not saving me back there. You were as useful as a trap door on a canoe. You wanna tell me why your pretty little wife has no idea that you’re the one who made that furniture as well as hers? That you own a quarter of *Americana Traditions*?” Guy asked curiously.

“No, I don’t. Mind your own business, Pippy,” Jack warned. Growing up, they occasionally gave Guy shit and called him Pippy, as in Longstocking, when he wore his long hair in two

braids to show pride for his Cherokee ancestry. “I would prefer that it not be disclosed until I’m ready.”

“Well, you better get ready, son. We’ve got orders pouring in, making us busier than a one-eyed cat watching five mouseholes, so we’re gonna need to expand our crew. Holt’s not complaining about the amount of work he’s doing, but we’re only a six-man team. I’ve got some interviews lined up this week; can you do them?” Guy asked. Holt was their other partner and childhood friend. Where Jack was charming and Guy was friendly, Holt was quiet. He only said what was necessary and never spoke more than that. Aside from the three of them, they had one more carpenter that worked for them and two office staff members.

“Yeah, not a problem. Let’s do them in groups at Hooligans,” Jack said.

“Cool; and by the way, we’ve also got a shipment of Blue Mahoe and Golden Spanish Elm coming in from Jamaica. Thinking about making a sample modern furniture collection with it,” Guy said casually.

“Since when do we buy from Jamaica?” Jack asked with a raised brow, not liking Guy’s way too innocent smile.

“Since we can justify it as a buyin’ trip with our accountant and write it off,” he said wiggling his eyebrows.

“What were you doing in Jamaica, bro?” Jack asked curiously. “You don’t even like anything remotely tropical.”

Guy’s face turned serious. “I was chasing a lead that Casey’s detective friend had for me. Supposedly Fern was holed up

down there with the kids,” he grimaced. “Unfortunately, the trail ended there. Ran into an acquaintance of hers that said she was runnin’ a little gift shop, but she got spooked and took the kids again.”

Jack’s face was serious as he clasped his friend’s shoulder in support. “Damn, I’m real sorry to hear that. Do you think she’ll ever stop running? She has to know that your brother passed right?”

A flash of pain crossed Guy’s face. “I would think so. I just want her to know that they’re safe, but maybe it’s just too much for her to deal with.”

Jack still couldn’t imagine Miguel, Guy’s easy-going, older brother transforming into the manic depressive, violent man he’d become since coming back from his tour in Iraq and was diagnosed with PTSD.

“Let us know if you need anything, man. We’re family and will do all we can to help. Don’t try to carry all the weight on your shoulders,” Jack offered.

Guy raised a sardonic brow at him. “Hi Pot, I’m Kettle. I remember how it was for you after Ma passed, may she rest in peace, and how you refused to break down. You’ve stayed away from this place because of what happened; but I gotta say, you look really happy right now.” He turned to look back at the house and so did Jack. They could see Noelle on her cell phone talking and laughing as she washed dishes. “This girl is really good for you, brother.”

Jack smiled and hoped he didn’t look as pussy-whipped as his brothers suggested he was. “I’ve got no complaints, but I did

want to let you know one more thing. Noelle's girlfriends are coming down this weekend, so be on your best behavior."

Guy's eyes lit up, and he rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Girlfriends? As in plural? Do they look anything like her?"

"Down, boy."

Chapter Nineteen

The drive to Nashville was a smooth one; albeit longer than Noelle expected, but the gorgeous scenery more than made up for it. They spent the better half of the day shopping at home décor stores such as Remix Furniture, Restoration Hardware, Anthropologie, Williams-Sonoma, and Z Gallerie. For lunch, they went to the Firefly Grille where Noelle had the buttermilk battered shrimp po'boy, and Jack ate the grilled flank steak; they split a plate of sweet potato fries.

Afterwards, Jack took her to the famous Bluebird Café, and Noelle loved the performances of all the up-and-coming singers. She watched in admiration as Jack chatted up a famous, married country singing couple who came in. He was so at ease laughing and joking with them and their daughters. When he introduced her as his wife, they warmly congratulated them, making Noelle beam with pleasure. It was a great day; and by the time they started heading back to Whiskey Row, she was exhausted, falling asleep before they even hit the highway.

The next morning, Noelle was busy making breakfast when Guy showed up with a big, muscular man in tow. The giant, who matched Darby in height, had wavy, golden blonde hair

and a matching beard that complimented his deeply-tanned skin. His eyes were a very deep blue like the bottom of the ocean. He nodded at her in a friendly fashion, his lips forming a half-smile. Noelle just shook her head in disbelief; and Guy, knowing what she was thinking, bust out laughing.

“Ms. Noelle, I’d like you to meet another childhood friend of mine and Jack’s, Holton Brammer. You can call him Holt.” Guy swiped up a sausage patty and bit into it as he gave his friend a contemplative look before nodding and turning back to Noelle. “Or Thor. Yep, Thor will do also.”

Noelle rolled her eyes at him, but secretly admitted that Holt did resemble Chris Hemsworth as the Marvel Comic character. She smiled and held out her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, Holt.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Congratulations on the weddin’.” Holt’s southern voice was deep, and his handshake was firm. “Please pay no attention to my demented friend. I’m not sure exactly how many times he was dropped as a baby, but I’m pretty sure it was more than ten.”

They all laughed, and Noelle gestured for them to have a seat at the table. “Breakfast is just about done. Have a seat, fellas. I’m about to make some coffee, or would you prefer cappuccinos?”

Guy said yes to coffee with a shot of espresso, and Holt opted for a cappuccino. Jack came downstairs as Noelle was making his cup. He greeted his friends before coming to kiss Noelle’s cheek. “Smells delicious. What are we eatin’?”

“Baked French toast casserole with fried apples, cheese grits, and sausage,” Noelle said, resisting the urge to press her hand

to her cheek where she could still feel his ice cold lips. So his shower had been a cold one. This morning, she'd found herself laying on top of him with a raging hard on pressing into her belly and his hand on her butt to hold her in place. Holding her breath, Noelle slowly raised her head to sneak a peek at him, only to find him looking at her with a sexy, heavy-lidded gaze. His black curls sticking up around his head and the beard growing in were fast becoming her favorite look on him; and Noelle hadn't been able to resist lifting her hand and rubbing it across his coarse cheeks. The heat in his hazel eyes intensified as he grabbed her hand and kissed the center of her palm.

“Don't start somethin' you can't finish, baby.” His voice was low and gravelly from sleep. Jack placed her thumb to his lips and slowly licked it before giving it a gentle nip, causing spikes of pleasure in her nether region. She smiled and rubbed his lips with her thumb.

With a quickness that was dizzying, Noelle found herself beneath him with his face nuzzled in her neck and his groin grinding into her core. His lips trailed kisses down her neck as his hands slid up her torso to palm each breast. Noelle's breathing was ragged in his ear as she tightly gripped his head to her neck and frantically rubbed herself against his long hardness.

“Noelle. God, Noelle I need you so bad,” he groaned; his fingers teasingly plucked her rock hard nipples through her cami, and he bit her shoulder as his hips thrust his erection against her core. “Feel what you do to me.”

Jack could feel her wetness through her boy shorts and knew it would be so easy to nudge them aside while freeing his cock through the hole of his boxers and “accidentally” slide into her. The way she was working her hips was driving him crazy, but he wouldn't do that to her. Couldn't do that to her, no

matter how bad he wanted inside of her delectable body. It still had to be her choice.

“Shit!” he groaned in frustration, pressing his face into the mattress next to her face and beating his fist into its softness. She froze beneath him as he struggled for control. Suddenly he lifted himself off of her completely and left the bed walking out of the room, mumbling over his shoulder, “I need a cold ass shower.”

Jack grabbed cups for the orange juice and brought them to the table as he sat down with his friends to talk. When Noelle brought the tray of coffee over, they all stood up and Jack quickly pulled her chair out as they waited for her to sit down before returning to their seats. *Man, I love a southern gentleman*, she thought to herself with a pleased smile.

“To what do I owe the pleasure so early this morning, fellas?” Jack asked before taking a long sip of his chicory coffee. Damn, Noelle could make a great cup of coffee.

Holt and Guy glanced at Noelle before Guy said nonchalantly, “We wanted to know if you could give us your feedback on two new applicants that are applying for office management. Any chance you could sit in on some interviews this afternoon? Got two lined up for twelve and one.”

“Yeah, I think I can swing it. Me and the missus got plans to go into town anyway, and then hiking. That all right with you, baby?” Jack asked casually, as he took the last sausage and cut it down the middle. Taking one half he put it on Noelle’s plate. She smiled at him brightly, and he felt it in his soul among other places as he discreetly adjusted his lower half under the table.

“This right here is serious business,” Guy said through a mouthful of food as he waved his fork at his plate. The other two men nodded in agreement as they concentrated on their own plates. “Screw Wheaties, this is the real breakfast of champions.”

“Thanks, guys. I’m glad you like it. Guy, what are you doing?” Noelle asked as he made a big show of checking the time and programming his phone. He shrugged and smiled sweetly at her, before grabbing his fork and devouring the rest of his food.

Jack narrowed his eyes at him. “Pippy, I swear to goodness if you set an alarm to be here in time to eat breakfast, it ain’t happenin’.”

Holt turned to give Guy a frown of disapproval. “Is that what you were doin’?”

“Maybe,” Guy said noncommittally and looked at the last of his casserole with sadness. Holt too, looked down at his own empty plate and empty cappuccino mug remorsefully.

“Damn. Why didn’t I think of that? Pick me up on your way in, okay?” he asked, causing Noelle to giggle at their silliness. “Do you take requests, Ms. Noelle?”

Jack shook his head in exasperation. “Y’all need Jesus in the fastest way.”

“You’re more than welcome to stop by,” Noelle said sweetly, ignoring Jack’s scowl. With business increasing, she didn’t get to cook as often as she’d like, so the more the merrier to her.

Whiskey Row was her kind of place, Noelle thought as she walked back to the barbershop. Her first impression when she accepted Jack’s invitation to come here was that it would be a mix of a couple of southern reality shows with no color at all, but so far it was nothing like that. There was a melting pot of cultures; she’d encountered Ethiopian, Ghanaian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Indian, and Native and African Americans in her walk down Main Street. She also saw a lot of BMW’s, Benz’s, and Lexus’s mixed in among Toyota’s, Nissan’s, and Chevy’s in the various parking lots.

Noelle stopped in a men’s store called *Homme* and instinctively knew Jack would love anything she got him from there. It was all things manly and had everything from plaid shirts to jeans to three piece suits. There was tobacco chew display along with cologne, survival kits with lotions and candles, and ties and suspenders artfully displayed with hunting knives. There were Converse’s, mixed with lumberjack boots and dress shoes. The walls were white, covered with black and white pictures of nude women in tasteful poses.

Noelle couldn't resist picking out a cardigan sweater and two ties for Jack. She also picked up a lotion that the sales associate said was a best seller. At a little toy boutique called *The Rabbit Hole*, she bought her nieces and nephews t-shirts and toys. As she was strolling back to the barbershop, Noelle heard someone call her name. Turning around, she saw Katerina in four-inch heels, strutting down the sidewalk towards her as if on a catwalk. Trailing behind her was the security guard, Mikhail, from the guard gate. Noelle waited patiently for him to catch up to her.

“Hi Kat, nice to see you again,” Noelle said warmly, leaning down to give the tiny woman a hug. She waved at the burly guard who inclined his head politely and surveyed the street.

“You too, babe. How's married life going?” Kat asked giggling with delight as Noelle blushed furiously. “That good huh?”

“Mmmmm,” she murmured noncommittally. “Where are you off to?”

“Actually, I was on my way to have lunch with my best friend Autumn,” Kat pointed at the tattoo parlor. “She owns the Ink Stain. We're going to Miguel's Cantina. Care to join us?”

Noelle smiled regretfully. “I would love to, but Jack and I already have plans to go to Hooligans after he's done with his cut. He's going to help Guy and Holt with their interview process, and then we're going for a hike.”

“Oh well, another time then,” Kat suggested hopefully with a sweet smile, and Noelle smiled in agreement. Katerina

Romankov was a total sweetheart that made her think of Avery.

“Yes, definitely,” Noelle said.

They both turned towards the Ink Stain as the saloon-style doors opened and a slender woman, wearing a short-sleeve, fitted, white fitted t-shirt, frayed denim cutoffs, and black utility boots stepped out. Her curly hair was short, shaved close on the sides with longer curls on top, tumbling over one eye. It was dyed the color of a sunset and complimented her flawless, golden complexion perfectly. Behind large, square-framed clear glasses, her big, round, dark eyes shone with friendly curiosity; and her full, plump, pink lips gave her an innocent expression despite the delicate tattoos visible on her arms and sides of her neck.

“Oh, you’re right on time. Autumn, this is Noelle, my new sister-in-law; and Noelle, this is my bestie Autumn Brady,” Kat said. Both ladies shared friendly greetings, and Autumn shook her head giving a playful whistle.

“You so know hearts are breakin’ all over ‘The Row’ now that a Sullivan brother has been taken off the market! I bet it’s got Darby and Casey quakin’ in their boots knowing the women in this town must be comin’ up with new strategies to reel them in.” Autumn laughed delightedly, causing the other two ladies to join in. They chatted for a few minutes more with a promise to get together before going their separate ways.

As Noelle stepped into *The Gentleman’s Club*, a sense of nostalgia swept over her. Instinctively she knew this was the kind of place that her Uncle Harvey would have loved. It was old fashioned and designed in reclaimed wood with a black and white tiled floor. Divided into several sections, there was the main barber shop, a shaving area, a shoe shining station,

and game tables that were occupied with customers playing poker, spades, and dominoes, etc.

She walked up to Jack who was conversing with the owner Antonio Ladeaux, a dark-skinned Adonis that greatly resembled Idris Elba. Noelle could tell they had a good relationship when they were introduced, and he slyly teased Jack about going over to the dark side. Jack just laughed, taking it in stride.

“Hey, pretty girl. Whatcha got there?” Jack asked reaching his hand out to her. She took it and curled hers around his much larger one, reveling in what his touch alone could do to her. As she took in the details of his haircut and facial trim, the shorter cut really emphasized his curls and the intensity of his hazel eyes. The whiskers around the lower half of his face were now cleaned up and framed his sensual lips and square jaw.

“Nothin’ just a lil sumptin’, sumptin’,” she teased, loving the way his eyes darkened as they traveled down her body clad in a pilot style light denim jumpsuit and nude heels. Noelle’s straightened hair lay in sleek layers down her back.

Jack smiled as his eyes traveled over his wife’s radiant beauty. He’d instantly been aware of her presence when she walked in, and the easy going atmosphere inside of the shop turned into a predatory one as the men took notice of her. He pulled her in close enough to slide his arm around her waist and whisper hotly into her ear. “Oh yeah? You gonna show me a lil’ sumptin’ sumptin’ when we get home?”

He laughed quietly, loving the way her cheeks flushed, and Antonio chuckled. “And on that note, my brother, I will bid you *adieu*. Mrs. Sullivan, it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s Noelle, and likewise. You’re so bad,” she whispered to Jack as they walked away, hoping no one noticed how her nipples were pressing through her bra as arousal coursed through her body.

“Don’t act like you don’t know, darlin’,” Jack returned with a roguish grin that turned into a laugh at her open-mouthed, wide-eyed look.

Chapter Twenty.

Avery had been staring blankly at her computer screen for the last ten minutes, even though she had far more important things to do than waste her time in this manner. She still had to make sure her flower vendor had the product she requested for Tarik’s party, and that it would arrive on time; or maybe go down to the venue with her checklist and ensure things were progressing smoothly. She also needed to interview the backup deejay in case Sidra couldn’t spin that night. Instead, she was wondering what to wear tomorrow night for her first meeting with Pierce’s mother.

Ever since she’d finally snapped and gave him a piece of her mind, Pierce had been falling all over himself to get back into her good graces. Avery was getting flowers every other day, baskets of fruit, and poems. *Poems for God’s sake!* He was calling her three to four times a day, and tomorrow he was finally bringing her to meet his mama. *His mama.* In all the months of dating, Avery had inquired about meeting Pierce’s parents on numerous occasions since he’d already met hers, but he always said when the time was right. Apparently, her

being on the verge of breaking up with him was the perfect time to meet his mama.

So everything was going great.... except for their sex life. It seemed that he still couldn't cross that hurdle and bring himself to be physical with her. While Avery was not one to base her relationships on what happened between the sheets, she did have needs— needs that had her overworking her B.O.B. and ordering one with more stamina and girth, which she found herself using on a more than regular basis.

The only problem with that was every time she closed her eyes and tried to imagine Pierce, a certain charming redheaded rascal always popped into her mind to assist in stimulating the best orgasms Avery had ever had as he whispered all the dirty, filthy things he wanted to do to her.

The phone rang, shaking her out of her reverie; and she answered it without checking, since it was probably Pierce with his *third* call of the day.

“Hello?” she said morosely and was surprised to hear a deeper voice than Pierce's on the other end. It was a voice with a southern drawl that made her stomach dance with butterflies.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Avery. It's Darby Sullivan. I didn't catch you at a bad time did I?” he asked smoothly. Goosebumps appeared on her arms. His accent had her feeling some kind of way for sure. Plus, he wasn't hard on the eyes either.

“Uh..no..uh..hi,” she stammered weakly and then slapped her forehead. His laugh was low and seductive, almost as if he knew she dreamed about him. “You weren't interrupting me, Darby. How have you been?”

“Oh, I can’t complain. I was calling to make sure that you were still coming down to Tennessee at the end of the week; getting all the flights coordinated so that only one trip is needed to pick everyone up in Knoxville. You gonna be able to make it?” Avery closed her eyes as she listened to his drawl. It sounded exactly the same in her dreams. Especially the one where he said things like, “*Spread your legs wider. I’m gonna make you feel real good, Ms. Avery.*”

“Ms. Avery, are you still with me?” Darby asked sounding concerned and startling her once again out of her reverie.

“Yes, I’m still here!” she squeaked. “I was just looking through my schedule to make sure I get everything done before Thursday. Looks like I’ll be okay. How about I email you the flight details after I talk to Sidra? What’s your email address?”

“It’s ringoffire@gmail.com,” he drawled, making her laugh. Of course he was a Johnny Cash fan.

“I love that song! It’s so real; love songs just aren’t what they used to be,” she said with a sigh of regret.

“A girl after my own heart. Music nowadays just talks about what someone’s gonna do to someone else when they get them alone. No heart, just the physical,” Darby said with such disgust it made Avery laugh again. “Especially R & B. Old school stuff had you ready to wife somebody, but this new crap gives you specific plans on how to cheat and not get caught.”

“Exactly! Some people like music because of the beat, but I listen to the words. If the beat’s great on top of good lyrics, then it’s a plus to me,” she replied.

“Amen to that. Listen, when you ladies get down here you, should come check out my bar that I co-own with a buddy of mine,” Darby suggested. “After you get settled in, of course. It gets a little wild at times, but there’s always a good time to be had at *Hooligans*.”

“*Hooligans*?” Avery repeated dubiously. Although she was down to try it out, the name made her question the type of establishment he owed.

“Yep, when I was growing up, Sister Mary McCloud used to scold me and call me a little hooligan; saying that if I didn’t apply myself, I would never amount to anything,” Darby replied; and Avery could picture his cocky smile clear as day. “She’s long since retired and wouldn’t ya know, she’s my best customer? Shows up faithfully to participate in the wet t-shirt contest first Saturday of each month to a full house.”

Avery burst into full-fledged laughter, and he joined in with his booming laughter. Talking to Darby was really nice; and despite her kinky dreams, she couldn’t believe how at ease she felt with him.

Before she could respond, a woman’s voice could be heard screeching in the background, “Darby, bring your fine as hell, sorry ass out here! You sexy son of a bitch! How dare you try to sneak back into town and not call me?!”

What the hell was she thinking?? Avery sat up coming out of her Darby daze. She had someone, and apparently he did too; a very pissed off someone from the sounds of it. “Well it sounds like you need to go. I’ll email you that information as soon as I

discuss it with Sidra. Bye, Darby,” Avery said hurriedly and hung up before he could respond. Groaning, she put her head on her desk. She was a fool. A complete and utter fool.

Darby stared at the phone in his hand and resisted the urge to throw it at his best friend Ginger’s head as she stood in the doorway of his office at *Hooligans*, glaring daggers at him. All week long he’d been gathering up the courage to call Avery. Just the sound of her musical voice had big, bad ass Darby Sullivan’s palms sweating. If any of his friends, or worse, his brothers knew, they would never let him live the shit down. The conversation was going great until the hot-headed she-devil standing before him burst in.

“Dammit, G! You’ve got the worst timing. What the hell was so important that it couldn’t wait? I know Sara told you I didn’t want to be disturbed,” he sighed with irritation as he scowled at his best friend since his junior year of high school, who remained unperturbed by his bad mood as she scowled right back at him.

Although you’d never know it, to look at her, Ginger Wyatt had grown up P.K., a preacher’s kid with a clean, shiny face, glasses, and brown hair which was now died platinum blonde. Her pale skin was heavily tattooed across her shoulders and back which she displayed with the corset’s she constantly wore. She was the poster girl for ‘good girl gone bad’, with her full breasts on display and her curvy behind encased in either leather or skintight jeans.

Although she drove the men in town crazy with her looks, personally they did nothing for Darby. They were just friends and had been since he beat the shit out of Lance Davis for stealing her asthma inhaler in high school.

He'd gone to the track meet to watch Casey run the 400 relay. After cheering his brother on, they'd stayed to watch a couple of more races when he noticed a commotion behind the bleachers. It was the frail voice that caught his attention and made him get up to investigate with Casey right behind him. It was weak and sounded almost like a kitten mewling.

"Give it back. Please...I really need it. My chest hurts," the frail voice pleaded, followed by a pitiful sob. It was followed by the sneering tone that was used by most of the rich kids in town. As Darby came around the corner, he saw rich boy Lance Davis standing there in his pristine varsity jacket, holding an inhaler over his head, gloating down on the frail, red-faced girl clutching her chest.

"Why don't you come get it? Look at you! Poor baby, are you going to pass out? You were the weak link on the team today, causing my little sister to place second. My family is second to no one in this town! You hear me, girl? Nobody!" He bent down and shook the inhaler in her face, laughing as she feebly tried to grab it. "Not so fast, little girl. Tomorrow you're going to Coach Henderson and quitting the team. You understand me?"

The poor thing couldn't even answer because she was wheezing so hard. Filled with rage, Darby charged and punched Lance in the throat causing him to drop the inhaler and gasp for air, grasping at his throat. Next, he punched him as hard as he could in the stomach and the older boy doubled over in pain, now wheezing himself. Then for good measure, Darby kicked him in the balls, and Lance fell to the ground in

agony, trying to find a way to get air in, as his pain-filled face turned blue.

Enraged, Darby stood over him as Casey helped the weak girl use her inhaler. He met Darby's raged-filled eyes and shook his head in disgust at Lance. He knew Lance wasn't just getting it because of what he did. He knew the rich bastard was getting it for being cruel like their father.

"What's the matter, mother fucker? Having trouble breathing? I can't hear you! Get your bitch ass up and take it like a man!" Darby said menacingly as Lance continued to writhe in agony. He leaned down and covered Lance's nose and mouth, making it harder for the other boy to breathe. "Breathe, bitch! C'mon breathe!"

"Please no more, Darby," the girl begged softly. Darby met her pleading gaze and could see that she was starting to look better already. She struggled to stand and managed with Casey's help. Her light blue eyes were huge behind her coke bottle glasses, and she barely came to his brother's shoulder. He didn't know who she was, but she seemed to know him.

Darby nodded at Casey to indicate that they should leave him with Lance. He made sure they were out of hearing before leaning down to get in Lance's pain-filled face. The other boy immediately cowered with his hands over his head. "If you or your homies even look at her, I will come for you, you piece of shit. I will come for you every day in some way until you can't take it anymore and have to leave town. Look at me!"

Fearfully Lance met his gaze, and although Darby hated saying it, he had to get his point across. "You know who I am right, bitch? I'm a Sullivan, and it's no secret in this town what we're capable off."

It was later that evening as he and Casey were eating dinner with Alexei that the intercom buzzed. Alexei answered and was notified that there was a Pastor Wyatt there to speak to him. Casey and Darby exchanged glances that Alexei's shrewd gaze caught as he wiped his mouth, tossed his napkin down and pushed his chair back.

"I will need to be making a generous donation on your behalf to the church, da? he asked Darby in a dry tone as he stood up. "Is there something either of you wish to tell me before I meet this man of God?"

Darby quickly shoveled food into his mouth. "Yeah...this is some good spaghetti. Cook sure can burn in the kitchen."

Casey and Alexei rolled their eyes before leaving the room to wait for their unexpected guests. With a sigh, Darby reluctantly got up to follow. There was a knock at the door and, Alexei opened it to reveal a middle-aged white couple that Darby had never seen before. The woman was short and round with blonde hair braided in two plaits. She looked at Darby and gave him a smile that made him think of his dear mama's. The man appeared to be older with receding blonde hair. He wore glasses and a stern expression. His gaze steady as he surveyed Darby. Then he turned to Alexei and held his hand out.

"Good evening, Mr. Romankov. My name is Jim Wyatt, and this is my wife Nadine. I'm the new pastor over at First Methodist. We've just moved here from Rock Head, Missouri. We're sorry to bother you at the dinner hour, but we felt it couldn't wait another day to address the issue at hand."

Alexei grasped the man's hand in a firm handshake before giving his wife a gentler one. "It's a pleasure to meet you both. These are my boys, Darby and Casey. What exactly IS the issue at hand?"

The boys nodded politely; and Darby, fidgeting under the Pastor's and Alexei's speculative gazes, stared at the floor.

"Well sir, as a servant of God I normally don't condone violence of any kind but...I'm forever in your son's debt and would appreciate it if you would accept our invitation to Sunday dinner."

Darby's eyes flew up to meet Jim Wyatt's tear-filled gaze. "Thank you for what you did today, son. Thank you." The pastor said humbly, holding his hand out for Darby to shake. Not quite sure what to say, Darby nodded his head and returned the man's handshake, pissed that he was blushing like a school girl underneath Alexei and Casey's proud gazes.

"Helloooo? Earth to Darby? I apologize for the rude entrance, but I've been emailing you reminders about our big investors meeting all week. You know the one that I attended in Nashville by myself two hours ago? You swore you wouldn't miss it, but you did!" Ginger pointed her finger at him. "We're partners, Sullivan. Your fuck up is my fuck up, and last I checked, I'm not in the business of getting fucked without pleasure, *partner*."

Darby winced, hoping that good Pastor Jim may he rest in peace, wasn't looking down from Heaven, listening to his little 'Ginny' be so crude. She ignored his pained expression and continued on with her rant.

“We’ve been working on this expansion deal for a long time, so I need to know that your head’s in the game before we go any further.” And with that, she slammed out of his office.

Darby leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. Although he came off as a good time guy, he never fucked around when it came to business and making money. He needed to get focused, to stop wasting time thinking about a certain brown-eyed angel with killer curves and a sweet smile; an angel who belonged to someone else.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Finally, a moment alone,” Noelle whispered in relief as she heard Jack leave the house. This week was the best and worst of her life. It was the best because she and Jack were having fun hiking, hanging out, and decorating the house. They were instinctively on the same page in deciding what colors looked great in each room as well as the furniture style to go with it. It was the worst because the days and nights were rife with sexual tension and lustful looks between them. Her nerves were permanently stressed.

Whenever he was in the vicinity, Noelle could feel Jack’s hot gaze on her; and even the most mundane things like watching him drink a bottle of water or painting the walls turned into some of the most erotic shit she’d ever seen. Two days ago, the sexual tension had finally boiled over, and things had been strained between them ever since.

After doing her nightly yoga routine on the back porch, Noelle went upstairs to take a shower. When she walked into the master bedroom, Jack was just coming out of the bath, fresh

from his own shower, wearing only a low-slung towel wrapped around his hips. Frozen at the sight of his near nakedness, Noelle could only stare at all that muscular flesh rippling as he started to apply lotion to his arms. His body was pure perfection- broad shoulders, slim waist with rock hard abs, and thick, muscular thighs and legs. Miguel's "Adorn" bumped in the background.

Jack was speaking in a low voice. Noelle couldn't answer because she was too busy watching his erection grow beneath his white towel. Just thinking about its thickness moving so deep inside of her was making her sweat even more in her sticky workout clothes. "Noelle? Do you mind?"

She pulled her gaze upward to focus on Jack and the bottle he was holding out to her. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

He raised an eyebrow and grinned wickedly at her. 'I know what you want,' his expression taunted. But the real question was could she be bold enough to go and get it? Instead, he repeated himself patiently. "I asked if you could please put some lotion on my back."

Noelle stared at the bottle of lotion she'd bought for him as if it were a snake, before wordlessly taking it. You can do this, she told herself. Jack turned around and she stared at the wide expanse of golden skin in front of her. Since coming to Tennessee, he'd gotten considerably darker from being outdoors, and brown freckles were starting to appear on his arms and across his nose. Noelle opened the bottle, and the pleasant scent of lemon with verbena filled her nostrils.

"Mmmm, that smells really good," she murmured as she squirted a generous amount into one hand and tossed the bottle onto the extra-large king bed he'd insisted on buying. Like a brother, she reminded herself as she rubbed her palms

together and placed them on Jack's shoulders. Briskly she started to rub, and he tensed at her touch before giving a groan of pleasure and dropping his head forward, goosebumps breaking out across his skin.

All thoughts of brotherly love vanished, as she massaged the smooth liquid into his warm flesh. Her fingers trailed along his skin lovingly and she watched as the muscles flexed beneath them when she traced his tattoo. The lotion was long absorbed but still she couldn't resist touching him while he remained silent and still. Noelle's body was aching for this man's touch and she could tell he was just as affected when she saw his hands clenching and unclenching. His reaction made her feel bolder, and she dared to dip her fingers beneath the top of his towel, grazing his firm ass. The song faded and their ragged breathing filled the room.

"That's enough," Jack said in a low, guttural tone and Noelle instinctively dropped her hands, shocked at how harsh and animalistic his voice sounded. With his fists clenched, he walked across the room, keeping his back to her.

"I can only take so much, Noelle. You don't have a clue about how bad I want to be buried inside of you, do you? That night we slept together plays on repeat in my mind; how good you smelled, felt, and tasted. So I need you to do to one of two things: You're either gonna get naked for me, or you're gonna walk away. Pick one or the other, but you've got fifteen seconds to decide. Fourteen...thirteen..."

Jack whirled around and Noelle was shocked at how feral he looked. She lowered her eyes to see his massive erection straining against the towel as the countdown continued. "Nine..six.."

She squealed as he slowly moved towards her, a predatory look in his eyes, and ran into the bathroom, quickly locking the door behind her. "Coward," she whispered to her reflection, surprised to see how wild her own eyes looked in her flushed face.

That night, she treated herself to a long, cold shower.

Noelle wanted to give in. Oh, how she wanted to, but there was so much more at stake. He was playing for her body, while she was playing for keeps. When it was all said and done, if it didn't work out, she'd be the one left picking up the pieces...of her broken heart.

So instead of giving in to temptation, Noelle threw all her sexual frustration into cooking and baking. She'd discovered a love for southern cooking and was addicted, especially to barbeque after Jack decided to order her a plate at Darby's bar, *Hooligans*. The ribs melted in her mouth; so meaty and tender that she devoured them in record time. Ginger sent her home with a to-go box full of ribs that she held on to protectively as if it were a pot of gold, much to Jack's amusement. Although embarrassed, Noelle practically ran to the car with her bounty; and when Jack found her in the kitchen at one in the morning licking her fingers clean of barbeque sauce, she simply murmured, "Don't judge."

Since then, she'd been researching cooking techniques and regional styles such as the Carolinas, Texas, Memphis, and Mid-South and was currently experimenting with sauces. Every day, Guy, Darby, Alexei, and Holt came over to help

with the house; and while the guys worked, Noelle did what she loved to do most-cook.

She made big, hearty meals, and they all sat in the backyard eating, listening to music, and playing card games. Every meal they had included sweet tea and something barbequed. They were her guinea pigs and always eager to try out her new recipes. So far, quail wrapped in bacon with Dr. Pepper barbeque sauce was the most popular. They were adamantly against eating the barbequed salt and vinegar pig's feet and teriyaki chitlins.

Noelle was putting the final touches on her baked salmon, when she heard a car screech to a stop and doors slam. Wiping her hands on the *Kiss the Cook* apron tied around her waist, she walked towards the front door and opened it in time to see Avery storming towards her dragging her hot pink roll-on luggage. She was followed by a glamorously sulking Sidra. Behind them, a classic mustang peeled off down the driveway.

Avery, reeking of liquor, brushed past her and into the house with a mumbled, "Hey girl."

Noelle stared after her with raised eyebrows and turned to greet her other friend who just gave her a wan smile before going into the house and leaving Noelle standing by the open door. "Well damn," she said loudly and shut the door.

Noelle walked back into the kitchen to find Avery, nails tapping on the granite, glaring at Sidra as she leaned against the island and finished off a bottle of Bud Light she'd found in

the fridge as Sidra avoided her gaze and plucked at her purse strap. *Uh-oh*, Noelle thought, eyeing the now empty bottle that Avery had killed in under a minute. Avery was a light drinker, more often than not, she only drank a fourth of whatever alcoholic beverage she ordered. Shit had to have really jumped off for her to down a beer like that.

“Soooo...how was the trip?” she asked brightly, walking back over to the oven to check on lunch. Silence. *Okaaaaay*. Noelle tried again.

“I hope you brought your appetites because per your requests, I made my famous baked salmon with a berry salad! I told Jack we’d meet him and the boys in town for a night out after we had a chance to catch up. Sound good?” Again silence. She slammed her hand down on the counter. “All right, heifers! Start talking dammit! I’ll be damned if the two of you are going to come up in my space and disrespect it!”

Avery took a deep breath and finally looked away from Sidra. She flashed Noelle an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, babe. You know I’m always happy to see you. Thank you for having us here this weekend.” She turned to Sidra and pointed a perfectly manicured index finger at her as she spoke to Noelle “This one....I just can’t... with her. Maaaaaan listen...” She stopped to take a deep breath shaking her head in exasperation.

Sidra rolled her eyes and turned to Noelle. “It wasn’t that bad, I swear. Ave’s totally exaggerating.”

“I’m exaggerating?!” Avery shrieked so loud both women winced. “Really, Sidra?! I’m exaggerating? So I didn’t just spend the last three hours trapped between you and Casey as you guys slaughtered each other with insults while Darby tried to play peacemaker? It’s a wonder I’m not covered in blood!”

Avery was the sweetest person Noelle knew. Not one to normally lose her cool, she could be counted on to see the positive side in any situation -except for this one apparently. Sidra sucked her teeth hard in defiance as Noelle really noticed her normally impeccable friend's haphazard appearance for the first time.

Avery's thick, shiny hair was pulled to the side in a sloppy ponytail with strands sticking out all over. The collar of her fitted black and white gingham checked shirt was twisted and her full black skirt was severely creased. Noelle looked down at her feet and saw that her open toe black heels were slightly scuffed and the polish on her big toe was chipped.

With a sympathetic look, Noelle walked over to Avery and gave her a hug before gently steering her towards the doorway. Speaking to her in a soothing tone, she said, "Okay, baby girl. You're no longer a potential witness to a homicide. Why don't you go wash up while I finish with lunch? Afterwards we'll head out so I can show you guys around." Noelle pulled Avery close for a reassuring hug as another shudder wracked the shorter woman's frame.

"I think the two of them were a serial killer couple in another life," Avery whispered to Noelle and cringed. "You should have seen the joy they took in hurling insults at each other." She whipped her head around to glare at Sidra. "If you even think of continuing where the two of you left off the next time you see him; you're going to get more of what I gave you in the car. I will be all over you like a freaking spider monkey, Sidra Jane Barton."

The threat was enough to make Sidra clutch at her ear protectively as Avery flounced out of the room, leaving both of her friends to stare after her in shock.

Darby eyed Casey's hands clenched tightly around the mustang's steering wheel, as they sped away from Jack's house. The way his baby brother was gripping it made him think he wished it were Sidra Barton's graceful neck in his hands right about now. Darby was amazed at the change in Casey because he wasn't used to seeing him this rattled. Even when he was beating aggressive women off with a stick, the youngest Sullivan was charming and polite in his rebuff; the perfect freaking gentleman at all times, except when it came to Ms. Sidra Barton.

So Darby was not surprised when Casey, upon seeing Sidra this afternoon as she entered the cabin of the private jet, started to radiate animosity. She promptly ignored him as she reached up to kiss Darby's cheek in greeting before silently sliding into the seat across from Casey. With her eyes hidden behind large dark sunglasses, Sidra pulled out her laptop and proceeded to type away, appearing oblivious to the steam coming out of Casey's ears as he glared at her.

Darby started to make a joke to ease the tension, but immediately forgot about them as Avery Monroe entered the cabin. Just seeing her sweet radiant smile and sparkling brown eyes made his heart pound. She was so pretty and ladylike that she made him sweat. The goody-two shoe ones always did which was exactly why he stayed away from them. Sure they looked like butter wouldn't melt in their mouth, but he knew firsthand that behind the big eyes and fluttering lashes lurked scheming brains and hearts made of stone. So instead, Darby went for wild ones who knew the score. They had a raunchy good time and nobody was blindsided by pesky things like

feelings. He'd made the 'goody-goody' mistake once, and it had been a hard lesson learned.

"Well hey there, Ms. Avery. Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" he murmured, watching as she blushed prettily; in the background he could hear a low-heated exchange between Casey and Sidra.

"Hi, Darby. It's very nice to see you as well. Thank you for the ride; it was very nice of you to offer," Avery said warmly.

After receiving an email from mizzmanners@hotmail.com informing him that she and Sidra couldn't get same day flights and wouldn't be in Whiskey Row until the next day, Darby asked Alexei if he could borrow his private plane.

The Russian agreed on one outrageous condition which Darby readily accepted, but still had no idea how he was going to pull off. All this, just to see if what he felt the first time he'd seen the beautiful Avery Monroe was a fluke. Standing in front of her now and hungrily drinking her in, he realized it wasn't, and that he was definitely up shit creek without a paddle. He had a witty reply ready; but it was interrupted by Sidra yelling, "You, asshole!" to which Casey replied immaturely, "Takes one to know one."

From there it was on and poppin', with Sidra and Casey flinging insults at each other the entire flight. Some were subtle, most harshly direct. Avery tried to distract her friend, and Darby attempted to play peacemaker while the flight staff avoided them like the plague at all costs. It was only when drinks were served that Avery and Darby thought a peace treaty could be in the works.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be. When Sidra stood up to put her laptop in the storage compartment, Casey muttered something and Sidra froze before snatching her drink and whirling around. Darby, seeing her intent, lunged forward to grab the glass. He grabbed Sidra's wrist and held it high, which unfortunately led to the drink spilling out over her shoulder and onto Avery. For a moment, there was silence as everyone stared at her shocked face and her now liquor-stained outfit.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod....I'm so so sorry, Avery!" Sidra babbled quickly grabbing some napkins and attempting to wipe her friend dry. Casey went to get a towel and help as well. Avery just sat there in shock. Then the bickering started again.

"Are you attempting to cop a feel? Take your hands off of her, pervert!" Sidra hissed and smacked Casey's hands away.

"Me?? This would never have happened if you hadn't been acting like you have no home training," Casey muttered under his breath, causing Sidra to suck air through her teeth loudly.

"What the hell did you just say?! You-"

Darby was done.

"The both of you shut the fuck up!!!!" he roared, and all three of them jumped. "Now let's work together to get her cleaned up, and your silence would be appreciated for the rest of the trip."

But again, it wasn't to be. The drive home was proving to be just as torturous as Casey drove the classic mustang that he kept at the airport hangar. Sidra sat behind him in the

backseat, and he took great pleasure in winding his window all the way down which caused her to complain about her hairstyle being ruined. Then she questioned his choice in white devil music and started to play Kendrick Lamar's "Bitch Don't Kill My Vibe" on her iPad. Casey retaliated by playing Kanye and Rhianna's "4, 5 Seconds". Through it all, Avery remained quiet; but Darby could see, as he watched her in his mirror, that she was on the edge of exploding when her left eyebrow started to twitch uncontrollably.

Sidra was just starting in on Casey's masculinity when all of a sudden she yelled, "Ouch! What the fuck, Avery?! That shit hurt!"

"SHUT.... IT." Avery said in small but deadly voice. Sidra opened her mouth to say something else but the only thing that came out was a high painful yelp that made Darby think of the sound a puppy would make if you stepped on its tail. He looked over at Casey who was grinning with glee until Avery's hand snaked between the front seats and gave him a quick pinch to the elbow, causing him to shout, "Holly hell, Ms. Avery!!! My arm feels like it's going numb."

"Wanna talk about it?" Darby asked conversationally, watching as Casey's knuckles turned whiter.

"No," Casey replied in a terse tone then a moment later, "That woman is going to drive the crazy bus 'til the fucking wheels fall off."

"Okay." Darby paused a beat. "So when did you finally sleep with her?"

The car almost swerved into the next lane. "What the hell man! Who told you that?" Casey howled. "That loudmouthed

witch,” he mumbled before using a high falsetto tone that Darby could only assume was supposed to be Sidra’s, but sounded nothing like her. ‘This never happened, Casey Sullivan! If you even attempt to say we slept together, I will deny it, and you’ll be hearing from my lawyer!’”

Darby gave a shout of laughter as he realized what a blow to his brother’s ego that must have been. “It wasn’t really that hard to deduce if you knew the signs to look for. The way you guys watch each other when you think the other isn’t looking. Or the way you guys take jabs at each other just to make the other pay attention,” Darby said mildly and shook his head, “It was bound to blow up in y’all’s faces. The two of you separated are cool as shit. Together, though? I wouldn’t wish you on my worst enemy. Y’all are like toddlers without naps.”

“Screw you, D,” Casey said with a stormy expression. He could admit to himself that today was certainly one for the books and planned on apologizing to Ms. Avery the first chance he got her away from that loud-mouthed shrew. When Sidra first entered the cabin in her black leather pants and white tee, his body had hummed with pleasure at seeing her again; and he had every intention of being civil-until he realized she was going to just act like he didn’t exist as she turned her nose snootily in the air. His mind flashed to their last showdown in Vivienne’s garden.

After realizing they hadn’t used a condom, Sidra had completely shut down. Casey offered her the handkerchief that he never left home without. Wordlessly, she’d taken it and turned away to clean herself up and scrambled into her clothes as she attempted to smooth down her curls.

“Are you on the pill?” Casey asked calmly, although his heart felt like it would jump out of his chest at any minute. How could he have done something so irresponsible? And with

Sidra 'Psycho' Barton of all people? One minute he was thinking about how much he disliked her; and the next, he was convinced her pussy deserved its own gold star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He watched as she jerkily nodded her head to confirm that she was. "Listen, Sidra, I've never had unprotected sex, and my last physical was eight weeks ago. I came back with a clean bill of health. I'll get your email from Margo and send it you."

Still avoiding his eyes, Sidra said nothing and attempted to walk around him. Irritated, he latched onto her wrist when she would have walked away. Her reaction was immediate, and she jerked back as if she had been burned. "Don't ever touch me again," she whispered in a raw voice.

Sidra's voice was hoarse and thick; and Casey could only surmise that she was just as shaken up about them fucking as he was. Her rejection still stung nonetheless, and he retaliated with words. "Relax. You don't have to worry about me touching you again," he said coldly and shoved his hand into his trouser pocket. "What I would like is reassurance that you're clean, and you don't make a habit of fucking men you barely know in dark corners."

CRACK! His head snapped back from the impact of her hand, and the side of his face throbbed where she slapped him. Rage flooded through Casey even though he knew he deserved it, and he grabbed her by the arms, pulling her flush against his body. Instinctively, his cock hardened again. He knew Sidra was aware of his reaction when her eyes widened, feeling it pressing into her belly. Inwardly he cursed, wishing that even as he fought off the urge to respond in kind, he didn't want to be deep in her magical pussy again.

Casey looked down into her eyes and saw anger mixed with fear and awareness. Sidra licked her lips nervously but

defiantly held his gaze. “I’m clean, and no, I don’t randomly hook up with strangers.” She jerked back, and he let his arms drop away from her. “This was a mistake, and it never happened. If you say that it did, I’ll deny it; and then you’ll be hearing from my lawyer, do you understand?”

“Like I said, you don’t have to worry about me touching you... unless you put your hands on ME again. Do YOU understand?” he said menacingly and felt pleasure in watching her step even further away from him. “And the next time, I won’t restrain myself, sweetheart.”

“Hey...Case!” Darby said loudly and snapped his fingers, pulling him out of his reverie. He shook his head and glared at his amused brother.

“Just forget it man. I plan to,” he said short-temperedly. There was a five-minute pause before Darby spoke again.

“It was really good though huh, bro?”

Casey said nothing and cranked the volume on the radio. But even the music blasting through the speakers couldn’t drown out Darby’s diabolical laugh.

Chapter Twenty-Two

From Noelle's back porch, Sidra sipped her glass of orange blossom iced tea and took in the scenic view of the Smoky Mountains around her. It was so peaceful here with the birds chirping musically and the gentle breeze blowing that she was surprised at how much she liked it. A city girl born and bred, she was used to the hustle and bustle of New York with its busy energy.

In New York, you moved at such an incredibly fast pace that there was no time for regrets. But here in the country, the pace was refreshingly slower so that you had time to reflect on ... things. Things like how a certain anal-retentive jerk managed to get under your skin to the point where you made a complete fool out of yourself and wound up on one of your dearest friend's shit list. And things like how sometimes one's personality could be too much, causing them to go to the extreme.

Sidra sighed and sat down in an Adirondack chair, slipping her heels off to tuck her legs under her. It was true that she could be bold and outspoken, and not one to hold back, especially when it came to her sister girls, work, and family.

Her mother's voice rang in her ears. *"Why can't you be better, Sidra Jane? You know he stays away because of your behavior,"* tears running down her beautiful face. *"Just try harder and he'll come back to us okay, baby?"*

This was something her maternal grandmother wholeheartedly disagreed with. *"Baby, you're my little firecracker,"* her Granny Evie used to tell her. *"Folks best not stand too close to you, or they gone feel your spark! Don't let it bother you none though, chile. You sparkle and don't let anyone or anything ever dull that sparkle!"* she'd cackle. *"You don't want no one around you who can't appreciate you for who you is."*

And so that's how Sidra tried to live her life— unapologetically and to the fullest. She was passionate in her relationships, believing in giving her all and expecting the same of the other person. If she wasn't getting what she was giving, then it was time to break ties. Loyalty was very important to her and violating her trust was the ultimate no-no. She always went with her gut, and that's where impulsiveness was a problem.

With work and school, going with her gut was always a success and brought Sidra great commissions and straight A's. In her personal life, however, going with her gut led to mandatory anger management classes when an ex called her a bitch and, following her gut, stabbed the foul-mouthed motherfucker in the thigh with her letter opener. And now this latest thing with Casey Sullivan...

If Sidra hadn't thought about it every single moment since it happened, she would never have believed that she let Casey Sullivan fuck her. Or worse, that she would have enjoyed it so much. Who knew that prissy, uptight, snooty Sullivan could fuck like a roughneck? It made her knees weak just thinking about his powerful thrusts that had her damn near climbing the sidewall of Viv's home.

"You think that you're gonna get this good shit somewhere else?"

Sidra quickly shook her head to clear the memory of Casey's hot words in her ear. It was best to keep in mind exactly why she didn't like him. She could still recall seeing him for the first time and thinking he was the finest man she'd ever seen as he commanded the conference room. Suited up with his hair slicked back, he looked like he just stepped out of a GQ magazine. His hazel eyes were bright with determination and

his smile so charismatic, it took her breath away. Then he'd given her a condescending dress down in front of the Boys Club, and her admiration turned to dust, as she vowed to make his life hell every time she saw him. After today's fiasco, the score in humiliation was 3-0, and not in her favor.

The back door opened and Noelle slipped out to sit in the chair next to Sidra's. Nothing was said as she looked out at the same beautiful view that Sidra was enjoying. Ten minutes passed before she finally spoke, her eyes still focused straight ahead.

"Please don't kill my husband's brother. I happen to really like him, but I LOVE you, Sid. I'll always have your back. So whatever it is that is making you so upset that both Avery and I are thinking we need to keep Gloria Allred on retainer, please... just don't give in to the urge," Noelle begged.

Sidra rolled her eyes. "I'm fine, Noelle. Again, Avery was grossly exaggerating."

"So you really didn't say that you wished Casey would step on a hundred Legos? Lego threats are pretty dire. And the pain?" Noelle gave a mock shudder. "I've stepped on enough of my nieces' and nephews' Legos to know they're no joke."

"I was just joking! I can control myself. Honest," Sidra insisted as the suspect look in Noelle's eyes called her a liar.

Noelle snorted, "I'm fairly certain Anakin Skywalker said the same thing to Obi-Wan before he got a new name and outlook on life."

"Hey, Anakin was getting pressured left and right to be better than this or that. Sometimes being the better person is

overrated and you just need to go uber-ghetto on a mother-”

“Sid,” Noelle interrupted firmly. “Listen, I appreciate the dedication you have to your particular brand of crazy, but I’m seriously going to have to ask you to dial it back four hundred notches. Right now our calm, sweet Avery is upstairs half-drunk off a bottle of beer! A beer that she needed to drink after spending time with you and Casey. This is supposed to be a relaxing weekend. I’ve got my girls with me, and I just want to enjoy our time together.”

“Okay fine. I give you my word that I will not start any trouble with him,” Sidra grouched. “Let’s change the subject.”

“Thank you, boo,” Noelle said sweetly and blew her a kiss.

“Uh-huh. Now let’s talk about how the honeymoon is going. Have you guys christened every room in this gorgeous house yet? Ewwwww! On second thought, please say you refrained from doing it in the guest bedroom,” Sidra pleaded.

“Actually ... we haven’t consummated the marriage,” Noelle said glumly ignoring Sidra’s startled look.

“Damn girl! What the hell are you waiting on? World Peace? The weapons of mass destruction to be found?? If I had a husband who looked at me the way Jack looks at you and puts it down like you say he does, I would never leave the house, much less my bed!” she exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief.

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Sidra. Believe me, I’m *dying* too. It’s just I’m already in too deep, and we’re just pretending. I knew the very first time I saw Jack four years ago, that I loved

him. The spark was there for me, but he's always been a perfect gentleman who never showed any interest.

He's a good guy who's willing to sacrifice a little of his time and freedom right now so that he doesn't have to work harder later if the shit hits the fan and my dirty secret became public. Why not get some free ass while doing it? He'd be killing two birds with one stone, that's for sure. I just don't want to be the same fool twice; you know? Remy came off as a good guy too and look where that shit got me," Noelle finished bitterly, and Sidra shook her head in disagreement.

"Noelle, are you crazy? I've seen the way Jack is around you! That kind of shit can't be faked," Sidra argued heatedly. "Do you know how many women are dying to be in your place? Or how many interns Margo had to replace because their attention was focused on him and not work?" she disputed. "So Remy was a piece of shit. Do you think he'll be the only one you'll ever come across? If you're worried about something like that, then you're in for a long, lonely life. Stop being such a coward and go for it already!"

"I'm not a coward," Noelle retorted, eyes snapping with irritation. "You don't understand what's at stake, so just drop it."

"I call bullshit. You are a coward. Up until six months ago, you've spent your whole life living up to other people's standards. When you decided that you finally had enough of their crap, you made shit happen. Now look at you. You've got your own place; you're co-owner of an up-and-coming business; and you're married to your dream guy! It doesn't matter how, you just are!" Sidra exclaimed, and Noelle conceded her points grudgingly.

“Now here the two of you are living alone in this big old beautiful house; and instead of taking every opportunity to enjoy your time with Jack the way you really want to, you’re hiding! And for what? Because you’re scared the feelings won’t be reciprocated. When you look back on your life at these moments, do you really want to say that it was a good thing you played it safe and kept yourself from the man you love? Or that you loved every single second of being with him completely?” Sidra stood up and gently pulled Noelle up as well.

“I may be crazy, but at least I give it my all,” she said teasingly and gave Noelle a big hug. “Don’t let that bastard Remy steal all the joy and love that you have to give. Go get your man, girl.”

Sidra was absolutely right, Noelle thought as she squeezed her friend back tightly. It was time to get her man.

Jack sipped his mug of beer and leaned across Casey to swipe an onion ring. They were sitting at the honorary Fab Five table in *Hooligans* along with Guy, Darby, and Holt, watching the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees series. It was nice hanging with the fellas after being gone so long; just kicking back and catching up, he decided. The afternoon was spent working at the shop, and it felt good to be working with wood again. Guy wasn’t kidding when he said they were getting busy and Jack quickly dove in to assist. Although his degree was in business, it was working with wood that kept him sane after his Ma was gone; and he loved it.

Americana Traditions was his baby. Jack was a designer along with Guy who was also a skilled cabinetmaker and did all the fine and detailed work, specializing in the making of cabinets made from wood, wardrobes, dressers, chests and other furniture designed for storage.

Holt, like his father before him, was a master carpenter. After graduating from high school, he went to Germany to follow in the family tradition of obtaining his master certification in carpentry. He could make just about anything with wood. On his twenty-second birthday when he came back from Germany, his father graced him with a deed to some land, and Holt bought some wood and built his log cabin.

The last member of their team was one of the most talented, finished carpenters in the country and, they had been lucky to get him. His name was Quaid McKay, and his specialty was cabinetry, furniture making, fine woodworking, model building, musical instrument making.

Scottish and a bit of a daredevil, Quaid roared into town three years ago on his monster Harley and offered up his services which they quickly accepted. He wasn't as quiet as Holt, nor was he as outgoing as Guy, but somewhere in between. Jack suspected he was running from his own demons because he never spoke about his personal life. As far as Jack was concerned, since Quaid passed his background check and psyche test with flying colors, he couldn't care less what the man did as long as he maintained his perfect work ethic.

It was early Saturday evening, and the pub was packed. Lots of folks had stopped by the table to say 'hey', and Jack found himself thinking that next time he shouldn't stay away so long. He tapped his foot in time to the country music playing from the jukebox in the corner, as he waited impatiently for Noelle

and her girls to join them. He'd received a text from her saying they were on their way ten minutes ago.

"Hey, Jackie; heard you were back in town," a female voice cooed in his ear. He glanced sideways to see Kara Ann Winter standing next to his chair, looking as if her jeans and tank were spray painted onto her surgically-enhanced form. Her long, blond hair fell in waves underneath a pink cowboy hat, and he could see that her blue eyes were sparkling. At one time, she had been his high school girlfriend. They'd dated for three months before he discovered she created t-shirts that said "Mrs. Sullivan" on the back and told everyone how she was going to have his babies. Jack couldn't break up with her fast enough. He nodded his head in recognition. "Kara Ann, how are you?"

"Well don't just sit there! Gimme a hug!" she pouted, holding out her arms. "I haven't seen you in ages! Maybe we can slip away and... catch up. I can do that one little thing you used to like. You know... make it a proper homecoming," Kara Ann said, suggestively licking her lips. Jack could see that she'd even had those done. *They looked like someone punched her in the mouth*, he thought with distaste. Immediately, Noelle's generous all natural bee-stung lips popped into his head. There was nothing in the world that compared to the feel of his woman's lips.

"I'm afraid that I have to decline your thoughtful offer. I'm a married man now, and my wife wouldn't like me spreadin' my affections around," Jack said mildly. He waved his ring finger in her face, feeling the usual wealth of satisfaction run through him at being able to say that. Besides, any girl could suck dick. He was with a woman who also blew his damn mind.

Kara Ann's face turned red. "Well that right there tells me you went and married a damn yank, didn't ya? Southern women

are a lot friendlier and would never deny a man a little hospitality. I'm sure you're really enjoying your highfalutin Yankee, Mr. Hot Shit," she said snarkily.

"Tell you what, Kara Ann. You should run along before my wife shows up. I reckon you'll be in a world of hurt if she hears you runnin' yer mouth. She doesn't take too kindly to shit talkers," Jack said coolly as he snatched a buffalo wing and dipped it into the ranch dressing, watching as her face turned bright red. The other men tried to stifle their chuckles and she left in a huff. The table broke out in laughter, and Jack shook his head in disbelief. *As if he'd go for someone other than his Noelle.*

"So where *is* your hot wife, Sullivan?" Guy asked, chuckling at Jack's dark look. "What? I can't pay your wife a compliment? Relax man, yeesh."

"No, you can't," Jack said seriously. "And I'm gonna whup your ass if you compliment her again."

"Do you even hear how insane you sound?" Guys asked incredulously, shaking his head. "Damn man; the next round is on you," he pointed at the empty plates on the table. "You damn near ate all the appetizers by yourself."

Jack looked down and was surprised to see that the wings, onion rings, and cheese sticks were gone. He didn't recall eating that much, but he supposed it had to do with having Noelle on his brain since the night she'd touched him. Just remembering how her soft hands felt sliding over his flesh was enough to make his dick hard as rock, and he shifted subtly to avoid the discomfort in his groin area.

One touch and he was a goner. He'd wanted to peel away her workout clothes, which were driving him nuts by the way the fabric clung to every curve on her body, and have his way with her. Judging from the way her breathing had changed and how dilated her pupils got; she was just as aroused as him. Jack knew it would have taken minimal effort to take control of the situation and give them both what they wanted. No, *needed*, so desperately, but he wasn't that big a bastard to do so and have her thinking he couldn't keep his word.

Although the house was fully furnished, by silent, mutual agreement, they continued to share a bed. Every night they went to bed with a respectable distance between them in the huge California King; and every morning they woke up with Noelle in Jack's arms with his hardness ground into her bottom. It was the most exquisite agony he'd ever experienced. It was all he could do not to slide between her legs and put his mouth on her hot spot; to hear her noises of excitement, egging him on as he pleased her to his heart's content and fucked her deeply into the mattress.

No, Noelle had to come to him; the sooner the better so they could both be put out of their misery. Jack knew it wasn't easy for her, because she had trust and confidence issues, but hopefully he could help her to overcome those fears. Away from all the bullshit in the city, she was a lot more carefree and appeared to be enjoying herself here in 'The Row'. He would definitely have to arrange for them to make more trips here.

"Everything okay, Jack?" Holt asked quietly. Out of all of them, Holt was the most reserved. He never spoke unless he had something to say, he was content to just chill and listen. After their Ma died, Holt would come over and just sit with them for hours on end. He'd bring pocket knives from his uncle's bait shop, and they'd just sit quietly whittling on wood Ian provided, not saying a damn thing. It was what helped Jack

get through the first three months after Ma died, until Vivienne took them to see the shrink in D.C.

“Yeah, just thinking about some stuff I need to rearrange when I get back to New York so that I’m able to spend more time here,” Jack said. “The way things are going with all the projects we got goin’ on around here, I figure it’d be best for me to start pulling more of my weight around here.”

“So you’re really going to divide your time between here and New York? What does the gorgeous Mrs. Sullivan have to say about commuting?” Guy asked curiously, ignoring Jack’s dark look of warning.

“Yeah, Jack. What does Noelle have to say about it?” Casey asked, looking at him intently aware that there was something going on in his brother’s marriage that the couple wasn’t disclosing. Darby, who was busily shoving chili cheese fries into his mouth, also looked up with a raised eyebrow.

Jack narrowed his eyes and threw a french fry at Casey which he neatly avoided. The sound of loud heels clicking shifted their attention to the approaching newcomer who stopped next to their table, plucked a fry out of the basket, and popped it between her full, cherry-red lips.

“Mmmm, don’t mind if I do,” Kat said with a smirk as she surveyed the table.

“Hey, get your own,” Casey mock-scowled; and Kat stuck her tongue out at him as she leaned down to give him a quick kiss on the cheek, leaving a red lipstick stain behind. She ruffled Darby’s hair affectionately and nodded at Guy who winked back at her. Holt gave her a measured stare that made her

blush to her roots and she quickly looked away to address her brothers from another mother with a narrow-eyed gaze.

“So is this how brothers treat their only sister? Leave her to hang out all by her lonesome on a Saturday night?” Kat asked with a pout, and Guy leered at her.

“Well, I don’t have any sisters so I wouldn’t know about treating one badly, Kat. But what I *do* have is vast knowledge on what women like, if you’re interested,” he said suggestively.

Kat rolled her eyes as every male at the table turned to look at him with the same unblinking stare. “Whaaaaat?” Guy said innocently. “I said if she was interested, clearly she’s not interested.”

“Stop flirting with her,” Casey ordered. “Not unless you want us to make you cry again, Pippy. Besides, what all do you know about women, big liar? You’d call an alligator a lizard all day.”

Darby turned back to frown at her. “Why the hell is your skirt so short, Kat? Does Lex know your running around parading your hoo-ha? Go grab a damn apron from Ginger and put it on.”

Kat shot him a dirty look. “You didn’t object when Gabby Ferris was sitting on your lap last week at the Founders Day Parade with a skirt at least two inches shorter than this one; *and* it was paired with a shirt sheer enough to show her religion, Darby Liam Sullivan;” she snorted delicately. “And did you really just say hoo-ha? No surprise you’re still single if you’re calling it that. It is a vagina. Va-giii-naaa. Or va-jay-jay. My personal favorite is kitty-”

Collectively the guys groaned and covered their ears except for Holt, who gave her a look hot enough to set her on fire. Ever since Kat bumped into him two months ago at the gas station, there'd been something brewing between them; something that compelled her every time he was around to seek him out, only to find his gaze already on her. This 'thing' filled her with a certain kind of feeling. It was the feeling you got as you slowly chugged up a roller coast track knowing there's a thousand-foot drop on the other side; the kind of feeling that left you hating and loving it all at the same time.

Kat bit her lip and glanced towards the door, spying her dear friend James Leighton coming through it. He was her best friend Autumn's cousin and was in town to pick up the ring he planned to propose to his girlfriend with. She gave an enthusiastic wave, motioning him over. The men all glanced toward the door to see a medium height, well-dressed man heading their way.

"Who the fuck is that?" Jack asked darkly, eyes never leaving the newcomer. "He looks like a damn gigolo."

The others murmured their agreement; and from the corner of her eye, Kat saw Holt's hand clench around his beer bottle when an idea came to her. She needed to distance herself from Holt because she had a feeling that if she didn't, nothing good would come of it; and James would be the one to help her do it. She replied as nonchalantly as she could, "He's not from around here. We went to school together."

James was now at their table and confused by her beseeching expression as she reached up to give him a lingering kiss on the cheek. She whispered into his ear, "Please play along."

He squeezed her waist to let her know he would and gave them all a toothpaste white smile that glowed against his nut brown skin as he leaned down to kiss Kat's cheek briefly hissing, "You owe me!"

A collective growl from the seated men made him straighten up nervously.

"Hush, all of you. James, these are my brother's, Jack, Casey, and Darby. Those two are my honorary brothers, Guy and Holt..." she finished softly as her gaze met Holt's dispassionate one. Perhaps this wasn't such a great idea...

"Hi, fellas; nice to meet you," James said a little too enthusiastically as he took in their unsmiling faces. "Kat says the nicest things about you guys...I uh...feel like I already know you all already."

Kat winced, shaking her head slightly, and James damn near swallowed his Adam's apple when the temperature at the table dropped to thirty degrees below zero.

"Fuck what you heard. We haven't heard shit about you," Jack said coldly. James looked ill as he nervously pulled at his collar. Kat grabbed his hand and pulled it down to intertwine their fingers, holding on tight as he tried to yank away. Holt's gaze lowered and remained on their locked fingers; and this time, it was Kat who had the urge to pull away.

"If you knew us, then you'd know that we despise ass-kissing," Casey said brusquely.

"You ain't from around here is ya?" Guy asked in a low belligerent tone as he pulled a long, wicked-looking knife

from underneath his jacket to lay it on the table next to his drink. The blade gleamed evilly underneath the lights.

“No...no...sir,” James squeaked with a gulp, eyes riveted on the knife. Kat wanted to roll her eyes as she felt his hand go clammy in hers. *Ewww*.

“It is my people’s belief that if a man is serious about taking a woman out, then he has to play five finger roulette for every brother she has. This game is called ‘Osiyo’. To refuse would bring dishonor to the woman, as if to say she is unworthy,” Guy explained menacingly, giving James a fierce glance that called forth his Native American warrior ancestors. “You ready to play, boy?”

“Ummm, you know Kat, perhaps this wasn’t the best idea,” James said anxiously as he looked at the knife in horror and then the hardened faces around the table. Kat stomped her tiny foot in frustration.

“Cut it out, all of you!” Kat yelled, causing other patrons to turn and look at them. “Tell him you’re not serious.” Stoic glances met her annoyed one as the men continued to silently intimidate James. Finally, Holt stood up, and James seeing his full height, took a step back and reached into his jacket, pulling out an inhaler that he quickly took two puffs of.

“Leave him,” Holt said in his deep baritone as his angry gaze colliding with Kat’s. He grabbed his beer and walked towards the bar leaving the friends to stare after him in puzzlement, missing Kat’s remorseful look as she too watched him walk away. Instead of feeling relieved that she’d caused a rift in their unspoken game, she felt like shit.

Darby turned back to James. “The Smoky Mountains ain’t no joke. It’s beautiful but deadly. A man could get lost or die tryin’ to find a way outta there. You even think about putting your hands on her, they’ll never find your body, ya hear?”

James blanched at his overly sinister tone. “Yes...s-s-sir.”

Kat rolled her eyes and pulled him away. “All y’all need to quit. Let’s go, babe. “

The group of men waited until they couldn’t see the couple in the crowd of people before speaking.

“Isn’t *Osiyo* ‘how are you’ in Cherokee?” Jack asked Guy mildly. “That’s the best you got?”

“I was improvising, man,” Guy said defensively. “Besides, I don’t see anybody else at this table that’s able to lay claim to a bad ass tribe of people. And would somebody please get this knife away from me? Holt asked me to hold it because my jacket has big pockets, but you know how I feel about knives.” He gave a shudder and gingerly pushed the knife towards Casey, who rolled his eyes.

“You’re such a big baby. Well I’m pretty sure we put the fear of God in him, and he’ll think twice about putting his hands anywhere they’re not supposed to be. Besides, thanks to Vivienne, Kat is pretty up there in Krav Maga. She could probably rip his spine out with her dainty little hands,” Casey mused as he grabbed his beer and glanced up to the entrance, bottle poised near his lips. “Holy hell!”

All the men turned towards the door as the noise died down in Hooligans, and everyone turned to watch the trio of black

goddesses standing in the doorway, all uniquely different, but equally beautiful.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Guy gave a long low wolf whistle. “Dayyyyyum! I call dibs on either one that’s not Mrs. Sullivan,” he said quickly, causing both Casey and Darby to give him sharp looks. Simultaneously they growled: “She’s unavailable.”

“Oh come on! None are available? Is this true Jack? Jack?” Guy whined, trying to get his friend’s attention but getting nowhere.

Jack tried to appear nonchalant, but his attention was held by the second tallest of the trio, wearing a black mini tank dress that clung to her curves and showed a lot of her silky skin, and black gladiator stilettos with gold and silver jewelry to complete her look. Her hair was styled in a long braid over one shoulder, and she wore one of those chain headbands that gave her already exotic look another level of mystery.

Noelle glanced around the bar until she saw Jack and smiled, causing his heart to stutter. This wasn’t her normal sweet smile. It was just as beautiful, but filled with seduction and a promise of sensual things to come. A glance around the bar showed that the women were the center of attention. and the admiring looks Noelle was drawing stirred jealousy in the pit of his stomach that was quickly spreading. He wasn’t sure how it happened, but suddenly he was on his feet and in front of her; hands cupping her face and laying claim to her silken mouth in front of everyone, lest there be any doubt of exactly whom she belonged to.

Noelle closed her eyes as she melted under the dizzying onslaught of Jack's possessive kiss. She wrapped her hands around his wrists and returned the kiss with fervor, loving the way his tongue was stroking hers and devouring the taste that was uniquely him. On and on it went and she wished they could stay locked like this forever. Eventually people started clearing their throats. Only when someone yelled 'Get a room!' and the whole bar broke out in laughter, did they separate. She opened her eyes drowsily to look into his lust-filled hazel ones. With a shy smile she said, "Hey."

"Hey yourself, pretty girl," Jack returned huskily, dropping his forehead to touch hers, his eyes traveling all over her face as if trying to memorize it.

"Something tells me we should make other sleeping arrangements for the night," Avery murmured fanning herself. *If only Pierce would look at me like that*, she thought, and another pang of jealousy hit her sharp in her chest as she watched Noelle and Jack staring at each other like no else in the bar existed. Instead, Pierce looked at her as if she was a burden that he had to deal with, especially when it came to being affectionate. Avery couldn't understand why their relationship was so screwed up.

Pierce and Avery should have been the perfect couple. Both were twenty-five years old. She attended Spellman College while he went to the neighboring Morehouse, two historically black universities. They liked the preppy modern look and had the same taste in music and wine. According to a palm reader

she visited occasionally, a powerhouse match to her Aquarius sign was his Leo. So why wasn't it working?

"I think you may be right," Sidra observed, glancing around the huge bar with the mechanical bull in the corner. She saw Darby from across the room, gesturing towards the empty seats at his big table. "Come on, let's leave the lovebirds alone and go mingle."

Noelle watched them walk away before turning back to Jack. He was still watching her, with that hungry man look in his eye. She glanced around, taking in the rustic decor, big screen televisions, and huge electronic bull.

"Wow...do people really ride that?" she asked curiously, and Jack looked over with a grin.

"Who? Shanna? Occasionally some poor soul will try it. Mostly it's cowboys who think they have something to prove. Nobody's been able to stay on it for more than fifteen seconds though," he said as he slid his hand down to curl his fingers around hers. Noelle spied the dance floor and jukebox. "Come on let's dance."

Jack handed her some quarters and stood to the side as she put the change in and selected a song, then let her lead him to the dance floor. He pulled her close as the slow beat to "Fire" by the Pointer Sisters started, and the smoky lead vocals of Ruth Pointer filled the room. Catcalls and wolf whistles ensued.

*I'm ridin' in your car, you turn on the radio
You're pullin' me close, I just say no
I say I don't like it, but you know I'm a liar
'Cause when we kiss, ooh, fire*

*Late at night, you're takin' me home
You say you wanna stay, I say I wanna be alone*

*I say I don't love you, but you know I'm a liar
'Cause when we kiss, ooh, fire*

Noelle plastered herself tightly to him, so he knew she felt his growing erection between them. He groaned and buried his face in her neck, inhaling her special scent as she swayed seductively to the beat. His hands slid down to grasp her hips possessively. She sang the words into his ear.

*You had a hold on me right from the start
A grip so tight I couldn't tear it apart
My nerves all jumpin', actin' like a fool
Well, your kisses they burn, but my heart stays cool...*

Her tongue traced his ear, and her fingers gently raked through the hairs at the base of his neck causing him to let out a low growl. "Noelle, don't tease me. Darlin', I really don't think I can take anymore cold showers. I want you so bad," he whispered in her ear, and the starkness of his voice made goosebumps spread all over her skin. He clasped her hand in his, keeping the other on her waist and spun her around before drawing her back in.

"In my arms. My Bed. Anywhere and any way I can get you. I want to hear your cries of passion filling my ears as I make you cum over and over again. Say yes, baby. Think about how good it is between us," he crooned as his lips trailed down her neck. She gave a deep, throaty moan. He was at his wit's end and beyond caring that he sounded like he was begging.

Noelle felt like she couldn't think much less breathe; she was so consumed with Jack. His lips left a trail of fire on her skin while his whiskers brushed erotically against her over-sensitized skin. Her panties were officially ruined. "Jack?"

"Hmmm?" he murmured and bit gently on her earlobe. Her moan was a little louder, causing Jack to turn his head and capture her lips again. His hand slid down to palm her ass as he skillfully explored the crevices of her mouth.

"Jack," she tore her mouth away from his, panting harshly as their eyes met. "I want the same thing you want."

Across the room, the group at the table watched them in rapt fascination.

“I think he’s gonna fuck her on the dance floor in front of everybody,” Guy speculated, and Holt nodded his head in agreement.

“They’re causing quite the scene. Someone should tell them to get a room,” Casey suggested.

“Someone should,” Darby agreed.

They all looked at each other before shaking their heads in mutual agreement. “Nah.”

Sidra, nibbling on a cheese stick, nudged Avery whose eyes were glued enviously to the couple and gave a little frown.

“Let’s definitely get a hotel room; there are some things you just don’t want to know about your boss and bestie.”

“We’ll be fine. Sex is so overrated, and besides, how long could it last?” Avery asked vaguely, her eyes still on Jack and Noelle. Silence filled the table, and she realized that she’d wondered that last part aloud and was now the focus of the group’s attention. They were giving her looks that ranged from amusement and disbelief to pity and incredulity. Defensively she asked, “What?”

“Darlin’, that man is a country boy from ‘The Row’. We aim to please, go the distance, and don’t disappoint,” Darby explained to her gently as if she were a small, wayward child. Avery blushed vividly as the guys chuckled knowingly and clinked their beers together. Sidra grunted, but found her eyes inexplicably drawn across the table to Casey who returned her stare intently. A vivid memory of him deep inside of her came to mind. Yes, sparks were still flying between them; but as long as they weren’t knives, she would do her best to behave.

Sidra looked away, raising her glass to finish off her amaretto sour. Turning her head, she found Avery looking at Darby in

wonder. Her poor friend had obviously never been the recipient of great pipe-laying and never would as long as she kept herself tied to that stick-in-the-mud otherwise known as Pierce. Well, not this weekend. Sidra would be damned if she let Miss Prissy sit around feeling sorry for herself. She managed to catch Darby's eye and nodded her head to the dance floor. He flashed a smile of understanding.

"Ms. Avery, have you ever done any line dancin'?" he asked smoothly, and Avery shook her head no.

"I can't say that I have. It does sound like fun though," she mused, tapping her foot in time to the music.

"Oh it is, and you're about to find out just how fun," Darby said with a wink as he stood and started to clap his hands and whistle. Everyone stopped what they were doing and Ginger turned off the flat screens.

"Everybody!!! I need your attention please! Do y'all know what today is?" Darby asked loudly and waited as everyone looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Today is... the first time my brothers and I have been back home at the same time in over five fuckin' years!!" he shouted, throwing his fist in the air. The room exploded with cheers, hooting, and whistling.

"So today is pretty special to me, not just because my brothers are with me, but because I also get to introduce y'all to my beautiful sister-in-law Noelle, who Jack has been monopolizin' by suckin' on her face since she walked in the door!" Laughter broke out as Jack gave Darby the finger, and Noelle, embarrassed, gave a shy wave when people started shouting congratulations to them. Darby raised his hand, and the crowd fell silent again as they waited for his next words.

"Now, Noelle didn't come alone, folks. Please give a warm welcome to her dearest friends, which automatically make them an extension of my family. Ms. Sidra and Ms. Avery, come on up here!" he bellowed with a motion of his hand, and as the ladies walked over to join him, he took a moment to admire how pretty Avery looked in a white, off-shoulder, ruffled eyelet top that showed off her pretty décolletage. Her

full denim skirt, with a tan belt encircling her waist, hit modestly above her knees.

Although she was well-covered up, the outfit only emphasized her luscious breasts, tiny waist, and generously curved hips; leaving little to the imagination about how she would look without any clothes on. Darby groaned inwardly as she gave him a sweet shy smile, noticing how other men in the bar were checking the two ladies out as well.

“Hey y’all, Ms. Avery just let me in on a little secret,” Darby said wickedly. “Now normally I don’t kiss and tell...” Loud raucous laughter filled the room, and he gave a look of mock hurt. “A gentleman never tells. Anyhoo, she told me that she has NEVER...EVER...in her ENTIRE life...participated in a country dance! I figured that we’d help her cross that off her to-do list. So I want everybody to join me on the dance floor who ain’t got two left feet so we can set this shit off right!!!” he shouted, and everybody cheered in and moved to the dance floor.

Darby saw Fyodor, one of Alexei’s guards, moving towards Avery, and he quickly pulled her around the waist, closer to him, ignoring her startled look; he gave the man a firm shake of the head. For a moment, he thought the big Russian would challenge him as his gaze traveled lustfully over Avery, and Darby could understand his reluctance to concede defeat because Avery was certainly a catch that any man would be lucky to have in his arms.

He held Fyodor’s gaze to convey that he would not walk away unscathed if he turned his thoughts into actions. The coconut smell of her hair lured him in, and he pulled her even closer, the feel of her breasts against his side burned through his shirt as he waited for the other man to concede defeat. Finally with a grimace, the huge bodyguard turned away.

Darby turned and caught Ginger’s shrewd gaze, but quickly looked the other way to avoid the questions he saw there. He didn’t really know what he was doing, but what he did know was that he couldn’t stand the glimpses of sadness in Avery’s pretty, brown eyes any longer and would do everything in his power to make them go away.

“All right now! How about we start off with a little bit of country line dancin’?” Darby said to the crowd of people. “Ginger, baby, gimme somethin’ a little funky!” he shouted to his partner, and the men and women lined up in separate rows to face each other.

The Kongo’s “Come With Me Now” started, and with the singer screeching over the base, feet started tapping in time to the rhythm.

“Try to keep up with me if you can, sugar,” Darby challenged, giving her his signature shit-eating grin, and Avery shook her head with a smile. You couldn’t help but have a good time with Darby. His larger than life personality was contagious, and she knew he was the life of the party wherever he went.

“I don’t think so, slick. Let a city girl show you how we get down,” she said smugly as they started to move. Avery caught on to the twists and turns pretty quick. It was very similar to the electric slide. Darby was a great dancer, and although no one else was really touching Avery, he kept his large hand on her waist almost the entire time. She glanced around to see Jack and Noelle dancing together, close to Sidra and Guy.

Casey was dancing with a tiny honey-skinned beauty, and Holt was dancing with a purple-haired woman whom Avery was surprised to find staring daggers at her. Why would she be looking at her like that? She was pretty sure that she hadn’t done anything to offend anyone in the forty-five minutes they’d been there.

“Drinks are on the house for the rest of the night!!” Darby shouted to an enthused crowd. “As long as you have a designated driver. Keys will be confiscated at the door if you don’t! Enjoy!”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The sexual tension in the truck was thick enough to cut with a knife. Noelle glanced over at Jack to see him staring straight

ahead, his face a rigid mask of concentration. Shortly after Darby's free drink announcement, Jack grabbed Noelle's hand and headed towards his middle brother. "Make sure the girls get home safe."

At Darby's knowing look, Noelle buried her hot face in Jack's back. Before his brother could respond, Jack was pushing her out the door and into the truck. The anticipation of being intimate with him again was killing her, and she nervously wiped her hands on her dress. Jack jerked his head away from the road to watch as her dress slipped a little higher, her movements exposing more of her thighs. He pressed down harder on the gas pedal a little harder as his cock threatened to burst through his jeans.

Noelle gasped as the truck shot forward under the sudden burst of speed. Jack's hands were clutching the wheel tightly and his face was a mask of concentration. "I'm sorry and I apologize if I come off as sounding like a douche, but I need to get you home," he said harshly. "Watching you shake that sexy ass in that little nothing of a dress has been driving me crazy all night."

Noelle smiled, heady with womanly power. "Oh you mean this old thing?" she teased, pulling the dress higher on her lap to expose her black panties.

Jack looked over and beads of sweat formed on his brow as he gave a low whistle. "You're playing with fire for sure, baby."

She laughed seductively. "I must be, because it's awfully hot in here. Maybe I should cool off?"

The spaghetti straps slid off of her shoulders to reveal the tops of her enticing breasts, bathed in the moonlight. Noelle tilted her seat so she was half reclining. "Mmmm, that's much better."

Her hand drifted across to his lap, and Jack jerked in response. "Baby, don't play with me. I already feel guilty enough about how deep I'm gonna be in that ass," he shook his head and growled. "There ain't enough yoga and pilates exercising in the world to make you limber enough for what I plan on doin' tonight," he promised, his tone laced with sinful intentions.

Noelle was so wet; her arousal was running between her thighs. “Mmmmm, Jack. You just made me ruin my panties. Guess I’ll just have to take them off.” She wiggled out of her panties and twirled them around her finger just as they turned onto the private road leading to the house.

Jack stopped the truck, turned off the ignition, and pushed his seat back. “Get your sexy ass over here now, Noelle!”

Pussy clenching in response to his command, Noelle threw her soaked panties to the floor and hastened to get across to his seat as he quickly unbuckled his pants and pulled his jeans and boxers down to his knees, revealing his swollen erection standing straight up and oozing pre-cum. She straddled his lap and slid her arms around his neck as he grabbed her around the waist to hold her in place. She slid her wetness up and down on his thick pole, purring with satisfaction at the contact. Jack yanked her head down and claimed her lips in a thoroughly dominating kiss that let her know she might be on top, but he was going to be running shit. He bit her lip and sucked away the sting; his hands untangled her braid and shoved into her thick strands to hold her face in place. He murmured against her lips, “I can smell you, baby. *Mmmmmm*... Your sweet, creamy goodness all over my dick.”

She groaned as more of her essence coated his big cock. Every time the meaty head bumped against her bundle of nerves, it sent jolts of pleasure coursing through her body. “Who makes you this wet?” he whispered as she sucked his neck and yanked at his tee shirt, pulling it over his head.

Noelle trembled as he let go of her hair to reach between them to put the tip of his dick in then pull out to beat it against her clit. Jack yanked her dress and bra down with his other hand to draw a succulent nipple into his mouth. He sucked hard then drew slow lazy circles around it with his hot tongue before treating her other nipple to the same decadent treatment. She fell back against the steering wheel and clutched his head to her bosom. Her hips lifting in rhythm to his teasing as he whispered tautly, “Answer me, dammit!”

“You, Jack. Only you!” she panted, loving the exquisite torture he was subjecting her to.

“Spread your thighs wider, sugar,” he urged, feeling like he was going to come any second. He closed his eyes as he fed her inch by inch of his throbbing member. Sweet mercy, nothing in this world was as good as Noelle’s pussy. *So hot, tight, and juicy!* Jack willed himself to think of the time he saw old man Abner’s wilted, vein-y balls when he accidentally swam under him at the community center one hot, summer day. He remembered coming to the surface and throwing up in the pool. As a result, the pool had to be closed for the rest of the day. All the kids in town had been upset with him.

The image yielded the desired effect, and he was able to calm himself down somewhat. Noelle absorbed the fullness that she was impaled upon, before moving up and down slowly; rotating her hips and enjoying the sensations just as much as the expression of pure bliss on her man’s face as his eyes drifted closed. She grabbed Jack’s face and rained kisses all over it before settling on his lips. He gripped the backs of her thighs and moved her faster on top of him. Their breathing was ragged. Their kisses, hot and sloppy. Jack tugged the nape of her neck and ran his tongue along the column of her throat as his other hand dipped between her ass cheeks, fingers teasing her forbidden hole. “Ride this dick,” he urged, sliding his lips down to alternate sucking between both of her nipples. “Take all of it!”

“Yessss, baby! Yessss!” She praised him as she bounced up and down, slightly pushing her ass back to take his finger as her hips dipped side to side. “It’s so damn good, Jack!!” Noelle shouted as his length continuously rubbed against her g-spot. Jack slid his arms underneath hers to grip her shoulders and slam her down hard. She saw stars behind her eyes; and her body trembled from the orgasm that rushed through her at lightning speed, causing her to gush all over his dick. Her legs were wobbly, and she struggled to draw breath as Jack’s thrusts became harder and faster.

Watching Noelle lose control was the most erotic thing Jack had ever seen. She looked like a goddess with her luscious boobs bouncing and jeweled headband atop her wild hair

billowing around her shoulders. He continued his rough thrusts as he bit and licked at her breasts, leaning her back against the steering wheel. The horn blared, but he kept going. Christ, she was so wet! Her juices were coating his thighs, making his cock harder and harder with every thrust. Noelle screamed again, body convulsing with pleasure, and clutched at his hair as she came a second time. He reached between them to pinch her clit, causing her to come a third time as he too finally reached his peak, shooting streams of his hot load into her welcoming channel.

They remained clasped to each other until finally Jack reached down and pushed the button to slide the chair back even more. As it reclined Noelle fell forward against him, and they collapsed onto the seat. “Noelle?”

“Yes?” she murmured drowsily.

“Don’t go to sleep. We’re just getting started,” he promised.

The music and Darby’s moves are getting to me, Avery thought as she stepped outside to get some fresh air after dancing for an hour straight. Goodness, the way he moved had her imagining what he would be like between the sheets. *Pierce*, she told herself. *Keep your thoughts on Pierce!* This had been so hard to do with Darby’s large hands on her waist, lifting her like she weighed nothing. Next to him she felt like the tiniest thing ever.

Music poured out into the open air as someone else exited the bar. Instantly Avery knew it was him when she smelled the clean scent of cypress pine and sandalwood tease her nostrils. He came to stand close behind her as she viewed the starry sky and mountains. The heat emanating from his body seeped through her clothes. With any other man, the lack of space between them would be deemed inappropriate; but Avery felt perfectly comfortable being in such close proximity to Darby, with the exception of the achy feeling uncoiling in her

stomach that she didn't want to label. "Everything alright, Ms. Avery?" Darby asked in that southern drawl that always made her toes curl.

"Yes, I'm just getting some fresh air. I haven't danced that much in...well forever," she said, trying to keep her voice calm, though her heart was racing. *Don't turn around*, she told herself. She feared that if she did, she might do something silly like beg him to kiss her.

"And why is that? You're a great dancer; hell, you caught on to the line dance so fast, I didn't have a chance to impress you with my skills." His voice dipped an octave lower, the sexy tone made her skin break out in goosebumps all over her body.

Avery gave a breathless laugh as she stepped to the side before turning around to face him. His dark green eyes, locked on her face, were stormy looking and she shyly dropped her gaze. *Big mistake*, she thought, taking in the outline of his manhood pressing against the front of his jeans, before quickly averting her gaze to the side. *Holy good wood, Batman!* No wonder he was so confident.

"Well to be honest with you, my boyfriend feels that when we dance, we...*I* draw too much attention to us," Avery amended. "He says that my body brings us too much attention; that I should lose some weight to try blending in," she said softly. She was now embarrassed that she'd admitted such a thing to carefree Darby of all people. There was a heavy silence before he leaned against the rail and looked down at her with eyes like emerald ice.

"Did you ever just tell your boyfriend to go fuck himself?" Darby asked with a pleasantness he wasn't feeling. Inside, he was livid that this goddess was being forced to walk with mere mortals when she should be dancing among the clouds in all her curvaceous glory. He wanted to find her prick of a boyfriend and beat the ever-loving shit out of him.

Avery gave a startled laugh, but admitted, "I've thought about it a couple of times, just haven't gone there yet. Wanted to, but haven't."

Darby gave her a serious look. “You shouldn’t be with someone who treats you like you’re ordinary or wants you to fit in— unless they’re your AA or drug sponsor.” They shared a laugh.

“So your boyfriend has a problem with your body, huh? How long have you guys been goin’ out?” Darby asked curiously as his eyes slid over her again. Avery was the kind of woman that needed a label stuck on her forehead. One that read: *Warning: If you can’t stand the curves, get off the highway.* Numerous times tonight he’d given his death glare to regulars who couldn’t keep their eyeballs in their sockets. It annoyed him, but he understood completely. He was in that percentile that wanted to be the one to mark her knees and leave her lips bruised and swollen in the best ways possible.

“We’ve been together for over a year and are compatible everywhere except in this area and ...” She trailed off in embarrassment. *Ahhhh*, Darby thought. *They weren’t compatible in the sack because her man didn’t know how to handle her sexually. What an asshole. So because he was lacking, he put that shit on her.*

He decided to go easy on her. Well, as easy as someone like him could go. “You’re not sexually compatible because you have a girlfriend, Ms. Avery.” Darby said bluntly watching her eyes go big with indignation.

“What?! That’s not true! Pierce is very manly, Darby,” Avery said defensively and Darby snorted. Of course the douche’s name was Pierce. Maybe she would understand better if he showed her.

“I don’t think so, darlin’. Your man is extremely threatened by all you have to offer. For instance, can he do this?” Quickly he picked Avery up and pressed her against the wall. He had to stifle a groan as through the layers of fabric separating them, his hardness found the soft apex between her thighs and he barely managed to restrain himself from grinding himself against her. Automatically, Avery wound her arms and legs around him, holding on for dear life, her big brown eyes wide with disbelief and awareness. The weight of her breasts against his chest would be forever imprinted in his mind and

she smelled so good that he wanted to push her clothing aside, bury his face in the crook of her neck, and fuck her senseless

Instead he settled for leaning in close to her; he knew she felt his thick erection by the way her breath caught. Their lips were mere inches apart, and he could count every one of her curly lashes in the bright moonlight. Their gazes remained locked as he held their position effortlessly.

“You are perfect just the way you are. Don’t change for anybody. You’re beautiful, smart, kind, caring, and sexy as hell. Since I’m such a fucking gentleman, I’m just going to leave you with this bit of advice. If your man can’t pick you up against the wall and fuck you like this, it’s because you really do have a girlfriend. Just sayin’.”

Slowly he slid her down; and Avery clutched at his shirt, her wide eyes never leaving his. Clearing her throat, she whispered “I think I understand what you’re trying to say. Thank you for the...er... demonstration.”

Darby cleared his throat and looked up at the moon. Christ, the things she made him *feel*. The spell was broken when he stepped back. “It was my pleasure, Ms. Avery. Sumthin’ else to think about: bones are for dogs and meat is for real men. Now how about we get you and Ms. Sidra fed? She’s got to keep her strength up for her next rumble with Casey, and we need to keep score. This time, no interferin’.”

He chuckled at Avery’s heartfelt groan and slipped an arm around her shoulders to lead her back into Hooligans, breathing in her scent every step of the way.

Sidra exited the ladies room and was surprised to see Casey leaning against the opposite wall in the narrow hallway. He’d obviously been waiting for her, and she glanced down the empty hallway before warily returning her gaze to his steady one. *It really was a crime for a man to be this good looking,*

she thought, letting her eyes travel down his tall, hard frame encased in a pair of khaki slacks and a worn, dark blue, denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He looked like a Ralph Lauren model with his streaked, tousled hair and faint shadow covering his square jaw.

Slowly she raised her gaze back up to his and met hazel eyes now filled with hot turbulence. “Skulking outside of bathrooms, Sullivan? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

His lips twisted into a wry smile. “No skulking, Sidra. I just wanted to take a moment to apologize for my shitty behavior earlier. I was completely outta line and neither you nor Ms. Avery deserved any of it.”

“Ummmm...wow...okay. I was NOT expecting that. Apology accepted,” she said, and then feeling generous, she added, “It wasn’t just you. I was completely over the top and should apologize too.”

There was a pause and then another as their stubborn gazes remained locked. Casey raised an eyebrow at her, and she smiled sweetly. “I said I *should*, not that I would.”

He gave a small smile and nodded his head in acknowledgement before pushing off the wall. “Fair enough. Well, I’ll leave you in peace then. I believe Darby will be bringing you and Ms. Avery back to Jack’s later this evening.”

Wow. She’d gotten a small victory. So why didn’t it feel as fantastic as she thought it would? He turned to walk away, and strange as it was, Sidra was reluctant to see him go. “Wait!” Casey paused and slowly turned around, an inquisitive look on his face. “Can I ask why you refer to Avery and Noelle with the ‘Ms.’ title, and I’m just plain, old Sidra?”

Sidra suddenly found herself backed up against the wall, and he was in her space. His lean body pressed into hers, with his mouthwatering scent surrounding her. She held her breath, staring up into his smoldering eyes. His voice was low as he spoke. “You wanna know why I address them that way and not you, right?”

His cool breath tingled against her lips, and she opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. Instead, she nodded her head dumbly. Casey framed her face with his palms, watching as her beautiful brown eyes burned brightly in response to his touch. *Damn she took his breath away.* He was so attuned to her that he'd known she was present as soon as she entered the bar. Like a sixth sense, the hair on the back of his neck stood up and his dick was instantly hard.

Clad in a long muscle tank and a denim cutoff miniskirt, Sidra's long legs were on display for every man in the bar checking her out. She wore black ankle boots, a black fedora, and lots of bangles on her wrists. Just like her laugh, the sound of them jangling had him focused like Pavlov's dog. She looked exactly like who she was- a sexy and beautiful woman with a wild streak. Her look screamed she only dated rockers, so staid lawyers need not try to step up; and although he wasn't interested in *dating* her, it still annoyed the hell out of him.

Her bumping and grinding on Guy was almost enough to break an eighteen-year friendship as he considered walking up to them and knocking one of his dearest friends smooth the fuck out. Normally he liked hanging around his friend and couldn't wait to shoot the shit with him, but not tonight; not when he was looking at Sidra like he was on death row and she was his last meal.

“Because I don't think of doing unladylike things to *them*. I don't dream of being buried so deep inside of *them* that I wake up fucking my own hand, okay? It's *you*. You're the one I want to fuck 'til we're both speaking in tongues. You're the one whose pussy I want to eat like it's my three square meals a day with snacks in between.” His thumb slowly caressed her bottom lip, causing a deep tremble to run through her body. “This is the mouth I want swallowing my dick whenever I whip it out. That's why I don't call you *Ms.*, because I *don't* want to do polite, ladylike things with or to you, Sidra.”

For once she was speechless, breathing ragged as her body responded to his enticing words. The images that they created in her mind were so bold and erotic that she didn't know what

to say. Casey took advantage of her silence and licked her bottom lip before slowly sucking on it. Her response was instantaneous as she captured his lips in a hedonistic kiss. His hands slid into her curls, knocking her hat back as he voraciously claimed her mouth. Casey wedged a muscled thigh between hers and she rode it, her skirt bunching around her waist as he rubbed it between her legs; their kiss turning hotter and hotter. Grasping at the front of his shirt, she sucked on his tongue, so turned on by just kissing him that she could feel the beginning signs of an orgasm tingling between her legs. She clung tighter to Casey as she rode his khaki-clad thigh with abandon, desperately trying to soothe the ache inside of her.

Suddenly he broke away with a ragged breath and pained expression, leaning his head against the wall next to hers. “We’re not doing this here, Sidra. I will be in New York in two days. You have until then to decide if you want this. If you don’t, I’ll never mention it or come at you like this again. Two days.”

Then he walked away, leaving a sexually frustrated Sidra panting and yearning for more of him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next morning, Noelle busily cracked eggs into a bowl at the kitchen counter; humming under her breath as she added salt, pepper, and a little half and half to the bowl before whisking the concoction briskly. Next she moved on to biscuit preparation. She gathered the ingredients: cold butter, shortening, all-purpose flour, salt, and milk. As she mixed the dough, another yawn escaped her. Noelle still couldn’t believe that she was up at eight in the morning after the night of loving she’d had.

When they finally made it into the house, Jack led her upstairs to the master bathroom where he pressed Noelle against the

shower glass and fucked her slowly from behind. As the warm water cascaded over them, her screams of pleasure bounced off the glass. Then he gently bathed her as she leaned against him weak-kneed and spent, before picking her up and carrying her to the bed. Laying her naked body down, he kneeled on the floor, hooked her legs over his broad shoulders and buried his tongue deep in her pussy. Growling low, he told her how much he loved to eat her sweetness.

Noelle clutched at his hair, gasping from the multiple orgasms he wrung from her. His hands gripped her hips tightly in place as it became too much for her and she tried to wiggle away. But Jack wasn't done yet. Flipping her over onto her knees, he licked from her quivering slit up to her rosette over and over again. She writhed helplessly on the bed, grasping at the covers as she pushed her ass into his face, silently begging for more. He tortured her like this endlessly before finally plunging his tongue into her nether lips while his thumb fucked her other hole and Noelle shattered under his expert ministrations.

“Soon, very soon, I’m going to take you here; but for now, we’re still not done yet, love,” Jack whispered as he fondled the sensitive ring of her anus, before rolling Noelle back over to kneel between her limp legs, admiring the fine sheen that coated her lovely body. He watched as her glazed eyes drifted down between his legs and she bit her lip in anticipation upon seeing the tumescent erection that was just for her. Noelle moaned and held her arms open, knees bent with legs spread wide to invite him in.

Jack covered her soft body with his muscular frame and gave her long, slow kisses as he gently invaded her body. Even after he was completely sheathed in her silken warmth, he continued to hold himself back as he trailed soft kisses down her neck and onto her shoulders, drowning himself in her wetness and womanly scent. Her soft hands caressed his arms and back before trailing down to his firm buttocks and traced lazy circles, causing him to give a hard shudder and groan. Languorously, she kissed him, tasting traces of her arousal on his tongue which aroused her even more. She sank her nails

into his curls, looking deeply into his stormy hazel eyes.

“Move, Jack.”

His first thrust was slow and deep as he captured her hands to pin them above her head. She grunted as she felt him bottom out in her belly. “Uuuuhhhh!”

“I’m too far gone for gentle, darlin’,” he warned hoarsely as his cock plunged into her moistness faster and faster, creating a sloshing sound that when combined with her breathless cries, his groans, and the bed rocking made a musical symphony for their ears only. Soon his thrusts had her backed up to the headboard and her knees by her ears as she grasped at his ass. Jack braced himself with one hand on the headboard and teased her clit with the other as he pounded into her.

“Uuuuhh, Jack! I’m coming!” Noelle screamed. Jack shouted hoarsely, “Give it to me, baby!”, and they clung to each other as they reached the ultimate peak together and exploded in an orgasm that seemed to go on forever.

Noelle jumped as a large, warm hand covered her belly, and then smiled as whiskers brushed her neck, causing currents to run through her body in anticipation of his next move. “Good morning, Jack.”

“Mmmm...Come back to bed. Can’t sleep without you,” he growled sexily as he nuzzled her throat. Giving a sigh of pleasure, Noelle leaned her head back on his shoulder as she felt his rigidness pressing against her bottom. “We’re lonely without you.”

“Oh it’s a ‘we’ thing now?” Noelle asked archly. “It doesn’t sound like I’ll be getting much sleep if I get back into bed with both of you.” Yet she continued to rub back against him and he placed his arms on the counter effectively trapping her as he slowly ground his raging hard-on into her bottom.

“We’ll be good for you. Besides, it’s a proven fact that everybody needs a daily dose of Vitamin D,” Jack said persuasively as one hand shifted to untie her robe. It fell open and his large palm slid up to caress her bare breasts, plucking at the aroused peaks. The other lifted her robe and short

nightie from behind, and his large thigh wedged in between her legs. Noelle leaned against the counter, bracing her arms and willingly spreading her legs as Jack pushed her floral panties to the side as the cool, morning air hit her wet center. “Well, what do we have here?” he murmured admiring her glistening nether lips.

“I like the flowers, darlin’,” Jack drawled, positioning himself at her entry. His lips tickled her ear licking her lobe. “They’re definitely brightening my day.”

He thrust into her deeply, and she fell forward; but his arm snaked across her chest to hold her shoulder and keep her in place. “Play with your breasts. Touch your nipples like I would,” he ordered hoarsely in her ear.

Noelle cupped her aching breasts and began to squeeze and pinch her nipples which brought her closer and closer to an orgasm. She leaned her head back to seek his mouth. Lips clinging together, Jack surged into her over and over again as their tongues tangled with each other. He slid his fingers down to play with her clit and it was too much for Noelle. She detonated, milking his cock tightly until he succumbed to the fiery pleasure as well. “Now that is what I call a great way to start the day,” he said, breathing harshly.

“I concur,” Noelle said tiredly as she leaned forward to rest on the counter trying to catch her breath. But Jack wasn’t done and tilted her head to the side to kiss her lazily. Noelle smiled against his lips as she felt him stirring back to life inside of her. She whimpered as his finger slid back down her body to slowly tease her extremely sensitive bud. “Again Jack? Really?”

“I have no willpower when it comes to you and my pussy, baby,” he growled, sucking on her neck as aftershocks ran through her body. This time, it was nice and slow, but the quaking orgasms at the end were just as powerful, leaving them both panting and weak-kneed. Suddenly they stiffened as the sounds of cheerful whistling outside the kitchen door could be heard. They stood frozen for a moment before scrambling with Jack quickly pulling out of her with a curse and Noelle

attempting to cover her breasts but only succeeding in getting flour on her chest.

The door opened suddenly but quickly shut again. “Aaaargh, my eyes! What the hell is wrong with you people?!?! Get a freakin’ room already!” Guy shouted in outrage. “Are you guys really doing that next to the biscuits?! I had my heart set them on them. With lots of honey and strawberry jam! It’s the only reason my hung-over ass is even up this early!”

Mortified, Noelle allowed Jack to carry her upstairs, her face buried in his chest. She was shaking with laughter as Jack shouted with no remorse over his shoulder, “Sorry, Pippy!”

Thanks to Jack and Noelle’s early morning activities, breakfast turned into brunch. After a shower where she had to fight off her horny husband’s advances, Noelle threw her hair in a haphazard ponytail and put on a fitted, grey t-shirt with silk flower-printed track pants. She sent Jack to get the ingredients for drinks, and he dragged a pouting Guy with him, promising to bring his brothers, Holt, and the Romankovs back with them.

Noelle dragged Sidra and Avery out of bed to help her cook. Instead of the meal she was prepping earlier, she decided to do the fry the chicken she was brining for dinner, with waffles and apple whiskey syrup, spicy kale with eggs, and roasted potatoes. The chicken was frying to a nice golden color in a huge cast iron skillet, and when Sidra saw it, she rubbed her hands together gleefully.

“Yassssss, honey. Bringing out the big guns in ‘Operation Get Yo’ Man, are we? I’m so glad I brought my appetite,” she said with relish as she set the table.

“Hush girl and plate the eggs,” Noelle scolded lightly with a happy smile as she set the potatoes in a dish and then added chopped parsley, bumping Sidra’s hip as she passed her.

“It was really good huh?” Avery asked enviously as she wiped glasses and silverware. Both women glanced at her in surprise. She held up her hand. “I know it’s not something I normally comment on, and you both think I’m prudish; but I couldn’t help but notice that you’re walking around with a little umm... caution...and you do have a hickey on the back of your neck.”

Noelle grabbed the back of her neck and stood ramrod straight. “I’m not going to say anything about it, except that I am extremely happy with the results of our fornication,” she stated primly and went back to placing food in dishes.

There was a moment of silence before Avery scoffed, “To coin a phrase from Sidra, ‘Bish, please!’”

They fell into peals of laughter and high-fives as the kitchen door opened, and Jack walked in, followed by their guests, laden with bags from the liquor store. “Smells good in here, baby,” Jack said, dropping a kiss on Noelle’s forehead. “Mornin’, ladies.”

Everyone exchanged greetings and small talk, gathering around while Jack and Darby made a big production of making Bloody Mary’s and Mimosas. When everyone had a drink in hand, they all gathered around the loaded table to clasp hands in prayer. It was decided that Avery would say grace. Unable to resist teasing them, Guy opened his mouth.

“Why are we doing this?” he asked innocently. “I could swear that the food was already christened this morning.” He emitted a yelp when Jack punched his arm. Noelle hung her head in embarrassment which let everyone in the room know that hanky-panky had ensued bright and early in the Sullivan household, much to Noelle’s chagrin and their guests’ amusement.

“All right, children. Let’s not embarrass the happy couple anymore. How about we bless the union instead?” Alexei suggested with a solemn face, though his eyes twinkled with mirth. All agreed before bowing their heads so that Avery could say grace.

Everyone sat down and the lids were lifted off the dishes; pleasant small talk ensued until Jack removed the lid from the

largest platter containing the buttermilk fried chicken. The delicious aroma filled the air and all talking stopped as the men at the table looked at the chicken then each other. Guy, Holt, and Alexei gave the Sullivan brothers concerned looks that were ignored as their attention was focused on the heaping platter of golden brown chicken which they stared at with something akin to horror. Noelle, Sidra, and Avery looked at each other in confusion while Kat made a gurgling noise in her throat. Since she was sitting between Jack and Darby in the corner, she squeezed Jack's hand and gave Darby's shoulder a reassuring rub which caused him to shudder and lower his head.

Unease filled Noelle as she looked at Jack, standing over the dish and staring at it as if the chicken would reassemble like a transformer, rise up, and beat his ass. "Is something wrong, Jack? If you don't want chicken, there's other stuff to eat. Let me make you a plate." Noelle stood up eager to ease the tension in the room that seemed to be building by the second. She shot her friends a helpless look, but they were just as in the dark as she was. Still Jack didn't speak, but surprisingly, Holt did.

"Let it be, love," he said with a kind smile to her. "He'll be fine, won't you, Jackie?"

Jack snapped out of his trance to find all eyes on him in concern. Then his gaze met Noelle's anxious one, and he knew he had to pull it together. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry about that. I was just thinking about something I had to do at work. Thank you so much for making this food. Everything looks great. Well, c'mon everybody, let's all dig in!" He winced as he heard his overly-enthused tone. Noelle's raised eyebrow let him know he was full of shit. The advice he always gave his clients was coming back to bite him in the ass. *If you aren't sincere, you sound like a complete moron.*

Jack looked at both of his brothers and tried to convey the message: *Please eat the damned chicken so Noelle's feelings wouldn't be hurt.* He was rewarded with stiff nods that said they understood. He grabbed the biggest piece of chicken and sat down again, giving her a reassuring smile; but her look

said she remained unconvinced that all was well. Kat complimented Sidra's blouse and conversation awkwardly started again.

Jack could feel Noelle's suspicious gaze on him as he picked up a chicken thigh. Taking a deep breath, he resolutely bit into it and was pleasantly surprised. Flavor exploded in his mouth. The chicken, golden brown and crunchy on the outside, was really juicy, tender, and savory on the inside with a kick of spice. He could taste the tang of buttermilk, seasonings, and herbs she'd used. He closed his eyes and relished the delicious taste of it bringing back old memories. It was exactly how his mama used to make it, and because he hadn't been able to get that taste replicated anywhere else, he'd long given up on eating fried chicken or finding it again. Jack opened his eyes to find Darby and Casey watching him cautiously, as they waited for his verdict.

Tears blurred his vision as he swallowed and took another big bite. To be sitting in this house that was a dedication to his beloved mother with Noelle, close friends, and family, eating chicken that tasted just like Ma's was a true sign; he believed that she was watching from above. *I love you, Ma*, he said silently and continued to eat the chicken until only a clean bone remained. It was only then did he realize that all conversation had ceased, and he was again the center of attention. He cleared his throat and used his wrist to wipe his eyes. "You outdid yourself with the chicken, baby. It's fucking amazing."

"Thank you," Noelle murmured uncertainly, watching in amazement as all the men reached for pieces of chicken and proceeded to scarf it down quickly. They spoke with full mouths as they laughed and agreed that it was some damn good chicken. Even the refined Alexei had grease smeared on his lips as he chowed down. Both Casey and Darby had tear-filled eyes as they grinned like lunatics at Jack and each other.

“Soooo...do you people not have access to fried chicken or something up here?” Sidra asked as she snagged the last piece of chicken, holding it out of Holt’s reach as he attempted to steal it from her hands. “Holt, I will smack you so hard into the future, you’ll be able to meet your grandkids. Damn, I’ve never seen chicken disappear that fast. It was easily two birds.”

Her gaze locked with Casey’s, and she could see they were filled with emotion before he lowered his head to wipe his mouth with a napkin. Sidra could see that he was just as shaken up as Jack, but trying to be a badass. She wondered what the story behind their strange behavior was. Across the table, Avery nodded her head in agreement and smiled sweetly at Darby as he willingly gave her a thigh from his full plate.

“Not like this, Sidra,” Jack spoke in a voice thick with emotion. “And not for a very long time.”

After brunch, Jack took Noelle for a drive while everyone else lounged around watching the NBA Finals. Before leaving, he asked Avery if she could help him cut some flowers and fancy them up. In her element, Avery grabbed the pruning kit that she traveled with at all times; because everybody should carry one on their person she insisted when they all looked at her like she was crazy and followed him. The bouquet she composed was stunning and colorful. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon and the weather was perfect for a drive. *Sundays are definitely for lovers*, Noelle thought, just happy to be with him as he grabbed her hand and wove their fingers

together. She admired the way their complexions seemed to blend together seamlessly.

“I just want to say thank you very much for the wonderful meal again,” Jack said glancing over at her. The lower half of his face was now completely covered in scruff and his black hair was curling up all over his head. He was so beautiful to Noelle in the afternoon light, that for a moment, she forgot to breathe. His gaze quickly turned to concern. “You’re not still weirded out about the chicken thing are you?”

“Ummm...no. Well yeah, okay that *was* kind of...different, but I wasn’t thinking about that just now,” Noelle said, a little flustered to be caught gawking like a groupie. Even though he was hers for the time being, it was ridiculous how thirsty she still was for him. Jack grinned, and his white teeth were a startling contrast to the black beard and deep tan he now sported. *I want to have babies with this man really bad*, she mused.

“What were you thinking about then? Penny for your thoughts, sugar,” he said warmly and brought their linked hands up to kiss her fingers. He opened her palm and gave the center a lingering kiss and she crossed her legs tightly at the feel of his soft lips on her skin, certain that if she didn’t control herself she would jump all over his ass.

“I was just thinking about what a great time I’m having here and how I’m really going to miss it when we leave tomorrow.” As Noelle said the words out loud, she realized it was true. She’d really grown to love the mountain town of Whiskey Row; the fresh air and the nice people she’d met, and wished things were permanent between them so she could visit more often. But the thought of being in Jack’s hometown when they were no longer an item was incredibly painful. When they

were done, it was best that she walk away and leave everything in the past. “Why’d you stay away so long?”

Jack didn’t say anything as he made a left turn and pulled the car over. Noelle glanced over to her right and saw a cemetery. “I think it is better I show you, so that you have a better understanding.”

He got out, grabbed the flowers, and came around to open her door, helping her out also. His chivalry was just one of the many things Noelle loved about him. Silently they walked through the cemetery, being respectful of those eternally resting. The many cemetery rows were arranged from smallest to largest tombstones. Jack grabbed Noelle’s hand as they reached the back row and stood before a large granite heart shaped tombstone. It read:

*Here lies Moira Aileen Sullivan,
Beloved mother to Jackson, Darby and Casey.
May you rest in eternal peace.
You are gone but never forgotten for
death leaves a heartache no one can heal,
while love leaves a memory no one can steal.*

Underneath were her birth and death years; and as Noelle looked at the dates, she realized how young the boys were when they lost their mother. Jack cleared his throat and lovingly touched the heart, before stepping forward and speaking. Noelle was surprised to hear his deep, southern voice slip into an Irish accent.

“Hello, Ma. It’s been awhile since I’ve come to visit ya’ and for that I’m sorry, truly I am. I hope you’re not that mad, ‘cause I’ve brought me beautiful wife Noelle with me. You’d

really like her. She's smart, funny, kind, and makes chicken just like you, Ma. It took me back today, and I almost started bawling like a babe and so did the *boyos*. Even Alexei was caught up in the moment. I wish you coulda seen him shoveling it into his mouth! You know me and the other two haven't eaten it since you've been gone. Could never find it just the way you made it." Jack took a deep breath, struggling for control; and when he spoke again, Noelle could hear the thickness of the tears he was trying to hold in. "She made it just right too, so crisp and juicy, my wife did. It's time for me to tell her our story. So that she kinna better understand. Dinna fash yourself, I won't tell her how you used to twist our ears."

Jack gave a raspy chuckle and leaned over to kiss the heart, lips lingering. "Well, that's it for now; I just wanted to come pay my respects to my best Galway girl before we leave 'The Row'. I know I was a real shite not to visit sooner. *Mo ghrá, go deo agus i gcónaí ag* (*My love forever and always*). Until next time, Ma."

Tears flowed freely down Jack's face and he made no effort to wipe them away as he placed the huge bouquet below the headstone. It was a cleansing process for him to be able to talk to her after so many years of silence. For so long, the pain of losing her had been a gaping hole in his chest that all the therapy in the world wouldn't fill. The regrets of not being able to do more to help her made him the man that he was today. Noelle came to rest her head on his shoulder and slip her arm around his waist. Gently her fingers wiped away his tears. Together they stood like that under the warm sunshine until he was able to compose himself and lead her away. Before going, she pulled away to kiss the granite heart as well. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Ma. Don't worry, I'll look after your boys."

The drive back to the house was a quiet one. Jack was deep in his thoughts, and Noelle was hesitant to disturb him. They arrived to find a note from Darby; everyone had gone over to Holt's for a game of Bocce, and they were welcome to join them. The silence was driving Noelle crazy so she decided to keep busy by making them cappuccinos.

When she was done, she placed them on a tray and brought them to the living room, where Jack was staring pensively out the window. She sensed he needed time to get his words together and sat down on the sofa, patiently waiting for him. Finally, he came over and sat next to her on the couch. He spoke, keeping his head down and focusing on his hands.

“My father Patrick Sullivan was nothing more than a sperm donor. He was a monster that death was too good for. He's buried at the top of Devil's Hill, and I personally named it after him. My mother was a beautiful young woman from Galway, Ireland. She came to the states to attend the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. where her father's childhood friend was a professor. She lived with him and his wife while attending classes there. She was at university for two years before she met Patrick and Ian in study hall. All three hit it off immediately.

“Her family disapproved of my mother having any male friends, and her guardian gave my mother an ultimatum, which if you're Irish, you know is the equivalent to raising a flag in front of a bull. The ultimatum was that she discontinued her friendship with her male friend or risk being sent back to Ireland; so Patrick and Ian helped my mother get financial aid and become a U.S. citizen. Next Patrick helped her to get a place to stay. The smooth bastard introduced her to an ex-girlfriend who needed a roommate, and then he charmed

himself into Ma's bed," Jack said bitterly and clenched his fists.

"My parents were inseparable, and her family desperately tried to get her to go back to her guardian's house, but she wouldn't hear of it. To hear Ian tell it, Patrick wanted to spend all his time with Ma, and his grades started to suffer." His hard tone turned to one of pride. "Not Ma's though; she thrived in the academic environment, and her success started to put a strain on their relationship. When he started to lash out at her verbally, she finally decided to distance herself from him, and moved in with Ian's family." Jack looked down at his hands.

"Patrick got kicked out of school due to his poor grades, so he went home to Whiskey Row and his wealthy grandfather. Four weeks later Ma found out she was pregnant. She went to see him despite her family and Ian's protests, and he promptly proposed despite his grandfather's objections. Determined to do right by her child, she said yes."

Noelle's stomach was doing somersaults as she waited for Jack to finish. Her heart was aching for him; he looked physically ill and sweat was beading his forehead. "So they got married, and her family disowned her. I was born seven months later. Darby arrived a year and a half after that, and school was now just a memory for her. By then, Patrick had started to show his true colors of being an angry, abusive piece of shit, and my mother knew the truth about him." Jack looked away towards the windows, his hands shaking slightly, so Noelle grabbed one and held on tight, letting him know she there for him. He took a steadying breath before continuing.

"See, Patrick's parents were killed in a car crash when he was two. He lived with his paternal grandfather who sent his only grandson away to school because he was such an embarrassment to the family name, just like his older sister

who ran off when she was fourteen. Patrick had an alcohol problem that was discovered when he was fifteen, and there were rumors of him sexually assaulting several girls in Gatlinburg by the time he was seventeen. When he came back home after being kicked out of school, his grandfather gave him a job in the family mill as an accountant and let him live in the guesthouse. Then my Ma showed up with me in her belly. Old man Sullivan was so livid that he'd gotten some little immigrant pregnant, he immediately disowned Patrick.

Patrick got a job as a bank teller but lost it due to his temper that he couldn't control. After that, he had trouble keeping any job. My Ma got a job as a waitress and then took in miners' laundry on Fridays when they came down the mountain on the weekends. She supported our family singlehandedly while Patrick drowned his sorrows in bottle after bottle of whatever liquor he could get his hands on and refused to help support his family. Ma was too proud to turn to her family or Ian for assistance."

Jack stopped again; and his expression this time was so enraged, that for a moment, Noelle felt a fission of alarm run through her body. He looked like he wanted to hurt something or someone, but at the same time, he looked like a scared little boy. Bending his head, he rubbed his face in frustration and tried to control himself. Noelle grabbed his face and made him stare at her until his eyes became focused. "Breathe, Jack! It's okay; I've got you."

Jack's smile was ugly as he talked about the father he loathed. "No, you need to know. My father Patrick Sullivan was such a stellar human being that instead of getting sober for his family and helping to support us, he began to accuse my Ma of having affairs with the men whose laundry she took in. First the abuse was verbal, but escalated quickly into physical where no one could see, because even though he'd been disowned, Sullivan's didn't do things like that. His moods

shifted from blaming her for the life he had to raging that she belonged to him. His sick jealousy knew no bounds, and he eventually started to take his abuse out on Darby and me even though Ma tried to protect us as best as she could.”

“The first couple of years in public, we were the perfect family- scrubbed clean and attending mass on Sunday, but it was a different story behind closed doors. My Ma refused to sleep with Patrick, so he then began raping her. When she found out she was pregnant again, she went to an OBGYN in Nashville to take care of the problem. It was there that she met Vivienne. They hit it off immediately in the waiting room, and my mother ended up confiding to her the real reason that she was there. Then Viv’s boyfriend came in to pick her up, and he was none other than Alexei Romankov.

Needless to say, my mother was scared of word getting back to Patrick, so she didn’t have an abortion. Instead, she went to old man Sullivan and blackmailed him. She told him she’d continue to keep quiet about his grandson’s behavior if he gave her enough money to open a laundromat. They struck a deal, and it became one of the most successful businesses in town. For once we didn’t have to struggle, and Ma could finally breathe easier. Seeing how much she didn’t need Patrick loosened the lock on his ugliness, and he became the town embarrassment, ranting and raving for everyone to see his craziness.

“I was thirteen when my mother decided to put her plans to leave him in motion. She started to stash money away and slowly bring our stuff to the laundromat. Viv would box things up for her and pack them away in a truck that she kept at her home; but they had to be very discreet about it because I’m ashamed to say, Patrick Sullivan was also a big, racist asshole who refused to interact with anyone who wasn’t white.” Jack felt Noelle’s sharp gaze on him, but refused to look at her as he revealed his shameful past. “He felt that affirmative action

was the reason he couldn't get a job, not because he was a lazy- ass drunk who felt he was better than everybody else.”

Briefly Jack closed his eyes; and one of the many unpleasant childhood memories he wished he could forget assailed him.

He was ten at the time and waiting for his mother to pick him and Darby up from school. As he waited for his brother outside, he talked some football with his friends Guy and Charlie. Unbeknownst to him, Patrick was there to pick them up instead. When he finally noticed his father, he quickly grabbed Darby and they hurried towards the truck, lest he get out and embarrass them. Jack had barely buckled himself into the front seat when...Crack! He reeled back from the slap his father gave him, his head hitting the passenger window as blood pooled in his mouth. “Stop slumming with the niggers and that savage, boy! You’ll only give ‘em ideas that they’re as good as you, and they’ll try to take your jobs and women!” Dizzy, Jack struggled not to throw up from the instant headache the blow gave him. Opening the door, he spit the blood out as his father continued to yell at him. His eyes met those of his sympathetic friends, and he wanted to crawl into a hole, certain they could hear the bastard’s ranting and raving across the parking lot. For weeks afterwards, he’d been ashamed to look them in the eye.

“Jack!” At Noelle’s voice, Jack blinked the memory away and wiped his flush face, before continuing his story.

“One day Viv was leaving the laundromat with a box of our clothes, and she ran into Patrick. The box fell to the ground and he saw what was inside. He grabbed her arm and accused her of stealing. As you know, my godmother is not one to mince words, so she slapped him and cussed him out. He grabbed her, and my mother came running out to help her friend. I’m told she jumped on his back, and he threw Viv to the ground, kicked her in the stomach, and punched my

mother in the face. Little did he know that earlier in the day, the Romankovs discovered that they were pregnant.”

“Witnesses went to get Alexei and the sheriff, and Patrick took off like the sniveling coward that he was. Alexei was furious at what the two women had been plotting on their own, and he took his wife to the hospital where he didn’t leave her side until the doctor said she was fine. Viv was mad at him for not going to check on Ma, but after speaking to the Sheriff who said the bastard was nowhere to be found, there was nothing she could say.”

“Two deputies were assigned to our house, and Ma pulled us out of school to get the rest of our things. We were upstairs packing when we heard him. We all huddled in the master bedroom and shoved a dresser against the door. She spoke calmly but quietly and gave us instructions to go out the window and to our nearest neighbor’s home. They would know what to do and stay off the road path. We begged her to come with us even as the dresser was being pushed away from the door. Patrick sounded like an animal, and we were terrified to leave her there with him. Ma wouldn’t hear of it and insisted that everything would be okay. We needed to go now and not look back or turn around for anything. When we left, we saw both deputies lying on the ground with blood gushing from their heads and a pipe laying in between them. Both were still alive and later told the sheriff that he’d been hiding under the house.” Jack hung his head, shaking at the memory of that horrible night.

“You are mine, Moira! I will never let you go! Never!!”
Patrick Sullivan screamed furiously and high-pitched wails of agony filled the air following his declaration.

“Patrick murdered my mother that night and then took his own life. He forever changed the lives of seven people. My

brothers and I were left motherless. Ian and Vivienne were left sister-less. Alexei ...wifeless, because as soon as Viv heard what happened to her dearest friend, she moved out of their bedroom into a guest room, remaining there on bed rest until she gave birth to Katerina Moira Romankov. A month after the baby was born, Viv left Alexei and hasn't been back since, because she couldn't and *still can't* forgive him for what he didn't do. Kat lost out on growing up with two doting parents who loved one another and lived in the same household. All she's ever known is being shuffled around back and forth between here and D.C. That's why every day since that night, I wish that I would've had the balls to kill Patrick Sullivan and protect my family," Jack said bleakly.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The silence between them hung heavy. Still reeling from Jack's confession of his family history, Noelle could sense the emotional turmoil weighing him down and wished she could take away his pain. She grasped his hand in one of hers and held it in her lap and stroked his rigid jaw with the other. Eyes closed, he turned his head into her touch and pressed a kiss to the inside of her palm. Noelle leaned in and gave him a soft lingering kiss. She said sincerely, "Jack, I'm so sorry that happened to you and your family. I wish I could take your pain away."

Jack gave a heavy sigh and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "It's not something I usually talk about, but today...just seeing that fried chicken and the *taste*... God, it brought it all back for me. I've never allowed myself to grieve or celebrate the time I was blessed to have with her. In the beginning, there was never time. I had to make sure that my brothers were alright; to be strong for them and Vivienne and to never show weakness in front of Ian and Alexei. Pretty soon it just got

easier to say and do the things to make everyone around me feel better, that I just buried my feelings and concentrated on making sure everyone else was all good. I never looked back; just kept putting one foot in front of the other until it didn't hurt to breathe so much."

"During our counseling sessions, I'd expose a little bit of myself to get the sessions rolling for Casey and Darby, but I wouldn't really divulge too much. Living with Alexei after Ma's death was really tricky for me, because he was always watching me, like I was a bomb just waiting to go off. I tried my hardest to be good and keep the boys in line so he would keep us together," Jack grimaced and leaned back on the sofa, closing his eyes wearily.

"It just became...too much for me and when it was time to apply for colleges I picked the ones farthest from home and only came home during holidays and to see my siblings graduate from high school. This visit is the longest I've been here since Kat graduated from high school. Usually we all get together in Nashville, D.C., or they come to New York to see me."

He fell silent, and Noelle leaned back resting her head on his shoulder and rubbed his thigh in a soothing manner. She listened as his breathing gradually returned to a normal state and silently cursed Patrick Sullivan for the all the damage he'd inflicted on these good people. *How much*, she wondered, *would he have hated that they had obviously taken after their mother and grew up to be successful businessmen that were well-liked and established? That a strong, beautiful, black woman had a hand in raising them, and they had a biracial sister? Or that his son was married to a black woman? Oh, how he had to be turning in his grave*, she thought. Suddenly Jack sat up and got to his feet. "C'mon, let's get out of here and get some fresh air."

Noelle accepted his offered hand, and he gently pulled her up and wrapped an arm around her, drawing her tightly to him. “Are we going to join the others?” she asked.

Jack shook his head and grinned. “Nah, we’re going to do something that I haven’t done in a long time.”

Noelle looked at him expectantly. “Okay, I’m game. What do I need to bring?”

He grinned and her heart leaped per usual as he grabbed her hand and led her to the door. “You don’t have to bring anything except a willingness to try new things.”

Noelle craned her neck, looking up in disbelief at the forty-foot tall ladder attached to the side of a massive tree. She could make out the large wood platform at the top. Her gaze turned to follow the zip line that stretched from the tree over the huge man-made lake to a tree on the opposite side. Turning to Jack she asked in disbelief “*This* is what you guys did for fun growing up?”

They’d driven into a denser wooded area that made Noelle think of the Blair Witch Project, before coming to a stop by a clear path that led to a fenced in lake. Jack informed her that Alexei had it built for all the local kids the year he and his brothers came to stay with him.

Jack laughed his deep booming laugh and started to unbutton his black shirt, revealing tanned, sinewy muscles that Noelle couldn't help but admire. "Awww c'mon, baby. Where's your sense of adventure? This is where you could find the gang every summer from noon 'til dinnertime. The water's not that deep, seven feet tops. Growing up, parents didn't mind because there was safety in numbers; and after Alexei had it built, he hired lifeguards and security to supervise all activity. If you couldn't swim, you weren't allowed in. You *can* swim right?"

"Yes, but I don't have a swimsuit, Mr. Sullivan. Something I'm very sure you're aware of." She said dryly. He was down to his boxer briefs now and again Noelle found herself admiring his fine form. Under her perusal, she watched his manhood lengthen. Damn, she couldn't get enough of him. Noelle had to press her legs together to squelch her ever growing desire for him.

"Not a problem. It's just us out here. Let's climb to the top, and I'll show you how to use the zip line. It'll drop you anywhere in the lake, but you probably want to drop into the center," he suggested, glancing at her expectantly. Oh right, he wanted her clothes off. Quickly she kicked her shoes off and yanked her tee and pants off.

Jack felt his eyes glaze over at the brown sugar perfection before him, enhanced by a lacy, pink satin bra and matching bikini cut panties. Her nipples beaded under his hot gaze, and she bit her bottom lip. He cleared his throat and turned to discreetly adjust himself as he motioned for her to climb the ladder. "Ladies first, baby. Don't worry, I'm right behind you."

She smiled and walked over to the ladder. Jack groaned loudly, as the lush roundness of her ass teased him through the delicate lace, begging him to rip the bottoms off, cup the full

globes and explore the sweet goodness between them. Noelle must have been reading his mind, tossing him a warning look over her shoulder. “Don’t even think about it. This is Agent Provocateur, and you’d best believe you’d be replacing it, mister.”

Noelle reached up to hoist herself onto the first step, only to find herself pressed back against his warm body, his swollen cock nestled perfectly between her ass cheeks. His warm breath tickled her ear as he slid his large hand up her stomach to rest under her breasts. “It’d be worth it. Just so we’re clear...you’re saying as long as I replace it...”

“Mmmmmm, you’re insatiable,” she murmured, leaning back into him. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and gently swatted her behind.

“Up you go, so I can enjoy the view.” At the top on the wooden platform, Noelle was able to take in the breathtaking view of the lake as it sparkled in the late afternoon sun. The air was so crisp and fresh that she wished she could bottle it up and take it back to the city with her.

“Pay attention, baby,” Jack instructed; she listened attentively as he explained the mechanics of the zip line bar and nodded her head when he asked if she understood. Then he pressed a lingering kiss to her lips and grinned. *He looks so carefree*, Noelle thought; the heavy weight of his confession had been lifted from those broad shoulders of his. It was a shame he’d carried all that baggage around for so many years as he was clearly relieved to shed it.

“See you at the bottom.” He turned to grab the bar but quickly turned back around and yanked her into his arms. “One more for good luck.”

His firm lips covered hers in a tender kiss, tongues meeting and sliding against each other in the slowest of dances. Noelle closed her eyes and lost herself in his firm embrace as Jack's arms squeezed her tighter as if he never wanted to let go. It was different from their usual intense kisses, but got her blood boiling nonetheless. Slowly they broke apart, and her hand reached up to caress his cheek. In the late afternoon sun, she could see every green and gold fleck in his hazel eyes and count every freckle on his nose. *He's the reason our babies are going to be so good-looking*, she thought to herself.

Jack was thinking the same thing as he looked at her lush, pink lips swollen from their kiss and the delicate bone structure of her face, her big gray eyes filled with happiness. "Damn, girl. What's my name again?"

Laughingly she pushed him away and watched as he took the bar confidently and leaped from the platform. His enthusiastic 'Whoooooo!' as he sped down the line was contagious and Noelle laughed as he let go and dove into the middle of the lake. A minute later he popped up and gave her the thumbs up yelling, "Come on in! The water is perfect!"

Per his directions, Noelle operated the panel to bring the bar back to her. Claspng it tightly, she copied his actions; and soon she was streaming through the air laughing. Exhilarated she screamed, "I'm the queen of the world!"

A couple of feet away from Jack she let go and dropped into the lake. She was shocked at how icy-cold the water was and quickly swam to the top, breaking the surface with a screech. Treading water, she pushed her hair out of her face and wiped it free of water. "It's cold as shit, liar!"

Jack laughed at her. “I did almost freeze my balls off, but sometimes you just have to go out on a leap of faith, darlin’.”

Noelle shivered and rubbed her arms. “Whatever, Gandhi. I’m freezing.”

Cupping her bottom, Jack pulled her against him and her limbs automatically encircled him, aligning her center with his raging erection. “Your balls don’t feel like they’re frozen to me, buddy.”

He murmured huskily into her neck as he licked water droplets from it. “Seein’ your sexy ass glidin’ through the air in them next-to-nothing skivvies has got me all hot and bothered.”

His thick fingers pulled her panties aside, gently dipping into her center as his lips met hers in a scorching kiss. She sighed into his lips and commenced to riding his digits. Jack smiled against her lips. “Let’s see how good I am at warming you up.”

Firm lips gently pressed kisses along her jawline. They were light as a feather, and Noelle smiled as she slowly opened her eyes to find Jack’s face hovering above hers.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said softly, his desire-filled eyes were the color of warm honey. “How are you feeling this morning?” They’d arrived back in New York City last night. Noelle insisted they go to his place as she’d never been there, and he reluctantly complied. His loft was sleek, cold, and

impersonal. He stood by the door, silently watching as she explored all of his top-of-the-line electronic devices and the few pieces of furniture he did have. It was black and white bare minimalism at its best and didn't suit him at all. Finally, Jack came up behind her and whispered, "Let's get outta here."

They went back to her place where Noelle insisted on making them something to eat. She made prosciutto, melon, and mozzarella skewers drizzled with balsamic vinaigrette, and they sat out on the rooftop table, eating and emptying a bottle of white wine before Jack took her to bed and slowly drove her out of her mind. No matter how out of control she spun, Jack refused to speed up the pace, worshiping her body completely at an agonizingly slow pace until she was a breathless, quaking mess.

"Mmmm, I'm feeling cheated," Noelle said with a fake pout, and he nibbled on her lower lip. She pulled back and swung her legs to the floor, ignoring how warm her body felt as his heated gaze swept over her nude body and he licked his lips.

"Oh yeah? And why is that?" Jack asked, taking in how beautiful Noelle looked first thing in the morning. Her curls were everywhere and her body was calling his name. Judging from her rigid nipples, he was willing to bet money that if he slipped his hand between her legs, she would be wet.

"Because all the sexy scruff is gone," she said, running her fingers over his clean-shaven jawline. "I had my heart set on being beard-burned this morning."

Jack chuckled quietly and leaned her back into the pillows before ravishing her mouth. Gently he inserted a finger into her already moist center. Noelle moaned as he delved his tongue into her mouth, spreading her legs wider and rotating

her hips, silently begging for more. She ran her fingers through his curls as he added a second finger, quickly followed by a third, and his thumb made slow circles around her clit causing her to clutch at him feverishly.

“The scruff stays on ‘The Row’. If you want it, we need to take another trip down there, love,” he said thickly against her lips as his fingers curled in and rubbed against her g-spot. In the bright light of day, the colors of their skin melded together; and as always, the beauty of it made him catch his breath.

“Oh gaawwwd!!” Noelle cried, pulling her lips away from his and struggling to catch her breath. He quickly yanked her head back to claim his victory, swallowing every strangled cry she emitted as he continued to play her body. The muffled pants were music to Jack’s ears, and he leaned down to suction a plump nipple into his mouth. Her hips shot off the bed, and he swiftly repositioned himself between her legs as her hands frantically yanked at the sweats sitting low on his hips. She pulled them down, and his cock sprang free, red and tumescent. Jack grabbed Noelle’s wrists and held them over her head with one hand as he used the other to guide himself to her entrance and plunged, powerfully drilling into her as he rotated suckling her swollen peaks.

“I could stay inside you forever,” Jack groaned with pleasure, licking the perspiration gathering between her breasts as she writhed and moaned in delight, her legs curling around his calves. “Jesus, this pussy... is... so... fucking... *perfect*.”

No one compared to him, Noelle thought as he sexed her oh so thoroughly. His hips rotated and touched all her sweet spots, especially the main one. He was like a pool shark, expertly shooting the balls into each pocket. God, she couldn’t get enough of him; planting her feet on the bed, she thrust her hips up to receive her just rewards. He released her hands, and she

slid them down to grip his firm buttocks as she licked and sucked his neck. Jack still couldn't believe he was with her. The feeling was almost religious. He raised himself up to his knees, pulling her legs onto his shoulders; their gazes connected and he slid his thumb down to torment her clit. "Play with your nipples, Noelle."

She obeyed, loving the sensations and the carnal look in Jack's eyes as he watched her. The bed shook with the savagery of his thrusts. Her nipples were too achy and sensitive from her fingers and his teeth; every squeeze and tug she gave them caused her pussy to clench tighter and tighter around his cock, making his breathing even more ragged as he propelled deeper and harder into her. Her magic button was too hyper-sensitive from his play; and the way his member was swelling even more as he fucked her, she knew soon he would come; but like a true gentleman, he would make sure she did first. All it took was a gentle strum of his fingers against her tender clit and Noelle came in a fiery burst, clamping down on him so hard that Jack had no choice but to follow, releasing her legs to bury his face in her neck as he emptied himself inside of her with a long, harsh groan.

Afterwards, they were in a mad rush to get to work, and Jack insisted on driving Noelle. Twenty minutes later he pulled up to the large warehouse where Tarik's party would be held, and they waited for Avery to arrive.

"What time will you be done today? You look really nice by the way," Jack said as Noelle put a file folder into her large, black Marc Jacobs bag. Today she was wearing her hair in a side braid that hung over one shoulder. Her black, silk button-

down work shirt was tucked into a form-fitting green, black and white tropical print skirt. Black strappy sandals showed off red-painted toes. His eyes narrowed as they settled on her bare ring finger.

“Baby, where’s your ring?” he asked calmly although he already knew what her answer would be. A wave of irritation was rising fast inside of him. All week long he noticed her staring at it when she thought no one was looking, so he knew her having it on was a conscientious decision on her part. She looked at him and bit her top lip, letting him know that he wouldn’t like her answer. It was one of the many quirks that he loved about her. When she was nervous, she bit her top lip; if she was aroused, it was the bottom one.

“It’s at home on the dresser,” Noelle said nervously. This morning she’d debated putting it on, but decided against it, not ready for the twenty questions it would bring. Already she was regretting the decision; her finger felt and looked so naked without it.

“What’s it doin’ there, Noelle?” His accent was starting to get stronger, and Noelle could tell he was getting upset by the way his eyes were flashing and how his voice slipped back into a southern twang.

“Well...I just thought it would be best considering that our situation isn’t really ...well...real...” she trailed off as he waved his left hand at her, showing his band was very much on display. While Jack took another shower this morning, she’d checked her voicemail. There were eight messages, and five of them were from her mother, each message testier than the last. There was also a text basically stating that the mountain would be coming to Muhammad if she didn’t get a call back. Noelle knew it was pretty serious since her mother despised texting. The showdown was imminent, and she just

needed a little more time to gather her thoughts. The ring would certainly not escape her mother's hawk eye.

"No, it's not ideal, but our situation works. Nobody's going to know we're together, let alone married, if you don't advertise it in some way," Jack said with irritation. "I gave that ring to you on our wedding day, but I also said that it was yours no matter what. Even if it's not on your ring finger, I'd appreciate it if you wore the damn thing."

She bristled at his tone. "And I'd appreciate it if you didn't take that tone with me, Jack. I'm just not ready for the questions that would come with wearing it *here*."

He gave her a hard look. "You mean *here*, because this is where your family lives, correct?"

Noelle stiffened and looked straight ahead as the tension between them rose. The thought of having to deal with her family's questions gave her a raging headache. "Look, does it really matter? I just said I'm not comfortable right now. Besides you already sent our certificate to your friend, right?"

The temperature in the car turned positively chilly as Jack gave her an icy glare. "I was under the impression that we were in this together, but it's like you would rather keep everything a secret. Are you so terrified that your family is going to disapprove, that you're scared to rock the boat? That's fine. You're absolutely right, it doesn't matter."

Noelle had to stifle her gasp of pain as she watched him yank his ring off and drop it in the cup holder. Her stunned gaze rose to meet his coolly unreadable one. There was a knock on the window, and they turned to see Avery standing on the

sidewalk with a bright smile, holding a tray filled with Starbucks cups. Noelle opened the door to greet her.

“Good morning, lovebirds!” she said cheerfully unaware of the strain between Jack and Noelle. “I brought you guys coffee, because something tells me you two were occupied with ... other things this morning,” Avery finished delicately as she handed them their cups. “Venti Americano for Jack. Venti Caramel latte iced for Bae,” she waved her hand at Noelle. “Besides, this one is a complete brat if caffeine isn’t in her system.”

“Thank you, Ms. Avery. Well I better get going. I’m sure there’s a lot to deal with at the office, especially since I’ve been out all week,” Jack said, flashing her a quick smile before glancing down at his watch.

“Thanks for the ride, Jack,” Noelle said quietly, knowing that it was her fault that he was pissed off. Damn. And the morning had started off with such promise of a great day. She’d definitely fucked up big time.

“No problem. Ladies have a great day,” Jack said politely and Noelle grabbed her things giving him one last look as he stared fixedly ahead, his mouth compressed in a tight line. Slowly she got out and closed the door, watching with a sinking heart as he drove off down the street without looking back.

“Everything alright?” Avery asked with concern. “Jack didn’t seem like his usual charming self this morning.”

“Yeah, everything’s okay. Come on. Something tells me we’re going to be grinding long after the sun sets,” Noelle said taking a sip of her coffee, her mind still on Jack.

“Giiiiirrrrl, who you telling? That’s exactly why I wore my hardcore primer today,” Avery said, gesturing towards her face. “Oh, and I received a call today from a company called *Americana Traditions*. Their secretary is requesting a meeting. They want to use us for their launch party. Seems we’re growing quite popular...”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Everything was not okay; Jack thought to himself as he got off the elevator and walked to his office. He smiled and greeted everyone that passed him in the corridor but was getting more and more pissed by the minute. They hadn’t even been in the city for twenty-four hours and already things were very different.

“Good morning, sir! How was your vacation?” Margo asked cheerily, smiling as she stood up to greet him.

“It was good, thanks for asking. You look great. I guess me being out of your hair agrees with you,” Jack said, leaning down to kiss her cheek with a loud smack.

She laughed and shook her head. “Hardly, everything has been running smoothly under Mrs. Romankov’s orders.” At his look of surprise, she elaborated; “She said that you were not to be disturbed under any circumstances. She has been dealing with the pageant and Ms. Gaines, who has been on her best behavior, I might add. Mr. Rusnik called several times while you were out. I informed him that you would be in today and he said for you to call him back ASAP,” Margo sniffed. “Joel

and David Rothman have been calling for you nonstop as well.”

Jack sighed, knowing he couldn't put off the older man's calls forever. He knew that Ira's sons were calling to harass him about the stipulations placed on the loan for *On a Whim*, but he didn't give a rat's ass about those two spoiled dickheads. His phone beeped, signaling a text; and he pulled it out to check, grimacing as he read it. It was from Viv regarding Ian.

Just got off the phone with Gandalf. Ooooooooooh you in trouble....

“Thank you for holding down the fort, Margo. Please hold my calls for the next hour,” Jack said before walking into his office and closing the door behind him. After sitting down at his desk, he picked up the office phone and dialed Ian's number.

“It's about damn time. I thought I was going to have to take a flight home and put my Gucci loafer up your behind, dear boy,” Ian said in his smooth, dulcet voice. “I'm hearing things, Jack; things that have got my blood pressure up and my beautiful, silver hair turning gray. Talk to me, son.”

Anyone else, Jack might have told to kiss his ass; but not the man who helped to raise him and his brothers. “Your hair's been gray since you were born. Hello Ian, how is Greece?”

“Jackson Conall Sullivan, don't think your big, country ass is too heavy to go over my knee!” Ian barked. Jack laughed out loud at the image those words created and leaned back in his chair to relax.

“Exactly what have you heard, Ian?” Jack asked curiously as he stalled for time. He heard Ian sigh and could easily picture him, with his long, silver hair in a man bun and a matching goatee, smoking a cigar as he stood overlooking the Aegean Sea.

“I’ve heard that you finally grew a pair of balls and married my little girl. That’s what I’ve heard,” Ian said bluntly. “And if that’s the case, perhaps now you can stop eye-fucking her every time she enters a room.”

Wait. What?? Jack straightened up in the chair. “It’s true I did marry Noelle.” If he lived to be a hundred, he would never get tired of saying that. “Are you saying that you’ve known how I felt about her this whole time?”

“Are you asking me if I knew that you’ve had a hard on for my precious baby since the night of her twenty-first birthday party? If so, then yes; and it’s a surprise to me that nobody else has come to the same conclusion. It’s quite obvious from the way you make it a point to do all business concerning the Kramer’s in person and at their home; which is the one place that you were sure to run into her. Alicia Kramer could drive the Pope to drink, yet you grin and bear her; attending all the family events just so you can be near Noelle. Also, last time I was in your office, I believe I heard you plucking flowers singing ‘she loves me, she loves me not...’”

“Fuck off, Ian,” Jack said mildly as he stared down angrily at his ring less finger.

“So what else aren’t you telling me? The only reason I know is because I called Alexei yesterday and he commented on the delicious chicken your *wife* made. Naturally my curiosity was peaked. Said he hadn’t had chicken that good since Moira,” Ian said softly.

“Ian, that chicken was amazing. I really wish you could have been there,” Jack reminisced. “I haven’t had chicken that good since Ma. My wife can definitely burn in the kitchen on top of being sweet and fine as all get out.”

“No need to tell me how fabulous Noelle is. Besides, I’ve had the chicken, lad. It was her uncle who taught your mother and her how to make it. Your Ma and I would sneak out of the house and go to block parties in D.C. It was there that I met Harvey. He was serving his famous fried chicken, and it was calories at first sight,” Ian said fondly and Jack knew he was thinking of his beloved late partner. “Now, I want you to tell me why no one knows of your marriage? I would have felt the fire from Alicia about how you took advantage of her baby if she did know.”

“Actually I’m helping her out with a situation that has the potential to become a scandal for her and ultimately her family. After reviewing the cluster fuck from all angles, I felt that marriage was the best way to diffuse it,” Jack said carefully, hoping that his answer would be enough for the shrewd bastard.

There was a long pause before Ian finally spoke in a harsh tone. “So you thought you’d kill two birds with one stone, eh? Be very careful about the games you play, Jackie. Noelle won’t take too kindly to being your pawn and you playing with her heart. If I’m not mistaken, the saying goes ‘One of the cruelest things a person can do is to awaken someone’s love without the intention of ever truly loving them’.”

“It’s not a game for me, Ian,” Jack said forcefully. “I married her with the intention of staying married, and I don’t give a damn what any of you may or may not believe.”

“Does she know that or how you feel? I do not doubt your feelings are real. I’ve seen the way you look at her. All I’m saying is that if you got her under false pretenses, that will be how you lose her,” Ian warned.

“She is my wife and that is how it’s going to stay,” Jack replied fiercely. He was tense, feeling the anger and something else trying to claw its way out of the pit of his stomach. It was the fear of losing his beautiful, sweet wife. He would go to war with anyone who dared to try and interfere in their relationship, including the man on the phone.

“Don’t misunderstand me; I’m very happy for you, Jackie. Despite what you may think, you deserve happiness just like everyone else. As do your brothers, although it should be mandatory that Darby gets his with a shot of penicillin the way he spreads himself about,” Ian said in exasperation. “Vivi just gave me an earful about how she’s going through receptionists left and right because they’re sprung on his ‘damned ginger-headed ass’.” The last part was said mimicking Viv’s voice perfectly.

Jack laughed, relaxing again. “Y’all need to leave Darby alone. Now before I dig into the pile of paperwork on my desk, tell me about your vacation.”

He leaned back in his chair to listen as Ian launched into the details of his vacation, but Jack was only paying half attention because Ian’s words were lingering in the back of his mind.

“If you got her under false pretenses, that will be how you lose her.”

What a day, Noelle thought tiredly as she walked past the two security guards on front door duty and gave them a wave. “Goodnight, guys.”

“Goodnight,” they chorused, smiling and nodding before returning to monitor the surveillance cameras of the building. It was eleven-thirty at night and the venue was all set for Tarik’s party tomorrow. Everything was being done onsite, and the deliveries had been nonstop throughout the day. Her ears were still ringing from the dancers practicing their routine, and Avery’s scream of rage when she discovered the florist had sent the wrong kind of flowers. This pushed the arrangements that she planned on making two hours behind as they waited for the correct ones to arrive.

Four cases of party glasses arrived shattered, so polishing was delayed. They Skyped with Sidra, who was being vague on her whereabouts, regarding the music genre and did a checklist run-through of all the equipment needed for the DJ booth that arrived early that morning. It was one thing after another all day; and the only way she and Avery got through it was by chanting their favorite Nelson Mandela quote to each other when they crossed paths: *“Everything seems impossible until it is done.”*

Tomorrow would be another long day, and all she wanted was to go home and get something to eat before bed so that she would be well-rested and prepared for it. Hopefully it would also take her mind off the fact that she hadn’t heard from Jack at all today. As Noelle walked out the doors and into the late evening, she came to a stop. A black, matte Range Rover was parked out front and Jack was leaning against it, staring at the front doors, making it obvious that he was waiting for her.

Pleasure stole through her, and she couldn't contain her wide smile; just to know that he cared enough to come pick her up even if he was mad at her. She marveled at how impeccable he looked, as handsome and fresh as he had that morning except for the tie loosened around his neck. Meanwhile her light makeup had faded away hours ago, tendrils escaped from her braid and curled around her face.

Jack smiled when he saw her and held out his arms. Noelle ran into them, sighing as his strong arms closed around her, holding her tightly to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered into his ear, "I'm sorry I was a jerk this morning. Please forgive me."

Jack held her tighter and cleared his throat, "It's alright. Let's go home."

Unease settled in the pit of Noelle's stomach as he shut the passenger door behind her, and she watched him walk around to the driver's seat, his expression inscrutable. Just because he came to pick her up didn't mean all was well between them. His 'It's alright' wasn't exactly the same as 'I forgive you'.

When they got to her brownstone, Noelle walked into the tantalizing smell of jerk chicken and quickly followed it to the kitchen where there were bags from the Jamaican restaurant around the corner. She turned to look at him as he shrugged out of his suit and tie, unbuttoning the first three buttons of his white dress shirt. For the hundredth time she wished that she was back in Whiskey Row with 'Scruffy Jack'. "It's as if you were reading my mind; I'm starved! I haven't eaten anything all day."

Jack smiled, moving forward to take her workbag and purse. "Figured you would be too busy to eat. Why don't you take a quick shower, and I'll make our plates?"

Noelle willingly handed over her things and hurried to do just that. That was really nice of him to be thinking of her after she was such a bitch this morning. *I'll make it up to him tonight in bed*; she thought, grinning in anticipation as she shed her clothes and stepped into the steaming shower. Fifteen minutes later, she found him in the living room watching the news channel with two heaping plates of rice and peas, jerk chicken, and fried plantains. Two iced, bottled beverages were placed beside them.

“That looks soooo good, Jack. Thanks again,” Noelle said as she picked up a plate and spied the label on the bottle. “Orangina! How’d you know I love drinking this with Jamaican food? I didn’t know you even liked Jamaican.” Picking up her fork, she dug in, ravenous after her long day.

Jack picked up his own plate and started eating as he nodded his head, feigning a look of surprise. He knew she liked Orangina and that she visited the restaurant whenever she had a long day, from the private detective’s reports. He finished chewing. “You’re kidding me right? Who doesn’t have Jamaican food and Orangina together? They go hand in hand.”

“Exactly!” Noelle beamed; glad that he got it, and took a sip of the fizzy, citrus drink. “So how was your day?” The hooded look Jack was giving her from over the bottle let her know what was up. For good measure, she slowly sucked the top between her lips and ran her tongue around the rim.

“It was good.” He cleared his throat, staring at her glistening lips. “We’re taking on a new client, a celebrity chef named Seline Marcuzzo. Familiar with her?”

“Yes, she was really good on that food challenge show. I remember how pissed all the other contestants were with her because she was winning all the time.” Noelle frowned slightly. She also remembered how beautiful Seline was. Resembling a young Sophia Loren in looks and knock ’em dead curves, the chef was also smart and cunning as she played to the male judges and audience. The behind-the-scenes footage with the other contestants had not painted her in the most flattering of lights.

“She’s quite smart, and during lunch today, she laid out her game plan. It was ambitious as hell; I almost felt like I should warn Martha Stewart that she’s about to be dethroned,” Jack said half-jokingly. Seline came from humble beginnings but wasn’t about to let that stop her from getting to the top. *Even if it meant attempting to seduce him to get it*, Jack thought, recalling their lunch meeting today.

“Monsieur Sullivan, I promise that if you take me on you won’t regret it!” she stated dramatically in her charming accent, pressing a hand to her generous cleavage and slightly brushing her blouse to the side to draw his attention. She tossed her long, brown waves over one shoulder and pouted prettily. It was a deliberately calculating move that was wasted on him, as he was too busy thinking about Ian’s words of warning.

‘If you got her under false pretenses, that will be how you lose her.’

He looked Seline directly in the eye. “I think you’re very talented, and I like the plans that I’ve seen so far. You’re hungry and that’s good, because I will put you where you want to be as long as you are willing to work hard and comply with your contract.”

Seline smiled flirtatiously, a speculative gleam in her eye as she leaned in closer to reveal more of her breasts, slyly suggesting, “Monsieur Sullivan, you are just as hungry as I am, perhaps we should be eating together, non?”

Jack gave her a hard stare. “I only eat with my woman, and she brings the table to the table, comprenez-vous?”

“It sounds like you have your work cut out for you, and you’re both on the same page. I’m glad it worked out well. You’re going to be at the party tomorrow night, right?” Noelle asked stealing some chicken off his plate. Jack snagged one of her plantains and avoided looking at her by pretending to be interested in the news. It flashed to world news in and images of protestors appeared on the screen. Jack quickly changed the channel to HBO, and an image of a woman nursing a dragon appeared. *Tell her, tell her before it is too late*, his conscience urged. He clenched his jaw tightly, trying hard not to give away his anxiety.

“Yes, it probably won’t be until later. Our other potential client is coming by the office, and I have a dinner meeting with Seline and some investors. Did you need me to get anything for you? Let me know, and I can have Margo arrange it for you. I promise I will be there as soon as it’s over.”

Noelle watched him carefully, looking for signs of affection as he continued to eat and watch the news. There were none. “No, I think I’ve got everything covered.” She glanced at the television. “I didn’t know you were into *Game of Thrones*.”

He wasn’t and found the little blonde girl with the dragon sucking at her breast to be fucking weird as hell. Jack stood up and gathered the remains of their dinner. “Every now and then. I’m going to clean up in the kitchen and lockup. Why don’t you get some rest? I’ll meet you in the bedroom shortly.”

Noelle lay in bed sleepily waiting for Jack to join her, but he took so long that she fell asleep. The next morning there was a note on his pillow stating that he'd gone in to work early so he could try to be at the party at a decent time. There was no lovemaking and teasing, and Noelle knew for certain that his feelings had been hurt by her careless words and actions. *Guess the honeymoon was officially over.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tarik's party was in full swing and packed to capacity. The Great Gatsby theme was a hit, and Noelle smiled as she worked the main room, taking in the activity around her. The crowd had gone wild when Tarik rolled into the venue, driving a vintage Rolls Royce surrounded by scantily-clad flapper models. Art Deco décor in black, gold and silver screamed glamour; prints of famous artists from that era were blown up and hanging everywhere. Cocktails named after 1920's musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong were circulating the room; and the dancers mingled with guests, pulling them onto the dance floor as Sidra rocked out in the DJ booth.

The party was a raging success for *On a Whim*. Tarik had introduced Noelle and Avery to the crowd, thanking them profusely for a wonderful party; and they were now networking as they mingled. Jack showed up around eight-thirty and was at the bar speaking with two men. All evening

he'd been in the background, proudly smiling and watching her do her thing. Although right now, he wasn't smiling. He had a very stern expression on his face as he spoke with the men. Finally they stormed away, leaving Jack to sip his drink and survey the crowd. He looked so dapper in his tux with his hair slicked back, his profile model-perfect and exuding sex appeal.

As Noelle watched him, a beautiful blonde woman walked up to him and gave him a very long hug which he returned affectionately. As the woman pulled away, she realized it was the woman from her birthday party on the night they met. Noelle felt her left eye twitch as Jack kept his hand around her waist and leaned down to listen to her speak, and she wrapped her arm around his. Occasionally he smiled and nodded. Noelle felt a stab of pain in her heart as he brought his hand up to take a drink, and she stared at his bare left hand. *Well what did you expect, missy? That's what you wanted right?* her conscience taunted her.

“That’s Jack Sullivan, the P.R. guru. Isn’t he yummy?” a woman’s voice said behind Noelle. She turned around to see two well-dressed partygoers who probably hadn’t eaten in years surveying *her* husband like he was a seven course meal. She turned back around to watch him, engrossed in deep conversation with the blonde leech. The handsome husband that she’d let out of the house without the ring he was supposed to be wearing and was surrounded by beautiful women daily. *Dumbass*. Noelle caught Sidra’s look and her raised bitch brow as she looked back and forth between Jack, blondie, and her. *Whatchu wanna do?* her look said.

“Yeah, that’s him. They say he’ll never settle down and commit to one woman. The woman standing next to him was his on and off again love. Her name is Vaughn Emerson, and she’s a shoe designer. They look good together don’t they?” Hungry Girl Two confirmed.

“They might look good together, but I heard she’s married to some asshole banker who runs around on her,” Hungry Girl One said in a gossipy tone.

To hell with this, Noelle had heard enough and walked away, shaking her head no at Sidra. Protocol demanded that she go over to the blonde hussy and beat her down for touching her man; then turn to said man and knee him in the balls for allowing himself to be touched. *Jerk*. Unfortunately, since she was here in a professional capacity, she’d have to take the high road. For now...

She grabbed a Sidecar cocktail from one of the waitresses before crossing the room to stand by the side doors where she could view the entire room. Downing a big gulp, Noelle grimaced as she thought about her situation with Jack. Deep in thought, she didn’t even notice when someone crept up behind her.

“There was a time when you could drink three of those like they were water,” a British accent said in her ear. Noelle spun around to see Theo standing there grinning at her. “Theo! What are you doing here?!”

They exchanged hugs, and Noelle stiffened as he squeezed her extra tight, pulling her against him. She stepped back and gave him an eyebrow as he laughed. “Sorry, luv. It’s just always a pleasure to see you. So this is your shindig, eh? Absolutely

done right. Completely spot on and I'm proud of you and your mate."

"Awwww thanks, babe. It's nice to see you as well. How's the painting going?" she asked with a big smile and it was his turn to grimace.

"Not well. My best subject seems to be fond of up and disappearing. I'll need you to come by the studio sometime this week and see what I've done with your painting. I've been experimenting with shading, and I have to say that I think I'm onto something. Aside from that, I've got a show in London next month," he beamed proudly, and she grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly.

"Theo, that's wonderful! I'll give you a call later so we can set something up," she promised with a big smile.

"Okay then; it's a date. Looking forward to it. Hey, I ran into an old friend from school here earlier. Elizabeth Markel? Busty girl with multi-colored braids? Anyway, she wanted to meet me so that we could catch up. Poor thing looked pretty down in the dumps about an old flame dying, so I shall do my best to console her," he wagged his brows and kissed her cheek.

"You are absolutely incorrigible," Noelle said, rolling her eyes. "Don't go breaking her heart, Theo." He didn't say anything for a moment as he gave her a head to toe lingering look.

"How is it that you get more gorgeous every time I see you?" He shook his head in bemusement. "Anyhow bye, luv. Congrats to you and Avery on a successful party!" And with a two finger wave, he was gone, mingling into the crowd.

Noelle smiled to herself. Theo would probably gag if she told him the answer to his question was post-coital glow.

“I’d like to laugh with a pretty lady. Care to share the joke?”
The voice behind her was silky smooth with a Long Island accent.

Men are just popping out of the woodwork tonight; she thought and turned to meet a pair of ice-blue eyes. They belonged to an owner who wasn’t handsome, but there was something about him, Noelle decided, with his wavy brown hair slicked back and his nose that was a little on the larger side, and lips that were too full for his face. Something that women would like; and when he licked his lips with his long tongue as he coolly perused her from head to toe, she knew what it was. This man knew how to fuck, and women loved the way he did it. He was one of the men that Jack was speaking to earlier.

“There’s no joke. Are you enjoying the party, sir?” Noelle asked politely, stepping back to put distance between them. He grinned, leaning his shoulder against the wall which put him in closer proximity to her than she liked.

“I am indeed. You and your lovely partner are responsible for putting it together, right? Maybe we should get together to discuss an event that my brother and I are considering having for the Fourth of July? Pardon me; I just realized that we haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Joel Rothman,” he said charmingly and held out his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rothman. My name is Noelle...Kramer,” she said stiffly, realizing that she couldn’t

give her married name as much as she wanted to. Joel took her hand and held onto it, looking into her eyes.

“No, Noelle, the pleasure is all mine,” he said and reluctantly let go of her hand as she tugged it away. Joel reached into his pocket and pulled a small leather case out. He extracted a business card and handed it to her. “Please come by so that we can talk about it.”

Noelle glanced down at the blue card with silver writing and took it from him. Joel Rothman, Vice President of *Rothman Capital Investments*. “Is Ira Rothman your father?” she asked curiously.

Joel smiled blandly at her. “Yes he is, and I believe he made the loan for your business. It was the last one he did before semi-retiring. As a matter of fact, you really should come by Friday. He’ll be in the office, and after I tell him about the raging success of this event, I’m sure Dad will want to talk to you about expanding. It was a great party, Noelle. Call me,” he said persuasively, before turning to leave, as his gaze lingered again on her body, clad in a black, clingy dress that accentuated her curves.

Jack was furious as he watched Joel walk away from Noelle. First that British pussy, and now Rothman. His fingers clenched his glass as she slipped the card Joel gave her into the small beaded clutch she was carrying, before continuing to mingle with guests and speak to her staff. Knowing Rothman, he was probably pissed that Vaughn had sought him out. Joel would probably be even more pissed to find out that it was in regards to retaining Casey as her attorney when she filed for divorce from his sorry ass.

Good for her. Although Jack had a great deal of respect for Ira, his boys could kick fucking rocks as far as he was concerned.

They were lazy motherfuckers that were just waiting for Ira to die so they could fuck up his legacy. A couple of years ago, he and Vaughn had dated on and off. She wanted a commitment, but he didn't and they ended things a week after he met Noelle. Now she wanted to meet with him to brainstorm ideas for her new purse company, she claimed, but he knew from the way her brown eyes flirted and she clung to his arm, that wasn't all she wanted to do. In no uncertain terms, he told her no. He wasn't going to screw anything up with Noelle.

Jack was filled with pride as he looked around the beautifully-decorated venue. Everyone was having a good time. The food and drinks were amazing as was the music Sid was spinning; and he wished Ronald and Alicia were there to see Noelle in her element. They made eye contact, and her eyes briefly squinted at him, letting him know that she wasn't too pleased about something. He started to walk across the room but was stopped by Art Sanchez, a reporter with the NY MAG.

“Jack, I think I have enough coverage of Tarik's party. Thanks for getting me in here,” Art said sincerely.

“Not a problem, Art. Hey, a friend of mine at the Times was looking for a really good freelance reporter,” Jack said nonchalantly. He could see that Art was drooling at the thought of getting in good with the Times. “Think it's something you might be interested in doing? Nothing really big but some solid pieces to get you in the door. If you'd like I could put in a good word.”

“Yeah for sure, man. That would be great! Thanks for looking out,” Art said enthusiastically as Jack clapped him on the back and gave him a friendly smile.

“Not a problem, man. Listen is there any way you could get a picture of the event planners and maybe add something on

them. I've got a feeling that their business is going to take off after tonight, and they'd be some great people for you to network with. What do you say?" Jack asked, looking Art squarely in the eye. The other man didn't even blink as he said, "I was thinking the same thing myself."

Jack spied Joel heading out to the terrace for a smoke and shook Art's hand before walking away. "Good seeing you, Art."

The terrace was empty except for Joel smoking his cigar and talking on his cell phone. Jack quietly shut the doors behind him before approaching him. "Enjoying the party, Rothman?"

Startled, Rothman whirled around, cursing as some of the ash from his cigar flicked onto his hand. "What the hell, Sullivan?" He took a quick puff of his cigar and sneered. "As a matter of fact I am. How about you? Are you enjoying my soon-to-be-ex whore- wife hanging onto your every word? Just like old times for you, right?"

Jack stepped closer to him, anger coursing through his body. Although he wasn't the least bit interested in Vaughn and hadn't been in years, she didn't deserve to be talked about like that. Silkily he replied, "Tell me, who is the whore when you're banging your unsuspecting brother's wife? You or her?"

Joel froze in shock, but quickly recovered, "Who the fuck told you that-"

"No one had to tell me anything. I do my homework. What I've found is that The Ace Hotel is a great place to have some Rothman family fun time on Thursdays between noon and three," Jack smirked nastily at him.

Joel's face was purple with rage. "You bastard! You even attempt to say anything, and I will deny it. You're nothing but white trash aspiring to be better. You're just mad because I stole Vaughn away from you," he finished triumphantly. "It kills you that she didn't want to marry beneath her status."

Jack stared at him for a long moment before bursting out laughing. He laughed long and loud which angered Joel even more. "Where do you get these stupid-ass ideas from? Shit, no wonder Ira refuses to retire. I'd be scared too of leaving everything I've worked my whole life for to a brainless, conniving, little shit that'd stab his own family in the back and a moron too clueless to know he was being fucked over. I can't do this with you or even stand too close to you, because your stupidity might be contagious. Later, Rothman."

Shaking his head and still chuckling, Jack turned away to walk back to the terrace doors; but Joel wasn't done yet. From behind him he heard, "I don't think I'm so brainless that I can't figure out that you're interested in that fine piece of chocolate who's throwing this event. You've been watching her all night," he laughed spitefully as Jack stiffened and slowly turned around. "That's your client Senator Kramer's daughter, right? Hell Jack, I didn't know you liked them like that. Maybe I should just call you Willy Wonk-"

Jack's fist smashed into Joel's face, and he felt immense pleasure as bone crunched underneath it and the bastard landed flat on his ass. Blood spurted from his nose uncontrollably, covering his white dress shirt. He glared up at Jack evilly as he yelled, "You son of a bitch! You broke my fucking nose! I'm going to sue you!"

Jack stood over him shaking with rage. He wanted to pick this piece of shit up and toss him over the balcony. "Keep Ms.

Kramer's name out of your mouth. My business relationship with your father has nothing to do with you or your brother, and it would be in your best interest to remember that. See Rothman, your problem is, you're too arrogant. You want to run with the big dogs when you're just a fucking chihuahua nipping at our heels, barely keeping up. This is your only warning. Stay your ass on the porch, and you won't have to find out how hard I bite."

Jack waited to see if the other man would retaliate and was disappointed that he chose to wisely remain on his sorry ass and stay quiet. "Hmmm, just like I thought. *Now* you can have a goodnight."

The party was over and the ladies were standing outside talking about what a great success it was. "Ladies, this might be my last gig for a while," Sidra said with an excited smile. "I've been chatting with Dominick, and he wants me to be a DJ apprentice for his upcoming world tour!"

Noelle and Avery squealed in delight, hugging their friend. Sidra smiled amidst their words of encouragement.

"Thanks, lovelies! I'm so excited for the experience. I'll be shadowing two other guys for the first half of the tour, but then I'll get to spin. It's all-expenses paid, and it will be good to get away for a while," Sidra said with a pensive look in her eyes. Lately to Noelle, she'd been acting a little out of the ordinary, but when she asked what was wrong, Sidra just waved her off saying she had a lot on her mind.

“So are you going to tell us where you were yesterday? We were worried about your crazy behind,” Avery said teasingly, although her gaze held concern as she pulled gently on one of Sidra’s springy curls.

“I just had to take care of a problem that came up,” Sidra said evasively. A big, Irish problem that showed up on her doorstep the day before yesterday. She still wasn’t sure why she let him in; but one look into his lust-filled eyes, and Sidra, strong-willed as she was, had been powerless to resist him. Casey stayed until this morning, when they had a big argument over her poor eating habits. She didn’t think she would be seeing him again anytime soon.

The time away would be great for clearing her head. This thing between the two of them was beyond her comprehension. They didn’t like each other and were barely civil to each other around other people, but that wasn’t enough to stop them from fucking like rabbits every chance they got. “It’s taken care of though. What’s up with you and the hubby? You guys were acting like you didn’t even know each other tonight, and don’t get me started on blondie-”

“It’s not like we’re running around trying to broadcast our relationship,” Noelle interrupted her, holding up her hand to halt Sidra’s rant. “Besides, I’m here to work, not sit up under my man.”

“Well here comes your man now, and he doesn’t look too happy,” Avery warned. They all turned to watch Jack striding purposely towards them, his face drawn in angry lines. “Damn girl, Jack is wearing the hell out of that tux.”

“Isn’t he though?” Noelle acknowledged with a beaming with pride. Her man was *fiiiiine*. Although right now he looked really pissed which in no way detracted at all from his good looks.

“Ladies, you were amazing tonight,” Jack said with a smile before turning to Noelle. “I’ve got to go, baby. There’s a big problem with a client, and I need to leave town for a couple of days.” His jaw was clenched tight from what he wasn’t saying. “I’m leaving you the car and catching a cab to my place for clothes. I’ll call you when I get to my destination.” He pulled her close for a sizzling kiss that left her weak and clinging to his jacket lapels. A flash went off in their faces. Noelle blinked and Jack cursed, but didn’t make any attempts to shield them away from the intruder. Sidra and Avery yelled at the photographer, but he was already gone. Worried, Noelle looked at Jack who shrugged his shoulders unconcernedly. “Guess the cat’s out of the bag, darlin’.”

Chapter Thirty

The news of New York City’s most eligible bachelor being off the market was superseded by the national headline of his client Inez Gaines’s arrest for assaulting and stabbing her ex-boyfriend. Though Noelle’s phone was ringing off the hook and she had two photographers camped out on her doorstep, it wasn’t as bad as she thought it would be. The only calls she was taking were from Sidra, Avery, and Ian, but bracing herself for a visit from her parents after hearing her mother’s blistering voicemail.

It was 3:00 p.m. the following day, and she’d yet to hear from Jack; although she did see him on TV as he held a courthouse press conference in the small town of Baymoor, Maryland.

Casey was representing the beauty queen, and Darby was on her security detail. Noelle was filled with pride as she listened to Jack control the conference, southern charm oozing out of him. He cut a dashing figure in a brown Armani suit as he fielded reporters' questions. Her phone buzzed and she saw a text from Sidra.

Turn the TV on! They're talking about you and Jack!

Noelle quickly turned it on and saw the blonde anchorwoman commenting on the big screen picture of her and Jack kissing last night. Although she was horrified to be caught in a PDA moment of such a large magnitude, she couldn't help but smile because she and Jack looked good together. Their eyes were closed, and they were totally into each other.

“Turns out the mystery woman seen in the scorching lip lock with elusive bachelor and PR whiz Jack Sullivan is none other than Noelle Kramer, one half of the company On a Whim that created Tarik Owens lavish birthday celebration last night. Mr. Owens is a client of Sullivan's firm and another interesting twist about the beautiful Ms. Kramer is that she is the youngest daughter of Senator Ronald and Alicia Kramer, who are also represented by Jack's firm. Talk about keeping it all in the family.” She winked at the camera as the screen changed to a picture of her parents smiling faces at her father's election celebration two years ago.

Noelle turned the TV off with a sigh of frustration. She just knew her mother would try to use this against her husband, and if she got her father worked up enough, he would be demanding Jack's head on a platter as well. Her phone rang again, and this time it was her sister Sloane, who was currently traveling in Europe with her family. She answered with a smile.

“Hey Sloane, how are you?” Noelle said cheerfully. She could hear her niece and twin nephews shouting hello to her in the background.

“It’s always the quiet ones you have to watch out for. Ms. Thang,” her sister said smugly. “I should have known from the way he was always watching you that something was going to happen sooner or later. You should hear Mother ranting and raving about his improper conduct and possibly suing him.”

“She’d better not try it. Jack and I are a consensual thing. As in we’re in this together. Anyone who has anything to say about it can kiss my ass, present company included if you called on Mom and Dad’s behalf,” Noelle snapped angrily.

There was a pause on the other end and then a long whistle. “Okay, sis, no need to get riled up. So am I allowed to ask how long it’s been going on?” Sloane asked cautiously. “Despite the way it may come off to you, we only have your best interests at heart.”

“That’s fine if you have my best interest at heart, but I’m a grown-ass woman who’s capable of making decisions that don’t require any hand-holding from anyone in the Kramer family. And you can certainly ask how long it’s been going on, but I’m not telling you. That’s our business. All any of you need to know is he makes me happy, so you should support our relationship,” Noelle said with finality, resisting the urge to pump her fist in the air. Damn, it felt good to be taking a stand!

Her sister gave a soft laugh. “Well go on then, girl. I’m really proud of you for standing up for yourself and what you believe. Took you long enough. Just know that I’m always here for you if you want to talk. So how’s your business

going? From what I could see of last night's event, you and Avery did an amazing job."

Noelle grinned happily. Even though she'd been in business for a couple of months now, it was the first time her sister had ever inquired about it. "It's going really well. Thank you for asking. Last night was amazing! You should have seen..."

She launched into some details that she was at liberty to disclose, and her sister seemed genuinely happy for her. They talked for about fifteen minutes more before Sloane said. "By the way, I'm sorry to hear about your friend Remy."

"Remy? What about him?" Noelle asked sharply. It was sad to say but most of the time she forgot all about that idiot, because she trusted Jack one hundred percent to handle it, and her time was far better spent on growing her business.

"Girl, you don't know? I guess it wouldn't be a big deal in the States because he isn't American. Well apparently he was murdered in Paris three weeks ago. He was caught in bed with the Ambassador from Cameroon's wife, and the man shot him in the knees before throwing him over the balcony onto a crowded street where he died on impact. The French want his head on a platter, but the ambassador is claiming diplomatic immunity. In the meantime, the wife has disappeared and is rumored to be pregnant by Remy. Tensions are escalating daily, and there have been protests and riots for the last couple of weeks. It's a big freaking mess; and Andreas feels that we should probably skip Paris which saddens me because you know how I love Paris this time of the year," Sloane groaned.

Remy, her blackmailing scumbag ex, was dead. Noelle's heart was pounding as she grabbed her laptop to look up his first email to her. It was dated three and a half weeks ago. She tried to compile the time frame of events in her head.

“Elly, are you still there?” Sloane’s use of her childhood nickname made her smile.

“Yeah, I’m still here. Listen, I have to go. It’s a madhouse outside of my home. Apparently, I’m somewhat of a celebrity now that Jack’s fallen under my spell. Give my love to the kiddos and Andreas. Love you, Sloane,” Noelle said absent-mindedly as she Googled Remy Dumont’s death. She felt her breath catch as she realized Jack’s visit to her home was two days after that- after he’d supposedly done all his homework on Ratface Remy.

“I love you too, and again I’m sorry about Remy,” Sloan said sincerely before ringing off. Noelle paced the length of her hallway. Something wasn’t right. Jack’s words came back to haunt her.

“Your ex is the type who would make a lot of noise if he was threatened. The pics would come out either way. This could have lasting effects on your father’s career and your family.”

Noelle tried calling him, but it went to voicemail. Instead of leaving a message, she hung up. Suddenly something from last night clicked, and she quickly scrolled through her contacts until she found the one she was looking for and pressed the call button. As the phone rang, she peeked out of her front window and saw a group of paparazzi still loitering around. A groggy voice answered, and Noelle rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, Theo? It’s after three in the afternoon. I need you up and alert,” Noelle said impatiently as he groaned. “Listen, I’m sorry to bother you, but last night you mentioned a girl that went to University? You said she came back from a recent

funeral? I need to talk to her about that because I think I might know her friend. Can you help me get in contact with her?"

"I'll do you one better, luv. She's laying bare arse up right next to me," Theo said lecherously, and Noelle made a *tsking* sound as Theo murmured sweet words to wake his bedmate up.

"Lizzie, could you be a dear and talk to my mate Noelle about your old bloke that passed? Now don't look at me like that. I'm sorry to be a cad, and I promise I'll do that thing you like with my tongue. 'Ow's that sound?" Theo cajoled with a raunchy laugh. Noelle shook her head at his ridiculousness as she waited for dear, old Lizzie to get it together.

Jack was tired and irritated as he slid onto the bench across from Casey at The Comfort Table Café. They were soon joined by his brother's good friend Max a former lawyer turned farmer. He wished he was back home with Noelle to help her weather the crap that she was probably getting from the press and her family. Unfortunately, Inez's ex-boyfriend made the bad decision to harass her; and the ending result of the altercation was him getting his ass handed to him with a deadly combination of a high heel and frying pan. Sheriff Holloway had to take her in on assault charges, not for defending herself, but the kick to the groin she gave him with her six-inch Halston heels after he was down. It was witnessed and recorded by his new girlfriend and her sister.

The video was already seen by five million viewers worldwide, had three million likes on Facebook, and the memes were out of control. Comedians were having a field day. The pageant was trying to strip Inez of her title; Viv was fighting for her endorsements; and Ian already had her

scheduled for a couple of talk shows. Inez was furious that they had taken her phone and deactivated her social media accounts.

“I want to tell the whole world what that asshole and those bitches tried to do to me on my terms, Jack!” she’d screamed, pacing back and forth furiously, her lovely honey-colored eyes flashing as they talked in the holding room. Inez was out for blood and refused to be denied. “Casey, you’ll sue anyone who tries to break my endorsement contracts, right? Jack, I need to be active on-”

“What you will be doing is staying put and shutting the fuck up, Inez,” Jack said coolly. He was tired of her drama. Stunned, she sat down and gazed up at him wordlessly. When he next spoke to his partners, he would be willing to concede that he may have bitten off more than he could chew with the beauty queen. “If you recall, I warned you about becoming involved with this guy, but you didn’t listen. Your hostility towards the press and egg-throwing is beyond immature. I told you to stay put and conduct yourself like a Miss World Beauty is supposed to. That means no posting pics on social media, comparing the size of your ex’s dick to a caterpillar; and initiating twitter wars with women you don’t know with invitations like ‘What’s good bitch? Get at me then’. Are we clear?”

She had the grace to look ashamed, and a blush stained her bronze skin as she ran a hand through her shoulder length bob. “I might have gone a little too far.”

Jack shook his head wearily. “You think??? I’m going to do my job, but you really need to start thinking before you act and focus on your priorities. You’re a smart and beautiful girl with the potential to have the world at her feet, but you seem happiest acting out, and that shit has already taken a toll on

your image. You're the Dennis Rodman of beauty queens and I'm over it. I'll let Casey fill you in on our next course of action."

"Yes, of course." Inez said humbly before turning to the attorney.

Casey cleared his throat and placed a folder in front of Inez. "This is your contract with R.R. & S. The next course of action is you falling into compliance with your contract and not creating anymore waves, or we're going to sue the shit out of you for breach of contract for the two clauses you've already broken. What's it going to be?"

"Wade said she'll be able to get out in the morning. Thank you, ma'am," Jack said stifling a yawn as a waitress put a plate with chicken 'n' dumplings in front of him. Casey got salisbury steak and mashed potatoes, while Max had gumbo. "Case, what can you do to spin this in her favor with the law?"

Casey and Max looked at each other for a long moment before Casey turned back to Jack and said slowly, "That dog won't hunt, Jack. Inez kicked that asshole in the nuts so hard; that half the teams in the NFL are offering her punting contracts." All three men winced and managed to restrain from cupping their own privates.

"There is no spinning it in her favor. She'll probably do anger management courses and have to go to therapy. If you make her leave, her reputation will be that she has to be managed all the time. My suggestion is to let her stay here in her hometown. She's surrounded by people she knows and can rally around her."

Max nodded, “Wade is a good man and a great sheriff. He’ll definitely make sure she gets enough protection, and Inez also has another protector.”

As if on cue, the door to the café opened, and a tall, muscular man with curly, dark brown hair strode towards them with fire in his green eyes. He stopped at their table and said with exasperation to Max, “Seriously, my last words to you were ‘Keep an eye on ‘Crazy Pants’ for me’! I don’t even get to state line before all hell breaks loose?! What the fuck happened?”

“‘Crazy Pants’, huh? I like it. Sure as hell suits Inez,” Jack murmured to Casey who nodded in agreement as he sprinkled salt and pepper on his steak before cutting into it.

The man turned to them and glowered as Max said, “Well, you should have taken her with you. Space my ass. I don’t know who the two of you think you’re fooling, playing it cool and shit. Rafe, allow me to introduce the Sullivan brothers. Jack is her PR and Casey is her lawyer. Guys, this is Rafe. He’s the contractor who’s been working on Inez’s new venture.” The men nodded at each other. “They were in the middle of brainstorming a hero to rescue our damsel in distress angle,” Max said, a little too innocently.

Rafe clenched his big hands into fists. “Your first mistake is thinking Inez needs a man. She doesn’t need one, because she already has one. Me. Your second mistake is thinking she needs someone to fight her battles. She just needs someone to have her back, which I do.”

“Sorry for the assumption, Rafe. Last time I looked, your back was heading out of town because you were confused about your feelings for her or have you forgotten that?” Max asked in a mildly accusatory tone.

Rafe stiffened. “I’m well aware that I shouldn’t have left, and I won’t be making that mistake again. Where the fuck is that motherfucker who dared to put his hands on her?”

“I believe he’s in the hospital where they are trying to surgically remove his balls from the roof of his mouth,” Jack answered tiredly as he took a bite of his dumplings. Damn, he couldn’t wait to get home to his wife. His phone vibrated, and he looked down to see Ronald Kramer’s number. He pushed his chair back and stood up. “Excuse me, while I take this call, fellas.”

Chapter Thirty-One

He lied to her, Noelle thought numbly as she looked out the window of the cab she and Avery were sharing. According to Elizabeth’s timeframe, Remy was dead two days before Jack came to her with the information he’d “gathered”. By playing on her fears, he’d gotten her to do exactly as he wanted, but for what? That’s what she couldn’t figure out.

Twice this morning Jack had called, but she’d responded only with texts saying she was in meetings with potential clients. If she spoke with him, she knew she’d demand answers to her questions and that couldn’t happen right now. Noelle really needed to put her game face on because she and Avery were on their way to a meeting at *Rothman Capital Investments*. The confrontation would come later when they were face to face so she could see his reaction.

“So, I’ve got our business plan for expanding, and I spoke to my grandmother’s realtor regarding the kind of office space we’re looking for. She’s available after the meeting if you want to meet.” Avery was talking, but Noelle was barely paying attention. Her mind was racing a mile a minute with memories.

“Maybe you’ll like being married to me.”

“I can only take so much, Noelle. You don’t have a clue about how bad I want to be buried inside of you;” his eyes burning hazel fire.

Fingers snapped loudly in Noelle’s face, startling her. She turned to look at Avery who was staring at her with lips pressed in annoyance.

“I heard you, and yes I have all of our financial statements,” Noelle said automatically. Avery rolled her eyes.

“Chile, I was just asking if Mama A had shown up on your doorstep yet. You need to pull it together. We’re about to go up here and show we can hang with the big boys. I can’t have you staring off into space,” Avery said seriously and Noelle gave her a ‘*B, please*’ look as the cab pulled to a stop in front of *Rothman Investments*.

“Bosses don’t hang with anybody. They work hard and let the results speak for themselves. Thought you knew that,” Noelle said sharply as she paid the cab fare and got out of the cab. “Now get your sexy ass out and let’s walk like we’ve got ten men following behind us.”

The meeting room of Rothman Investments was cold and sterile looking. *Kind of like a doctor's office*, Noelle thought as she sat at the large conference table with Avery and Joel and David Rothman. Noelle was surprised that Joel could see the reports. He had two black eyes, and his nose was bandaged up. She didn't know what the hell had happened to him, but she had a feeling he'd probably brought it on himself. All of *On a Whim's* financial records and business expansion plans had been reviewed, and now negotiation terms on the interest rate for their refinanced loan would start. The new loan would allow them to get an office space with a kitchen for the catering side of events.

An hour later, mutual terms were agreed upon and the only thing needed was the ladies' signatures. As the contracts were being printed, there was a knock on the glass door. Noelle looked up to see Tarik waving at them enthusiastically. She smiled and waved back, as Joel motioned him in. The men exchanged handshakes, and Tarik kissed both Noelle and Avery on their cheeks.

"Crikey! What in the hell 'appened to your face, mate?" Tarik asked as he took in Joel's injuries. "I was on my way to meet with your Dad about an investment when I saw you guys and thought I'd say hi," he said charmingly. "Ladies, thank you again for the wonderful party. I've never gotten laid so much in my life. Women are practically throwing their panties in my path for me to pick up and bed and I shall do so in the order that they come." The men all laughed lecherously while Noelle and Avery gave the Boys Club disdainful looks.

"What's the investment if you don't mind me asking, Tarik?" Joel asked casually, and something in his tone made Noelle

glance sharply at him. He was watching her carefully as Tarik replied.

“A horse farm Jack recommended. He said that maybe since I ride horses, I could probably invest in breeding them. He thinks a lot of people would buy them from a well-known polo player. That man is a genius. Bravo on getting your hooks in him, Noelle. He’ll do wonders for your career as well.” That last remark was said with a cheeky wink which made Noelle glare at him and Avery gasp in outrage. *No this mutha-*

“Hard work will do wonders for anyone’s career, Tarik,” Noelle replied sharply, trying to control the urge to brain him with her laptop. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to insinuate, but I suggest you refrain from saying or implying anything else of that nature.” The room went silent before Tarik threw his hands up in defense.

“Whoa, darling, relax. I wasn’t trying to say anything of the sort. Well . . . er. I better go. Don’t want to keep Ira waiting.” Tarik beat a hasty retreat out the glass doors, and the conference room was silent.

“Is everything okay, Noelle?” Joel asked silkily. “Don’t be too hard on Tarik. I’m sure he means well.”

She studied him hard, certain more than ever now that something else was going on. He was playing a game with her but hadn’t revealed the rules, which made him a cheater. And she didn’t do business with cheaters.

“David, Avery mentioned on the way in how beautiful the atrium is and how she’d love a tour; isn’t that right, Ave?” Noelle spoke without taking her eyes off of ‘Joel the Snake’, and he gave an unpleasant little smirk.

“Yes! I did say that. Would you be so kind as to show it to me, David?” Avery asked sweetly as she stood up and smoothed her salmon pink dress around her hips, drawing attention to her body. Noelle knew she would owe her big time as David’s eyes followed her hands, swallowing hard.

“Yes, of course. This way, Ms. Monroe.” He quickly stood up and walked over to the door holding it open for her.

“Oh please call me Avery. Lead the way, honey,” she cooed, sliding her well-manicured hand through the crook of his arm as they left.

The silence in the room was deafening as the two occupants sized each other up. Noelle spoke first. “Please explain your last comment to me, Joel. You seem to think that I should know what you’re talking about, and I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage; because I don’t.”

Joel gave a derisive laugh. “I was making reference to the fact that you got your loan with Rothman due to your relationship with Jack.”

THE HELL?! Noelle shook her head. “What does ME knowing Jack have to do with my loan with your FATHER’S company?”

Take that asshole, she thought with satisfaction as his eyes narrowed on her emphasis of his father.

“It has everything to do with it! Six months ago Jack made a deal with Ira that he’d bring the bank more business and

advertising if a loan was offered to *On a Whim* at an extremely low interest rate. He certainly kept up his end of the bargain. Jack got Tarik and some other clients to utilize us. The catch is that we would have to strongly recommend *On a Whim* for any social events they do. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

Unfortunately, she was starting to. Noelle's felt like her heart was going to jump out of her chest, and she was going to throw up. Jack had orchestrated not only her business, but her clientele. Noelle thought of the numerous times that she'd solicited his advice and how eager he was to give it; how Tarik picked her company when he had his choice of more experienced event planning companies; never mind that his event had turned out to be very successful. Fury raced through her as she registered how badly she'd been deceived.

"Now I wouldn't give a shit if Ira wanted to run around in a fucking tutu all day and ride a damn tricycle while doing so as long as he stays out of the office. The problem is all the new business is bringing him out of retirement, and he's putting his nose where it doesn't belong. David and I don't need him here, but thanks to your lover boy, Ira's not going anywhere. I told that bastard to mind his own business, and this is what he did to my face. So maybe you could do me a solid since we are giving you this loan on such generous terms and tell Jack to stay out of our lives," Joel suggested unpleasantly.

Noelle gritted her teeth in an effort to restrain herself from jumping the table and punching Joel's conniving ass in his already broken nose. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she glanced away and for the first time noticed what appeared to be a family picture. It was of Ira and an older, silver-haired lady sitting down and surrounded by David and Joel with their wives. David's wife was an uptight-looking, plump brunette with glasses. Joel's wife was a stunning blonde with a forced smile, holding a crying, toddler-aged boy. Noelle's eyes narrowed in recognition. It was the blonde from Tarik's party

and her birthday years ago. She was the unlucky bitch married to Joel Rothman.

“Vaughn Emerson. She’s married to some asshole banker who runs around on her.”

Jack’s ex was married to Ira’s loser-ass son. That was the real reason Joel had such a hard-on for Jack. His ego couldn’t take that his wife had dated someone more good-looking, charming, and smarter than him. Someone if judging from the looks his wife had given Jack at the party, she still wasn’t over. Noelle had heard enough and her head was spinning from all the little surprises that kept popping up. She stood up, grabbed all the papers, and shoved them into her tote. Giving him the finger, she started walking towards the door.

“Hey, where are you going? Noelle!” he shouted.

“Our lives,” Noelle said abruptly and turned around watching Joel narrow his eyes in confusion.

“Huh?” He asked stupidly. “What did you say?”

Noelle gave him a withering glare. “You said our lives. Not our business, which leads me to believe that this is a little more personal for you. Go fuck yourself, Rothman. We both know there’s a little more to this story than your ego is willing to acknowledge. When Jack finds out what you tried to pull here, for your sake I hope you have plenty of lubricant. You’re going to need it when he jams both of his size thirteen’s up your smug ass.”

Noelle watched with satisfaction as his face paled and she saw real fear in his eyes. She walked out despite his protests and

texted Avery to meet her in the lobby. Noelle pressed the down button on the elevator and waited impatiently for it to arrive. Her head was pounding, and for once she was regretting breaking up with Mary Jane. She'd kill for something to relax her right now. When the doors opened, she came face to face with none other than Joel's wife. It was hard to say who was more surprised. Quickly Noelle composed herself and nodded her head in greeting.

"Hello. You're Jack's friend Noelle, aren't you?" Blondie asked curiously as she stepped out of the elevator and Noelle gritted her teeth. Like this heifer didn't know. She really didn't want to do pleasantries with the woman who'd dated her husband and was married to Joel the slime ball. Not today, not ever. And as mad as she was at Jack, she really wanted to let his former lover know she was more than a *friend*. She was his wife, lover... oh hell, who was she really kidding? She was nothing more than his fucking puppet on a string

"I am, and you're Joel's wife," Noelle stated shortly, watching as the doors shut and the elevator began the downward descent, without her.

"Vaughn Emerson." She held out her well-manicured hand haughtily, and Noelle reluctantly shook it. Up close Vaughn was even prettier than she'd first thought, but she could see exhaustion in her big, brown eyes; and Noelle suspected it was due to Joel.

"I always knew you and Jack would wind up together," Vaughn said with a wry twist to her bow-shaped lips. At Noelle's surprised look, she shrugged her shoulders prettily. "It was obvious the way he couldn't stop staring at you the night of your birthday party. I asked him about it afterwards, and he just shrugged off my question. A week later, I went to his place, and there was an open folder with a full dossier on

you as well as pictures. I knew right then that any hopes of being Mrs. Sullivan were not going to be brought to fruition.”

“Do you still want him? Is that why you’re telling me this?” Noelle demanded, pressing the down button for the elevator. Mentally, she moved Vaughn to the top of her shit list and Jack to second; or should Jack go first and then the Rothmans? Realistically, if it wasn’t for Jack, she wouldn’t be having all these damn issues...

Vaughn looked at her seriously. “If I was single and he wanted me, then yes, in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, he doesn’t feel the same way. At Tarik’s party, it was déjà vu all over again for me. He’s never looked at anyone the way he looks at you, but you can’t even see it, can you?”

Noelle gave her a contemplative look as the elevator dinged and the doors opened. She moved forward, forcing Vaughn to step aside, and entered the elevator. Turning around she spoke to Vaughn calmly. “I really hope you listen to what I’m going to say to you, *Mrs. Rothman*. Mind your own damn business and don’t ever think you can address personal issues with me again. I don’t believe in repeating myself and, you won’t like the results should you be stupid enough to try. Are. We. Clear?”

“Crystal,” Vaughn replied nervously. Noelle’s gaze remained intently locked on her until the doors softly closed.

“Scoops of bullshit on top of bullshit, and then even more bullshit sprinkled on the sundae to make it tastier,” she growled, pulling out her phone and calling the one business-minded person that she could trust.

“Hello, my dear.” The dulcet tones immediately soothed her ire.

“Hi, Uncle Ian,” Noelle said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was seven-thirty that evening when Jack finally got to Noelle’s place. He was livid that he hadn’t heard from her all day. His repeated calls had been sent to voicemail until it was full, and she hadn’t responded to any of his texts. He unlocked the door and walked into the dark foyer. She wasn’t home, and he was stressed from worrying about her. What if something happened to her? Digging into his pocket, he pulled his cell out and called his contact at the police department to see if he knew anything about a Noelle Kramer being injured, waiting restlessly while the contact checked. There was nothing regarding her in the system, but he would keep an eye out he assured Jack, who thanked him before hanging up to take a shower and wait to hear from his wife. *Where the hell was she?*

“Theo, thanks for seeing me home,” Noelle said with a hiccup as she struggled to get her keys out of her satchel purse. After three attempts, she held them up. “Aha!”

“Not a problem, luv. It’s the least I could do so no other bugger could take advantage of you in your drunken glory,” he smirked as he plucked the keys out of her hand and deftly opened the door to her gate.

“Hey! I resent that. I’m not drunk. I’m...I’m... inebriated,” she finished self-righteously and then hiccupped again as she threw her arm around him. “Slightly.”

“Uh-huh, well come on then. It’s been a helluva day for you, hasn’t it?” Theo gently helped to maneuver her up the flight of stairs as she laid her head on his shoulder forlornly. Outside of her door, he cautiously propped her up against the wall before inserting the key into the lock of her front door. The day had ended with Noelle having drinks with Theo, Pierce, and Avery at the Blueprint Bar. She was smashed, which was something that normally didn’t happen, but it had been necessary to numb the pain of Jack’s betrayal.

Noelle giggled hysterically as she observed his disheveled, blonde curls and faint facial hair. “Did anyone ever tell you that you look like that Francis character on *Reign*? He drives all the ladies wild just like you do, my friend.” She touched his curls. “These curls are errythang, boo. Goldilocks is what I shall call you from now on.”

Theo rolled his eyes as she gave a dramatic sigh and drunkenly ran her hands through his curls. “I’ve made a deal with the devil and now he owns me. Did you know that?

Why couldn’t it have been you and me?” She shook her head sadly. “Instead my heart belongs to the devil.”

Theo gave her a serious look as he pulled the keys out of the now unlocked door. “I’ve often asked myself that same question, Noelle. If you even knew well...I don’t think you really understand what you mean to me. Maybe when you sober up, we can have that talk I’ve wanted to have forever with you.”

The door swung open, causing Noelle to yelp and stumble back in surprise. Her husband stood in the doorway, murderous intent blazing in his eyes as he grabbed Theo by the throat. “Well, why don’t you enlighten us, asshole?” he growled before turning to a stunned Noelle. “Honey, I’m home.”

Jack was so mad, his hands were shaking as he poured his silent, sulky wife a cup of black coffee. He pushed it across the kitchen counter to the other side where she sat. “Drink it.”

Defiantly she pushed it back towards him, and some of the hot liquid sloshed out of the cup onto the white marble counter. “That’s not how I take my coffee. You drink it,” she spat, glaring at him.

Jack placed his hands on the counter and leaned across it so Noelle could see just how serious he was, because he was just about out of patience. “You don’t want to do this with me right now, Noelle. Drink the fucking coffee. Then you can explain exactly what the hell “Prince Charming” was talking about out there.”

He would never admit how much her confessions hurt him. After hearing a noise by the door, he walked over and heard their entire conversation. Jack felt completely validated in choking the shit out of the little playboy. He knew he’d been right about Theo’s feelings towards Noelle, and that made him squeeze tighter and tighter as Noelle screamed and pulled at his arm. Only when the younger man started to turn blue did

Jack finally let go, a primal surge of satisfaction rushing through him as he watched the younger man struggle for air.

When Noelle bent to help him, Jack quickly snatched her arm and yanked her back. "Get your ass inside, Noelle." Head held high, she glared at him evilly, before staggering through the doorway.

Jack leaned down and got in Theo's face, "Stay away from her. I catch you near her or trying to get next to her again, my hand will be crushing your balls instead. Got it?"

Gasping, Theo tried to answer and Jack pressed his index finger to his lips. "Don't speak. I know you got it." Then he slammed the front door leaving Theo lying in a painful daze on the floor.

"Well, I won't have to wait long for us to be together right? You said we'd only need to stay married for a couple of months until everything dies down," Noelle said smugly as she took a small sip of the coffee, watching his eyes flicker in response. *Lying ass bastard.*

Jack observed her coolly. There was something very off about her, and he didn't think it had anything to do with him finding her and Theo together, as hurtful as that was. *She was pretty pissed off*, he thought, observing the sparks in her gray eyes. Her lips formed in a snarl, and all of it was directed solely towards him.

Noelle pressed on as she stood up, pushed her chair back, and headed down the hall, her words floating over her shoulder. "That is what you said isn't it, Jack? Well, I don't want to wait for the divorce papers to be drawn up. I want it done ASAP, and I want you to move back into your own space. I will pay

you for the time you've spent with me. This thing between us is DONE."

Heart pounding and blood roaring in his ears, Jack swiftly moved out of the kitchen and followed her down the hall to the bedroom where she angrily whirled to face him.

"We ain't gettin' a divorce, Noelle. I don't know what the fuck happened with you in the time that I've been gone, but divorce is off the table, sugar," he said in a tightly controlled voice. His southern accent was coming out strong. "I'll be damned if I let you go so that you can run off with that sniveling pansy. I'm not going anywhere, so quit actin' like a damned spoiled brat and talk to me about what's got you so riled up."

"Theo is more of a man than you'll ever be!" Noelle retorted furiously. "At least he's honest. Unlike you who has done nothing but lie to me! Maybe I should stay away from Theo or he might wind up like Joel Rothman, right? Or dead like Remy?" Her anger reached new levels as she watched realization dawn in his eyes that she knew of his deceit. "Yes, I know about that little fact you decided to keep to yourself. When were you going to tell me that Remy was dead? I had to hear it from my sister, and then an associate confirmed it! You fucking lied to me, Jack!"

So she knew. Jack stood still as he watched her helplessly falling apart. The cause of her pain, he was remorseful for the state she was in. His jaw ticking, he ground out, "I never lied to you, Noelle."

She looked at him crazily. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but was it not you who said that Remy would do all sorts of crazy things if he didn't get what he wanted? That was you, right?"

“That was me, but I never said he was dead or alive. I just told you that his threats checked out and relayed worst case scenarios. Then I offered a solution to avoid those scenarios,” Jack said calmly, even though his stomach was clenching, and he could feel sweat forming on his back. He really needed to get a hold of himself. He was a sailor that could navigate the deadliest of waters, but this one woman could capsize him with the gentlest wave. He knew it had been a dick move to play on her fears. She knew what he’d done and wanted to leave him. He wouldn’t let her. By rights he should, but in Jack’s world, that wasn’t a possibility that he would entertain, now that he knew what happiness felt like.

Noelle paused, and Jack could see she was trying to remember exactly what it was he’d said. Finally, she threw her hands up in exasperation, “It doesn’t fucking matter, you manipulative asshole. You already knew what happened to him, and you kept it to yourself; on top of arranging my business loan for me and giving me pity clients. What a laugh you must have had at my expense as I talked to you about business and listened to your suggestions. You’re no better than my family with their goddamn interfering asses!” she raged, smacking the dresser with her palm.

“You need to calm down, darlin’. It wasn’t even like that,” Jack said slowly. “As far as the business is concerned, yes I did make a deal with Ira to help you get the funding for your company. I only did it because I knew that your parents weren’t going to give you the advance on your inheritance, and you wouldn’t accept a loan from me. Your business, one that can provide food, music, and décor, is solid though, so it’s an investment in itself for Rothman because you, Avery, and Sidra all bring something to the table. You didn’t have to take that loan, but the business woman in you recognized it as a good opportunity,” he explained earnestly, hoping that she would see his reasoning. Jack struggled to remain cool, even though the walls were quickly closing in on him.

“In regards to the clients, they only had to hear your ideas. No one made them utilize them. That was you and Avery’s hard work as well as the repeat business. I simply got the ball rolling a little. You had a vision that you were trying to achieve, and I had the means to assist you. What’s wrong with wanting to help if I can?” Jack asked reasonably.

Noelle stared at him like he was the devil. “Nothing, as long as you are straightforward and direct about it, which you weren’t. You created this grand scheme so you could get what you wanted. Jack did what Jack does best: You fixed me. Isn’t that what you do? In order to marry me, you had to make me worthy; someone you could be seen with and not just fuck. Not poor, pathetic, unemployed Noelle who still lives at home with her parents. You made it so I’d be good enough to be seen on your arm.” She watched as Jack shook his head vehemently, his patience finally lost.

“No, that’s bullshit and you know it, Noelle!” Jack yelled making her jump and take a step back at the contorted look of anger on his face. “You’re the one who was so afraid of your own shadow, always scurrying around like a damn mouse! You let everyone put you down and were content to stay in the shadows. I’ve wanted you forever and just knew if you had the chance-” He trailed off realizing as Noelle looked at him expectantly that she was semi-correct.

“What you did was despicable, Jack. From the beginning, you manipulated me to fall in line with your plans, not giving a damn about how I felt or if my heart could survive it because you have a hero complex; and that’s what it all comes down to doesn’t it? You couldn’t save your mother, but you could save Noelle from slowly dying away in her parents’ tower like Rapunzel. I’m right, aren’t I? Aren’t I, Jack?!” Noelle shouted getting in his face. She was humiliated and furious, barely able to contain the tears that were trying to fall. She’d be damned if she cried in front of him. So enamored by his physical

appearance, she'd never really known him; to know he was capable of a cruelty that took her breath away. *What a complete fool I am*, she thought despairingly.

"Enough!" Jack shouted as he turned and punched a hole into her bedroom wall, stunning her into silence. He couldn't breathe as he stared at the damage. Suddenly he was that scared thirteen-year-old boy again, losing the love of his life. Then it had been his mother, but now it was his wife who would be lost to him; and he knew he would not survive if that happened.

"The worst part about all this is that you had me thinking this could really work between us," Noelle said bitterly, raking a hand through her messy curls, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "That's not your fault though. Again, you were very careful in what you said or didn't say. But you didn't have to involve me with all the wonderful people in your life and your beautiful hometown. You made me fall for you *and* them. You made me believe that I had a chance with you. You made me...made me...love you," she finished brokenly, turning away and willing the tears to disappear.

"It can work, Noelle," Jack said desperately. "You just have to want it as badly as I do, baby. *Please don't do this.*" He was resorting to begging; but he could tell her mind was already made up as she shook her head to and fro, refusing to turn around. "Give us a chance."

"You're off your goddamn rocker. Get out, Jack. You took me for dumb pussy, and that's something I won't tolerate anymore," Noelle said now coldly, in control on the outside even though on the inside her heart was shattered. Self-preservation was finally kicking in, and she would not let him see her fall to pieces. She just wanted him to leave so that she could start the healing process. She turned away from him to

wipe her eyes. *Damn, this was soooo hard!* “This is over. I just want to forget you and this. I’m filing for divorce in the morning.”

The finality of her statement was too much for Jack, and refusing to admit defeat, he grabbed her shoulders, pulling her close to him. Noelle struggled to push him away, but he held firmly, turning her around and cupping her face gently. He could see her eyes dilate and her breathing quicken in response to his touch. So she wasn’t immune to his touch after all, but still, her mind remained stubborn and unyielding.

“We will never be done, Noelle. You belong to me, and I belong to you. That will never change. Clearly my being away for two days has left you a little confused, so let me remind you,” Jack said determinedly before claiming her mouth in a wildly brutal kiss. She attempted to resist, trying to turn her face away while clawing at his wrists to break free; but the effort was futile as Jack kept kissing her, dominating her mouth, tongue teasing at her lips until she stopped fighting and wrapped her hands around his wrists to hold him to her and her mouth opened under his. Instantly the kiss gentled as he walked her backwards the side of the bed.

Something wet and salty mingled in their kiss, and Jack pulled back long enough to see the tears falling from her beautiful gray eyes. His heart ached from the pain he was causing her. “Stay with me,” he begged; and she shook her head. “*Stay.*”

“I hate you,” Noelle whispered in a subdued voice; and her words were like a knife slicing his chest wide open, even as she pulled herself up to exchange kisses with him.

“No, you love me, just like I love you,” Jack said persuasively and followed her down onto the bed. Noelle didn’t even have time to process his shocking admission as she was soon swept

away by his touch, eyes closed. His lips trailed close to her ear as his warm hands slipped under her blouse to caress her breasts through her bra. Her hoarse moan was filled with desire and heartache.

“You’re mine. I will never let you go....” he whispered raggedly then proceeded to show her how true his statement was.

It was two in the morning when Jack finally left the bed. He looked down at an exhausted Noelle sleeping as he slowly dressed. Shame and remorse filled him, leaving him feeling sick to his stomach as he saw the love marks he’d left on her body.

He’d taken her over and over again, driving her body to dizzying heights of pleasure and only giving her release when Noelle correctly answered the question of whom she belonged to. Jack refused to let her body come down from one orgasm before he was wringing the next one out of her as she screamed and moaned that she belonged to him while he gorged himself on her sweet pussy. In the end, she begged to be left alone, but still he couldn’t help himself as he gently turned her over onto her stomach and urged her to get on her knees.

It was like a force, stronger than a category five hurricane, that was driving him as he spread her ass cheeks apart and pleased her pussy and rosette mercilessly with his tongue, taking long licks and repeatedly plunging into both holes until she was frantically pushing back into his face for more.

Driving two fingers into her soaked channel, he scooped the mixture of their juices onto his cock and her tight hole for lubrication before placing his throbbing member at her tiny entrance. Damn, she was so tight, but he knew she was ready for it the way she inched back on to the tip of his cock.

“Do you want it, Noelle?” Jack asked through clenched teeth, fighting for control. He smacked her ass and she jerked, moaning with pleasure as he sunk in a little deeper. “If you want it, then say it.”

“Mmmm, yes there, Jack,” Noelle begged helplessly, and he slid in inch by inch until he was in to the hilt. The feeling was unbelievable. She winced, and he gave her a moment to adjust as his fingers slid underneath to play with her overly-sensitive clit. She shuddered and slowly pulled forward then back to test her limits. Jack was perfectly still, sweat running down his tense body; watching as his dick slid in and out of her tight, dark hole. He needed to move, to punish her for thinking she could leave him; to savor how exquisite the feeling of being with her like this was. She wiggled her ass and turned to look at him expectantly, licking her lips with invitation in her big eyes. Jack gently nudged her forward, driving her slowly down into the soft mattress. “Lie down flat.”

Noelle did and Jack followed her, lying on top but to the left side of her. He raised her right leg higher at an angle and braced himself by holding onto the back of her knee. Slowly he began to tunnel in and out of her ass, and her breathy sighs turned into deep-throated groans of ecstasy. Jack yanked her hair back, so her face was exposed, and whispered into her ear, “I feel like I’m going to explode in your sweetness, darlin’. Do you like how it feels?” His thrusts became rougher and deeper.

Noelle threw her ass back at him, loving the fullness inside of her. He was so thick, so big, so...perfect. Never in a million years would she had ever thought that she'd like anal sex; but the way Jack was doing it, was so right that he had her clawing the sheets begging for more. "I love it, please don't stop. Harder... uhhh... harder."

Jack stopped and Noelle whimpered in protest. "Who do you belong to? Whose pussy is this? This ass that I'm fucking?" He gave her two deep thrusts that had her convulsing as he pinched her clit gently. "Answer the question, Noelle!"

She exploded clenching and unclenching around his cock as she screamed "You! I belong to you, Jack Sullivan!"

"As I do you," he groaned into her neck. The pressure of her squeezing tightly around his dick was too much for Jack; he shoved her leg higher and proceeded to fuck her harder, his balls slapping against her ass as he increased his teasing of her clit. Noelle came again in convulsions, her eyes rolling back in her head. He finally joined her, shooting his hot semen into her with deep shudders before collapsing on top of her. By the time he pulled out, Noelle was beyond exhausted. As he pulled the covers over her, she curled up and whimpered, "No more. Please."

Jack was ashamed of how he'd treated Noelle and used her body against her. All he'd ever wanted to do was love her, but instead, he'd broken her. Like his father did his mother. His father's maniacally twisted face flashed in his mind.

"Yer mine, Moira! Ya hear?? I'll never let you go!!"

His guilt was suffocating him. He had to get out of there. Hurriedly he put on his shoes and grabbed his shit before

letting himself out the front door quietly. His conscience taunted him.

Run, you fucking coward, run! You're just like him! Sullivan men do nothing but hurt those around them! Run! He barely made it out the front door and down the steps before he threw up in the bushes.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Four Months Later...

A knock on the door caused Noelle to look up from the spreadsheet she was examining. Avery stood in the doorway of her office with a binder clasped to her chest.

“Our eleven a.m. interview is here. You ready?” she asked as she munched on a carrot stick, and stepped further into the office. Noelle leaned back in her chair and smiled back at her, happy at the changes her friend was making that seemed to bring her inner peace.

In the past couple of months, Avery had lost fifteen pounds and was feeling great about it. Oh, she'd always have boobs, behind, and hips, but now she wasn't so self-conscious about them. She seemed to have embraced it wholeheartedly, a fact that seemed to drive her fiancée Pierce crazy as he tried in vain to keep her covered up and on lockdown. Much to his dismay, Avery wasn't trying to hear anything he was saying.

“Actually you go ahead; I trust your judgment. I'm going to finish reviewing our budget spreadsheets before heading out to lunch with Uncle Ian. Do you want to join us? If so, I can

wait,” Noelle suggested as she pushed her black, framed glasses on top of her head.

“Nah, go ahead. Tell him I said hi. We can review my notes when you get back. Don’t forget we have that Skype meeting with Cinnamon Farms at 4 p.m., and I can’t wait. Honey, have you ever had a conversation with Farmer Hayes?” Avery asked, pretending to fan herself. “Good lawd, that man’s voice is sinfully wet-panty inducing! Toodles!” she waved as she left the doorway then popped back in. “Not to dampen your day, but the usual envelope came for you today as well.”

Noelle refused to look up from her computer screen. “Put it in the outgoing mail with the usual return to sender label please and thank you,” she replied politely even though she was screaming on the inside. She could feel Avery staring at her but refused to look up from the papers in front of her. Avery spoke in a soft voice, “Noelle...honey it’s been-

“Please don’t, Avery. Just...don’t,” Noelle spoke firmly, letting her friend know the conversation was over. Avery left the room without saying another word.

When she was sure the coast was clear, Noelle quickly got up and walked to the bathroom. Quietly she shut the door and observed herself in the mirror. Her face was thinner, making her large eyes and full mouth more prominent. The look that she dubbed ‘Traumatized by Love’ was garnering a lot of attention from the media. At first, she was known as Jack Sullivan’s love interest. Then she was known as the woman who dumped Jack Sullivan on his ass, causing him to become a recluse. Ian confirmed to her that Jack was the one who leaked this story to the media to make it work in her favor. *How thoughtful of him. Bastard.*

Now she was known as an “IT” girl and successful business owner. She and Avery were in high demand to plan the hottest events in town and constantly photographed for daily fashion and gossip columns. *On a Whim* was so successful, that they were finally able to purchase a loft in Brooklyn where they hired a full staff of caterers and florists. All of the blessings should have made her feel happy and carefree; but they didn’t, and she wasn’t.

Jack had left her. He’d said he loved her and spent the entire night worshipping her body, making her do and say things that still made her blush. And then the next morning he was gone. She called his cell repeatedly, only to be turned over to voicemail. By noon he still wasn’t back so she called his office. Margo said that he was in when she got there but left before noon. Noelle stayed in her apartment all day, staring out the window and waiting for him to reach out to her.

She didn’t bathe because she didn’t want to wash the scent or feel of him away. She lay in bed, breathing in the smell of him as the tears rolled down her cheeks, crying into the pillow. The next day there was a knock on the door, and she opened it, knowing she looked a fright, to accept the envelope from Sullivan and Associates in D.C. A feeling of dread settled in the pit of her stomach as she opened it and read its contents. The first page was a letter stating that Jack Sullivan was requesting that she divorce him on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. He would pay all her legal fees and a generous alimony for the next ten years. Noelle balked at the sum of seven thousand dollars a month. They’d barely been married a month!

The next few pages were divorce papers drawn up by Casey. All she had to do was sign them. Noelle tore the papers up and called for a courier service, sending the shredded pieces of paper back to Casey and got back in bed. Her world had just ended. Jack didn’t want her anymore and was now trying to

buy her off to ease his guilty conscience. It was just as she'd thought. She'd been nothing but an expensive piece of ass to him. That first week was the hardest and, she refused to do anything but lie in bed, go to the bathroom, and call his phone. Then Avery came. She banged on the door and wouldn't stop until Noelle threw the door open and yelled "WHAT?!?!"

Avery leaned back with a frown and covered her nose as she directed Noelle back into her house. Once inside, she led her down the hallway to the bathroom. Noelle scowled as she watched Avery squirt an obscenely generous amount of toothpaste on her toothbrush and handed it to her. Brushing her teeth, she watched in the mirror as her friend calmly drew her a bubble bath, then got her fresh clothing and waited expectantly by the tub. Noelle reluctantly took off her clothes and sank into the warm, fragrant bath surrounded by bubbles. Tears filled her eyes as Avery took her hair out of its ratty bun and gently began to comb through it, before washing and conditioning it.

"How did you know?" Noelle asked quietly and Avery knew she really meant: How did you know that I was dying? That my heart was gone?

"Darby," she said gently, and Noelle started to cry in earnest. Once she started, she couldn't stop; and by the time Avery dragged her from the water, it was ice cold. Noelle insisted on drying herself and when she came out of the bathroom, Avery had a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup waiting for her. She greedily ate the food, not realizing how hungry she was until Avery set a second sandwich in front of her, and she devoured it too. Soon she was sleepy. Avery tucked her into the fresh sheets and lay on the other side of the bed, flipping through magazines as she slept.

Avery had Pierce bring her clothes over; and she stayed until Noelle was initiating conversation and eating three meals a day. She was worried about her friend's condition and kept Sidra posted as she was away on the tour but checked in daily. When Sidra confessed to Avery that she'd emailed Jack a very threatening message and would need a solid alibi should something happen to him, she was very surprised that instead of lecturing her on restraint, Avery didn't try to talk her out of it. She simply said, "Make it hurt twice as much as you originally planned," then went back to caring for Noelle.

Three weeks later when Noelle asked what their next project would be, Avery knew she was going to be okay. By then the second package arrived from Sullivan and Associates, and Noelle forgot about being heartbroken and moved into Phase2: State of Fury, where she had since taken up permanent residence.

Noelle opened the envelope and read its contents before sending for the courier service again. If Jack wanted a divorce so badly, he would need to be the one to file. Fuck him. She was done letting him pull her strings, so she threw herself into her business wholeheartedly. With a loan from Ian, she paid off Rothman Investments and took their business to another bank. Business was doing so great; they were able to pay Ian back in two months. On a Whim was in the black and booked solid for the next six months.

No one had seen Jack in months. Noelle's mother was on a mission to sue him for negligence and job abandonment, since he turned his clientele over to Ian who was merciless on Alicia. When Noelle spoke to Darby, he said Jack was in Whiskey Row, but he hadn't actually SEEN him, whatever the fuck that meant. The envelope came every week like clockwork; and every week she sent it back because deep down, she knew she still loved him and always would. There

was no one else for her because his sorry behind was what her traitorous heart wanted more than anything.

A month later, she discovered that there was someone else for her, and that someone would be coming in less than eight months. Noelle was shocked as hell when she went to her doctor's office to see what could be done about her constant state of exhaustion. After running a few tests, her family doctor said, "At this time I'm going to prescribe plenty of rest, healthy foods to keep your iron up, along with some pills. Prenatal pills. Congratulations, my dear. You're pregnant."

She'd reminded him of doctor-patient confidentiality, lest he spill the beans to her parents; and for the next week, Noelle walked along in a daze as she tried to get used to the reality of being pregnant. Immediately she wanted to call Jack and tell him the news, but her pride wouldn't let her. He left HER, not the other way around. So she kept the news to herself, not even Sidra and Avery knew yet. When the nausea kicked in, she tried to work from home as much as possible without alerting Avery, but her overly concerned friend feared that she was becoming suicidal; so Noelle had to drag herself to the office and fake the funk.

Glassy eyes stared back at her from the mirror as she struggled not to cry. Some days were good, and some were bad. Envelope Day was always a bad day, but the pain had receded slightly due to her little secret. Breathing deeply through her nose, she counted backwards from one hundred until she felt calm again. She then splashed cool water on her face, before looking up at the sign above the mirror. ***Make today your bitch!***

It always made her smile, and it was a goal she strived to accomplish daily. After making sure the door was locked again, Noelle pushed her flowing, Kelly green kimono to the

side and lifted up her white dress shirt to peer at her small bump covered by her maternity skinny jeans.

“Hi, baby. How’s Mommy’s angel?” Noelle whispered lovingly to her belly as she caressed the bump gently. She was rewarded with flutters in her belly for her efforts. *Jack had better come around soon*, she thought achingly, or he was going to miss all the really good parts.

Noelle straightened her clothes and pulled her huge gemstone necklace into place. The trick to hiding her baby bump was to have people focus on a statement piece from her wardrobe. Today’s piece was a large, gold link necklace with turquoise and lime green stones set in a triangle shaped middle. It was bold and paired with a bright orangey-red lip gloss; the look was stunning and effective, keeping all eyes above her chest.

Noelle missed Jack so much, his smile, his laugh, and the feel of his strong arms wrapped around her; the way they could just talk about anything. Late at night she missed the heat of his body moving inside of her, and the warmth of just snuggling. When she felt the baby move for the first time, she’d cried all day, wishing Jack could be there to feel it too. Something had to give, because although she displayed a cool, calm, and collected demeanor on the outside; on the inside some days, it still felt like she was barely holding on. A knock on the bathroom door startled her. “Just a minute!” She called out, hastily checking her appearance one last time.

“Ian’s here and...ummm... so is your mother!” Avery said with strained false cheer before hurrying away. In the distance Noelle heard an office door slam shut and knew that Avery had locked herself in the safety of her office, away from Alicia Kramer’s acidic tongue. Noelle also knew she would not emerge until the coast was clear.

She groaned. Perfect. Abso-fucking-lutely perfect.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Darby's Harley Davidson roared down the long, twisting road. Normally he loved the freedom of being on his bike, especially on a cloud filled day like this, but not today. Today was the day that he and Casey planned to stage an intervention on their normally easy-going and unflappable older brother. He was a right fucking mess and had been since he'd shown up four months ago. The only time he left the house was when he ran out of liquor, according to Mort who owned the Wishing Well, the local liquor store. He pulled up to Jack's house and saw Casey sitting in his BMW, clearly waiting for him. When he saw Darby, he got out with an envelope in his hand, and nodded at him in greeting. "Mornin'. You ready to do this?"

Darby yanked his helmet off and shrugged. "I guess. He ain't returning Viv's or Ian's calls. Last week he made Kat cry, and I had to restrain Lex *and* Holt from coming up here to kick his ass. It's time for him to join the real world again. No more of this hiding bullshit."

Casey frowned. "Why would Holt want to kick his ass? Lex I can see, but Holt?"

Darby rolled his eyes at his brother as they walked up the front steps. Sometimes for a whip-smart attorney, Casey was so clueless that he couldn't find his ass if both of his hands were in his back pockets. "Seriously, dude? Never mind, you can't even fix your own shit with a certain sex in her strut, fine ass—"

“Shut it, D,” Casey said, sharply cutting him off and giving his brother a look that could curdle milk as he rang the doorbell obnoxiously over and over again.

“So how are we doing this?” Darby asked with a smirk. “Good cop, bad cop?”

“Nope. Come to Jesus,” Casey said as they heard stomping on the other side of the door.

“Wait...come to Jesus? What does that even-”

The door flung open, and they were both taken aback by Jack’s appearance. Gone was the meticulously-groomed brother they knew, and in his place was a Grizzly Adams-looking man with red-rimmed eyes.

“Why the hell are you ringin’ my doorbell like that?” he yelled. “Get outta here. I don’t wanna be disturbed!”

Darby pushed past him, causing him to stumble back into the door, and Casey followed behind him saying cheerily, “Tough shit.”

The house was a smelly mess. Empty liquor bottles littered the living room floor and dirty clothes were strewn everywhere in the darkened room. Dirty dishes covered every flat surface of the kitchen. The sink and stove top were piled high with used pots and pans. Jack pushed past them and threw himself down on the leather sofa sneering, “I’d tell you guys to make yourselves at home, but since I didn’t invite you pricks, feel free to see yourselves out.”

Casey went into the kitchen, and soon the smell of coffee was wafting through the house. Darby yanked all the curtains open and pulled the blinds up as well. Then he opened all the windows, ignoring Jack as he shouted, “No bright light!”

“What are you a fucking gremlin?” Darby asked irritably as he collected the empty bottles from the floor and tossed them into an empty liquor crate on the floor. It was worse than they’d thought. He hadn’t seen this many bottles in a home since their sorry- ass father was alive.

“Fuck you, man,” Jack retorted, flipping him the bird before turning over to bury his face in the cushions. Darby sat down in the armchair across from him, waiting patiently as Casey brought back a tray that held mugs of steaming black coffee, and aspirin. He set it on the end table, before pulling the large square ottoman to the side and out of the way of the sofa. Jack kept his back to them, and Casey looked at Darby who nodded his head. It was time to begin.

“You want to tell us why you’re hiding out, moping like a little bitch caught up in his feelings?” Casey asked cruelly. Darby’s eyebrows shot up, and even he felt a twinge of unease at his brother’s harsh words. He mouthed, ‘What the fuck?’, and Casey shrugged nonchalantly.

Jack stiffened but didn’t turn around. “Screw you, Case.”

“After you, buddy. You’re doing a good job of alienating everyone who cares about you. You made our little sis cry, and refuse to talk to any of us who care about your well-being. Who knows what the fuck you did to your beautiful wife to be begging for a divorce, and now all you want to do is fucking drink your sorrows away. You’re a fucking waste of space. Or should I just call you ‘Junior’?” Casey finished caustically. Jack sat up slowly and turned around to face him.

“Repeat what you just said, little brother,” Jack said; his voice eerily calm and hands twitching as he leaned toward his younger brother focusing on him intently. Darby stood up, now clear on his part of this so-called intervention.

“What’s the matter? Not sober enough to comprehend?” Casey asked derisively. “Then I’ll say it slower for you. You’re hurting everyone who loves you, breaking your wife’s heart, and drinking your sorrows away. Kind of like some other loser we knew.” He leaned closer to Jack who was breathing heavily and clenching his fists.

“You should stop now, Casey,” Jack warned quietly, and Casey laughed harshly, shaking his head.

“Sorry, I don’t understand pathetic drunks and their slurring. And that’s what you are. The apple doesn’t fall from the tree does it, junior?” He taunted mercilessly.

Jack lunged at Casey who quickly leaned back as Darby stepped forward and punched Jack in the jaw as hard as he could. Jack went down and lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, leaving both brothers to look down at him.

Darby turned to look at his little brother in disbelief. “This is your idea of an intervention?! Mentally attacking the person, and then having someone knock them out cold? Pretty sure Dr. Phil has never had to cold-cock anybody when he’s doing one of these.”

Casey shrugged as he bent to lift Jack up. “I’m sure he’s wanted to though; besides he knocks them out mentally, and I’m more of a literal guy. Either way, I’m happy. This was my

first time doing an intervention, and it went somewhat as planned. I'm sure I'll get better as time goes by. Now let's get him up on the sofa."

Darby snorted as he helped to maneuver Jack back onto the sofa. And they had the nerve to call him the wild and crazy one.

Lunch was a disastrous affair with Alicia and Ian flinging thinly veiled barbs at each other, as Noelle struggled to eat avocado toast and keep her nausea at bay. She was barely winning the fight, because the sight and smell of her mother's gorgonzola and fig salad was overwhelming her.

Ever since the picture of she and Jack kissing was made public, members of her family made it a point to visit her weekly. The visits started the week after Jack left and were the bane of Noelle's existence as they gently poked and prodded at her. Today was her lucky day as her mother "just happened" to be in Brooklyn and thought they could have lunch. As Ian laughed mockingly and Noelle stared at her like she had grown a third eye, Alicia blushed slightly at her own lie.

"Mother, when have you ever just happened to be in Brooklyn?" Noelle asked with polite disbelief. Her mother didn't even acknowledge to her friends that Noelle resided in Brooklyn. When asked she always said 'the city'.

"Oh pooh, darling. I've been to Brooklyn before. I find it to be...quite lively," Alicia murmured, waving her hand

dismissively and giving Ian a glare as he doubled over in laughter at her response. So they decided to go to Five Leaves in Greenpoint, and Noelle relished watching her mother squirm at the close proximity of the restaurant's tables. As he ate, Ian regaled Noelle with tales of his trip to Europe while Alicia only picked at her food.

"It sounds wonderful, Uncle Ian. Sometimes I think I should go back for a vacation," Noelle replied, thinking to herself that maybe after the baby was born, she'd spend a little time over there. The privacy would allow her to relax and enjoy the next chapter in her life, away from prying eyes and inquiring minds.

"I think Europe sounds like an excellent idea! Maybe you should go now, an all-expense paid trip from Daddy and I. Call it an early Christmas gift," Alicia suggested brightly.

"I can't go now, Mother. We're booked solid for the next couple of months. I'd also have to check to see if Avery has anything planned," Noelle said, seeing right through her mother's schemes.

"Well, what's the point in owning a business if you can't do what you want?" Alicia asked crossly.

"Oh you poor delusional thing. I guess that's the kind of mindset one can expect from someone who's never worked a day in her life," Ian said with mock sympathy.

Alicia bristled. "Ian, contrary to your beliefs, I've built a very fulfilling career as a politician's wife which has kept me extremely busy. Not to mention, raising children and being extremely active in numerous charities through the Kramer Foundation."

Noelle kept silent as she munched on her toast. A wave of despair and anger flooded her at the thought of being a single parent. Although if millions of strong women could do it every single day, so could she. *Suck it up, buttercup.*

“Well it couldn’t have kept you too busy. You make time to incessantly meddle in stuff that is really none of your concern; and besides, you had four nannies to help you raise the children,” Ian smiled unkindly as Alicia stabbed viciously at her salad. “If Noelle was going to go anywhere, perhaps she should go to Florida and stay where you did on your recent trips. Those trips did wonders for you as you were practically *glowing* when you came back.”

Noelle jerked her head sharply towards her uncle’s venomous tone as Alicia’s fork clattered loudly on her plate. The noise caused several other patrons to look over at them curiously.

“How dare you!” Alicia raged quietly, leaning in close to Ian who was also bristling in anger as he raised a brow and gave her a contempt-filled look.

“Oh no, it’s you who dares, Alicia. You dare to put yourself on this elevated pedestal like you’re too good for anyone or thing. Unfortunately for you, you are only human; and just like the rest of us common folk, you do...common things. Things that eventually... catch up to you,” Ian said in a hard tone.

“Alright, what the hell is going on here? I’ve never seen the two of you behave this poorly, especially in public!” Noelle hissed as she gave fake smiles of reassurance to the diners closest in proximity to them. She was promptly ignored by her companions as they faced off.

“Did Jack tell you this? It figures; what can you expect from a low-bred hillbilly who thinks he can better himself?” Alicia sneered, throwing her napkin down in disgust while not seeing the furious look on her daughter’s face.

Noelle’s hand smacked the tabletop so hard, everyone around her jumped as the silver and glassware rattled loudly. She looked at her mother who flushed, hating to be the center of public scrutiny. Alicia whispered furiously, “Really Noelle, everyone is looking.”

Noelle was beyond enraged at her mother’s snobbery. It was one thing for her to be pissed at Jack and call him names; but she would not allow anyone else to do so, especially knowing what she did about his difficult childhood. “Talk about the man I love again, Mother, and we’re *done*. By rights, we should be done anyway considering how badly you’ve treated me; but I want to give you the opportunity to know your grandbaby that will be arriving in less than six months.”

Ian and Alicia both looked at her in shock before her mother quickly recovered. “You’re pregnant?! I thought you said that the two of you were only casually seeing each other!”

“Well, I lied; and obviously we did more than just ‘see’ each other. He wasn’t just a casual acquaintance to me and could never be. I’ve been in love with him for the last four years. This baby was made in love; and if I ever hear you speak disparagingly about its father again, I will move heaven and earth to make your life miserable *and* deny you access to your grandchild,” Noelle said icily as tears filled her mother’s eyes. She shook her head, immune to them after so many years.

“Give it up, Mother. When are you going to understand that I’m not a puppet to be controlled? None of us are. You are so busy interfering in everyone’s lives that you don’t even notice

that you are driving us away? All my life I've just wanted you and Daddy to love and accept me. Like a robot, I did everything that you guys thought was best for me, and it still wasn't enough. It will never be enough. If I based my happiness on your approval of me, I'd be dying a slow death waiting for it. The only people who have ever loved me unconditionally were Uncle Harvey, Ian, and my friends. They love me without restrictions and with their love and support, encourage me to be the best Noelle I can be." An image of Jack's contorted face filled her mind.

"As far as the business is concerned, yes I did make a deal with Ira to help you get the funding for your company. I only did it because I knew that your parents weren't going to give you the advance on your inheritance, and you wouldn't accept a loan from me. You didn't have to take that loan, but the business woman in you recognized it as a good opportunity."

Jack loved her, and maybe she should have done a better job of hearing him out. Hopefully it wasn't too late.

"I have to go," Noelle said abruptly, standing up and grabbing her purse. Smiling, she leaned down to kiss Ian's cheek and then her mother's.

"Are you going where I think you are, dear?" Ian asked with a speculative gleam in his eyes, and she nodded her head determinedly. With a smile of approval, he reached into his leather messenger bag and pulled out a flat package that he handed to Noelle. "Excellent. By the way, this came for Jack at the office this morning. Be a dear and give him that as well as my congratulations on the little one."

"What? You can't just leave! We need to talk about-" Alicia sputtered as Noelle gave her a bright smile.

“Mother, I’m not sure exactly sure what Jack has on you, but I’m sure it’s nothing you would want floating around. He’s been nothing but professional to you, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want him as an enemy, or even me for that matter. I’m going to be with him, and together we will raise our baby. If you can’t be happy for me, stay away until you can at least fake it. Last warning, Mother, butt out of other people’s affairs or you won’t like the results,” Noelle said with finality before walking away.

“Bravo, my girl,” Ian said admiringly and watched her leave before turning to an open-mouthed Alicia. “Oh, dear; looks like someone just discovered that they’re not the sun; therefore, we the world, don’t revolve around them.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a firm squeeze and a big smile. “Cheer up, old girl. Our baby is going to have a baby!”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Noelle called Avery from home where she was busy packing. “Would you mind me slipping away for a couple of days? I did the payroll this morning and can email you the dishes that catering should be working on in my absence,” she detailed, grabbing a handful of socks and tossing them into her suitcase.

“Not a problem. Lunch was so bad that you need to get away huh?” Avery teased.

Noelle laughed. “Actually, it turned out to be a real eye-opening experience. I got a lot of crap off my chest that I’ve

wanted to say to my mom; and if she doesn't feel the need to speak to me for a while or ever again, I think I'll be okay."

"Hallelujah and praise Jesus! Well then, where are you going?" Avery asked curiously.

"Ave, I'm going to get my man," Noelle said simply and laughed as Avery started shrieking with happiness. She wished her luck and promised she'd find a way to stop Sidra from hurting Jack before hanging up.

When Noelle was done packing, she wheeled her suitcase to the front door and called for a cab. As she waited, she remembered the flat package Ian had given her at lunch earlier. Walking over to her purse by the door, she pulled it and studied it before cautiously opening it and looking inside. What the hell??

Jack surveyed his face in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. Gone was the scruffy, mountain man. The gnarly, long curls had been cut close to his head, and he was once again clean-shaven. He looked like his old self except for the large bruise on his cheek courtesy of his brother's meaty fist. Jack grimaced, thinking of how badly he'd fucked up. Yeah, he'd needed the sense to be knocked into him, just not so fucking hard.

When he came to, Darby and Casey were playing cards. His head felt like it was exploding and his face felt like someone took a hammer to it. Groaning, he struggled to sit up, but felt

really dizzy. "Somebody want to tell me what the hell happened?"

"Oh good, you're up. Bout time, Darby is slower than molasses when it comes to Spades," Casey said cheerfully as he got up and handed Jack a cup of lukewarm coffee along with two aspirin.

"Bite me, jerk," Darby grumbled good-naturedly as he gave his big brother a guilty look. "How are you feeling, Jackie?"

"Why'd you hit me, D?" Jack asked sourly as he carefully touched his face. He winced in pain, and his eyes promised retribution as he glared at his middle brother.

"Because you needed some damn sense knocked into you, that's why. If you were actin' any dumber, you could throw yourself to the ground and miss," Casey responded before Darby could. "You're a grown fucking man, pouting up here like a big-ass baby."

"You're a little shit, Casey. I know this whole thing was your idea; and when I get up, I'm gonna beat the fuck outta you," Jack vowed as he popped the aspirin.

"I'm real scared," Casey said dismissively. "Now that you're finally sober, let's talk. I'm here because Noelle finally decided to give you what you've been asking for."

Jack felt his heart stop and he froze with the coffee mug halfway to his lips. "What do you mean?"

“Don’t play dumb with me, you heartless son of a bitch. You know exactly what I mean.” Casey picked up the envelope that he brought in and tossed it on the sofa next to Jack. “It means she finally saw the light and signed the papers. In a couple of months, you’ll be a free man. Congratulations, asshole.”

Jack’s mind was racing while his heart was breaking all over again. This was the moment he’d been dreading. She’d finally realized he wasn’t shit and decided to move on. Meanwhile he was frozen with guilt and pain. Every time he closed his eyes, she stole into his dreams, making him fall in love with her all over again. But she was way too good for him and he didn’t deserve her after he’d hurt her so badly.

Darby shook his head in frustration. “C’mon man. What are you doing? That little gal looked at you with nothin’ but love in her eyes. Everyone could see that! I mean, this was your chance to be happy. You were supposed to break the Sullivan curse and get your ‘happy ever after’! Why would you deliberately screw it up? You’re one of the smartest guys I know. How could you screw this up?”

“Because I was scared!” Jack yelled and gave a mirthless chuckle at their looks of surprise. “What, I can’t be scared? Well I was! All anybody wants is someone to look up to and fix their damn problems. I’m supposed to have all the answers and make everything better for everyone. That’s how you guys see me right?”

“The first time I saw Noelle; I knew she was it for me. She was so beautiful and had all these cool quirks that made her perfect; and I wanted her—so badly that I became obsessed with her, and it made me feel sick to my stomach because of Patrick. She was all I could think about, but she was young too. What would she want with an old guy like me?” Jack shook his head “I felt like if I did get her, I would keep her

under lock and key. Hell, you've seen firsthand how I get about anyone touching her, and you're my damn brothers! I felt like I didn't deserve her because I wouldn't be able to treat her right!

So instead of wooing her, I stayed away until the perfect opportunity presented itself, and I just couldn't resist. I selfishly took it and hoped with time that I could make her love me, but the shit backfired and she found out; said she was through with me," Jack said bitterly as he tossed back the rest of the coffee. "It made me crazy to think that she would leave, and then stuff got a little out of hand." He hung his head in shame. Suddenly Darby was there in front of him dragging him up by the front of his shirt and they were nose to nose.

"What did you do?" Darby asked in a savage whisper. You could hear a pin drop; the room was so quiet. Casey stepped up next to him and placed a hand on Darby's shoulder as if to restrain him; but the look he gave Jack let him know that he was seconds away from getting fucked up if they didn't like his answer. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a buzz saw.

Jack's eyes were as cold as the Arctic. "No, I didn't rape or beat my wife if that's what you're thinking. Despite what Casey said, I'm not as big of a bastard that our father was. Now get your hands off of me, before I put you through a fucking window."

Darby released him on a ragged sigh, stepped back, and raked his hands through his hair. "Hell, Jack, I'm sorry, but you know I had to ask."

"When are you gonna get it in your thick skull that you are nothing like Patrick Sullivan?" Casey asked in frustration. "At thirteen, you were more of a father to us than he ever was. You

looked out for us while Ma had to work and disciplined us when it was needed. Even after Lex took us in, you refused to let down your guard and just be a kid. We'll forever be grateful for your love and care. But if YOU, the guy who takes care of all of us, don't think that you deserve happiness; then hell, we're all doomed."

Darby nodded his head in agreement. "I know you stayed away as long as you did because you still carried pain and guilt over her death, but we could see Noelle helped to ease that. You couldn't save Ma, but she saved us the best she could and gave us the chance to be free. Letting Noelle go will be the worst mistake of your life, and Ma wouldn't want you losing out on the opportunity to be happy."

His brother's words were the ones he'd needed to be free. He'd needed to hear that they didn't harbor feelings of anger and resentment towards him, and that they knew he'd done his best.

The first thing he did upon sobering up was send Kat a large apology bouquet of white roses. He also emailed Vivienne and Ian to let them know he was okay, and he'd be coming back soon. His bags were packed, and Darby was giving him a ride to the airport. The signed, divorce papers were burning a hole inside of his jacket.

Noelle probably hated his guts right now, but he wasn't going to give up without a fight. He was a fool to walk away. But he'd be an even bigger fool if he just let her go and not do anything to prevent it. From the moment he saw her, he knew they were meant to be together. Now it was time to make her see that truth also. He walked out of the bathroom and grabbed his bags from the bedroom before meeting Darby and Casey in the living room.

Darby gave a wolf whistle and started humming the James Bond theme song, “The name’s Sullivan. Jack Sullivan.”

Casey chuckled, and Jack rolled his eyes, “Come on you clowns. I gotta go get my gal back.”

“Yeah about that...”, Casey said, rubbing his neck hard and avoiding Darby’s narrow- eyed gaze.

Jack didn’t hear him as he opened the door and looked at the rain coming down. “We better get going. Judging from the look of those clouds over there, it’s gonna really start coming down. Lock up, Case!” He shouted over his shoulder as he jogged to the car with his suitcases.

Darby shook his head as he walked out the door. “Tell me you didn’t. Never mind, don’t tell me anything. I refuse to be your accomplice, Mr. Prosecutor. No wonder folks have no faith in our justice system.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how mad do you think he’ll be?” Casey asked, whistling happily as he locked the door and followed Darby down the porch stairs.

“Don’t ask me. I sure as hell ain’t stickin’ around to see if he cancels your birth certificate,” Darby said cheerfully.

Noelle was anxious as she slowly drove towards Gatlinburg. The rain was coming down in torrents. The elderly salesman at

the car rental place in Knoxville looked at her dubiously when she asked what the best way to get to Whiskey Row was.

“You sure you want to take that trip right now, Miss?” he asked. “I gotta say, it’s starting to rain here now, and as dark as the clouds are up there, it’s surely pouring. You should probably stay in town tonight and let it slow down a bit,” he suggested even though Noelle was already shaking her head in the negative.

“Thanks for your concern, but I have to get up there tonight.” She gave him a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Noelle saw the intersection up ahead and started to slow the VW Bug down. It rolled to a complete stop fifteen feet behind the big rig in front of her. It seemed impossible, but the rain started coming down even harder, and she could barely see the brake lights in front of her. With a sigh of resignation, she had to concede that the salesman was correct about the weather tonight.

She decided to turn around and head back towards the hotel she passed ten minutes ago. Seeing no divider between the lanes, Noelle checked for any oncoming traffic. The opposite lane was clear, so she started to slowly turn the wheel to the left. The loud squeal of tires from behind made her jump. In her rearview mirror, there were lights from a larger vehicle swerving on the slick road, hurtling straight at her. Noelle didn’t even have time to scream before everything went black.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Thanks to Darby's driving skills, the trip down the mountain wasn't as hard as Jack thought it would be. He looked at his watch and saw it was only five-thirty in the evening, but the sky was pitch black due to the storm. Prickles of unease slid down his back. He felt a little off and chalked it up to them cutting it close for his seven forty-five flight, but he felt confident he'd make it.

"The rain seems to be easing up as we get closer to Gatlinburg, but not by much. It will be much lighter in Knoxville," Casey offered, checking the weather app on his phone from the passenger seat.

"Yeah, hopefully we'll be there soon. I can't believe that Lex was so pissed at me that he wouldn't let me use his plane." Jack leaned forward between them shaking his head ruefully. "Kat accepted my apology and said the flowers were great, but obviously I need to do a little more groveling."

Darby shifted in the driver's seat. "Well, it may be a little bit more than that. See uh...in order for the girls to fly in with me and Case for their visit, I asked him for the use of his plane. He said I could use it on one condition. My guess is he's still a little salty that I haven't come through for him yet."

The other two brothers leaned in curiously, waiting to hear the arrangement terms. "He said in his big, scary, Russian voice that I had to get Viv to come home. That it was time for them to talk face to face."

There was a moment of stunned silence following Darby's confession before Jack gave a long whistle. "She'll never go for it. How you gonna manage that?" he asked curiously and rubbed his neck. The feeling of unease was getting stronger and making him even antsier.

“I know that he’s been trying to talk to her for a while; and that whenever he comes to town, she conveniently happens to be out of town,” Casey said slowly. “I’ve tried talking to her about it, but it’s the one thing she actually keeps her mouth shut on; which says a lot ‘cause you know she’s got an opinion on everything.”

“Casey, I need a favor from your private investigator friend. See what he can dig up on Joel Rothman having an affair with a stockbroker named Kelly Travers. It’s been hot and heavy between them for the last three months, and in that time frame, Rothman has been making extremely successful choices with his investments. I’m also gonna need your guy at the Security Exchange Commission,” Jack said casually.

Casey whistled softly. “Are you going after Rothman because he’s Vaughn’s husband? Sounds pretty personal. You still harboring feelings for her?”

Jack smacked the back of his brother’s head, making him yelp with pain. “No, jackass. I’m going after him because he dared to get between Noelle and me. No one and nothing will ever come between us again,” he vowed, ignoring the loaded look his brothers exchanged.

Flashing lights ahead caught their attention. Traffic was down to a slow crawl as passing drivers surveyed the scene. Police and ambulance were everywhere. There was a large semi-truck with its emergency lights on. A Volkswagen Bug was behind it, crushed on its side to it while an SUV was smashed into the other side of it. The emergency responders had applied the Jaws of Life system to the small vehicle. It was undoubtedly a gruesome-looking accident.

“Damn, do you think whoever was in that car made it out alive?” Casey asked in disbelief. “It’d be a miracle that’s for sure. Hey, pull over; I see Harvey Pete’s on duty. Let’s ask.”

“Case, I’m not trying to be a dick, but I’ve got a plane to catch. We really can’t afford to stop,” Jack said shortly. The feeling that something was wrong sat in his gut like a two-ton boulder. If he missed the plane, Casey was going to get it.

“Just hold on, it’ll take but a minute. What if it was somebody from ‘The Row’?” Case said patiently as they stopped by the policeman. “Hey, H.P., Can you tell me what happened here?”

The two men shook hands. “Good to see you, Case. Willard Ross had a heart attack at the wheel and rammed into the car which slammed into the truck. The young woman that was in the car is in serious condition. She had to be pried out and airlifted to the Trauma Center. Damn shame it was. She’s not from around here. Her driver’s license says New York City, so I gotta locate her next of kin,” Harvey said regretfully. “Hopefully she’ll pull through.”

“New York?” Jack asked sharply, a sense of foreboding filling him. “What’s her name, H.P.?”

“The young lady’s name is Noelle Kramer. Say you’re livin’ there now, ain’t ya? You wouldn’t happen to know her by chance? I mean I know it’s a big city and all....”

Jack couldn’t hear anything past his heart pounding in his ears. His brothers were talking to him, but he couldn’t hear them. He could only hear Harvey’s words.

In serious condition. Jaws of Life had to pry her out. The young lady's name is Noelle Kramer.

His love. His world. What was she doing in Tennessee???

The hospital hallway was eerily quiet; the only sounds that could be heard were Jack's shoes as he paced up and down the hallway outside of Noelle's room. It was a slow, methodical pace that belied the fear that now lived in him as he waited for the doctor to come out of her room with her prognosis. The last hour was a blur for him. He remembered Harvey arranging a police escort to take them to the hospital; Darby and Casey murmuring words of encouragement as he bent his head and prayed for all that he was worth. The urge to choke the shit out of the slow-moving head nurse upon arrival was strong as she questioned his relationship to Noelle.

"She's my fucking life!" Jack shouted, getting in her face and she flinched back; all commotion stopped around them. Although he meant to say wife, he didn't correct himself, because what he said was so true. He would die if she didn't make it. Darby, grabbed him, and led him to the elevator as she stammered out the room number and directions. Casey took the forms that needed to be filled out.

Jack yanked on his hair in frustration as he waited for the doctor. Casey asked him questions as he filled out the hospital paperwork while Darby made calls to friends and family. The door opened, and the elderly doctor stepped out. He warily looked at the three, big men whose lethal gazes were trained on him as they crowded around him. He spoke to the one who

stepped forward with the bruise on his face and wild hair, making him look ferocious. “Mr. Sullivan?”

“Yes, I’m her husband. How is she?” Jack demanded tensely, shoving his clenched hands into his pockets to keep from shaking the man for information.

“She’s resting for now. She had a mild concussion on impact but came out of it due to the pain she experienced. Your wife has a cracked collar bone, three broken ribs, and a broken ankle. She’s experiencing a lot of discomfort because we couldn’t give her the strongest pain meds possible due to her condition.”

“What do you mean her condition?” Jack barked. “What fucking condition?”

“Well the baby, of course.” The doctor said worriedly as Jack staggered back, stunned at the revelation as his brothers braced him. “I’m sorry, sir. I thought you knew...”

“Can I see her?” Jack asked dazedly. A baby. He was going to be a daddy. Joy was a healing balm running through his body, and he vowed to be the best dad possible; to fight even harder for his marriage.

“Yes, but just for a little bit. She really does need her rest,” the doctor said firmly before adding, “Congratulations.” Then he walked away.

“Congratulations, brother,” Darby said giving his shoulder a clasp and pulling him close. Casey chimed in, “Congrats, bro. Now pull it together. Don’t go in there like a pussy, and tell her we love her.”

Jack quietly entered the room and was stunned at the amount of tubes Noelle was hooked up to. She looked so pale and helpless laying there, her breathing short and shallow. Her lips were dry and cracked and her eyes were black and blue. There was an angry-looking lump on her forehead, and he could see the bruising and swelling above her right collarbone. He pulled back the covers by her feet and saw the cast around her ankle. *The pain she must be in*, he thought, tears filling his eyes. She could have lost their baby and the thought was enough to bring him to his knees by her hospital bed.

“Don’t. Cry.” It was uttered softly and Jack jerked his head up to look at her face. Her eyes were partially open.

“Noelle... baby, are you okay? Should I get the doctor?” he asked standing up, tears running unchecked down his face. Leaning over he gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

“Hurts, Jack,” she mumbled and he clasped her hand gently. He wasn’t ever planning on letting go. She was his lifeline. Her eyes closed again, and she tried to speak but no words came out.

“What hurts, baby?” he asked with concern, trying to compose himself.

“Heart hurts. See you cry. Don’t,” she said faintly, her fingers curling weakly around his before drifting off to sleep; a content smile on her lips.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

She awoke in severe agony. Her hands flew to her stomach, and she felt fire in her upper chest at her sudden movement. Moaning in pain, Noelle tried to feel for the small bump of her tummy.

“The baby’s fine, Noelle.” And she closed her eyes as the warmth of that sweet, southern drawl washed over her. God, it had been too long since she’d last heard it. She heard him move. “Do you need more medicine?”

Noelle opened her eyes at the concern lacing his voice to see Jack hovering above her. His hair looked like it hadn’t been combed in a while, his face covered in whiskers, and he was sporting a large bruise on his left cheek. To coin a phrase, he looked like shit; but to Noelle, he was the most beautiful sight in the world.

“What happened? I feel like I went fifty rounds in a fight club,” Noelle groaned, licking her chapped lips. She slowly sipped from the cup of water Jack brought to her lips. It was cool and refreshing going down her parched throat. “That’s good, thank you.”

“You were involved in a bad car accident and sustained some pretty awful injuries, but the important thing is that you and the baby are alive,” Jack said gravely. Noelle could see the questions and hurt in his eyes.

“I was on my way to tell you about the baby. I didn’t think it was something you should say over the phone,” she said quietly, trying to gauge how he felt about the news of impending fatherhood.

“Noelle, you’re almost five months along. When were you gonna say somethin’?” Jack asked, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. The relief of having her awake and coherent was great, but so was his anger at her secrecy. He watched as fire flashed in her tired eyes.

“Should I have called you up after your disappearing act?” She retorted angrily. “Or better yet, stick a post it note on the recurring divorce papers you sent me? “

“Oh you mean the papers you finally signed? Yeah, Casey made a special trip to give them to me; and it was the wakeup call I needed to realize how badly I was fucking things up,” he asked shortly. “I was on my way to the airport to catch a flight to see you and beg for a second chance, when we saw the accident. God, that took about a hundred years off my life, darlin’, when the deputy said your name,” Jack said unevenly.

Noelle frowned in confusion; what was he talking about? She’d never signed the papers, and realization dawned on her that it was Casey who’d forged them for her, knowing it would get his brother moving.

“How do you feel about the baby?” Noelle asked quietly, watching as he rubbed his hand over his shadowed jaw and a big grin broke out across his face.

“I’m very happy about the baby. It’s more than I could have dreamed or hoped for,” he replied honestly. “I think you’ll make a great mother, Noelle, and I plan to be front and center for every moment in our child’s life. I hope it’s something we’ll be doing together.”

“How do you plan on doing that exactly?” Noelle asked bluntly. “I mean, you said you loved me, and then *ran*, not

walked, away from me. How do I know that the next time shit gets too real, you won't take off again?"

Jack stiffened. "I fucked up and ran out on you, and words can't express how sorry I am for that. I did it because I was ashamed of the way I treated you our last night together. All my life, I've been terrified that I would turn out like my father with his violent, dominating nature. Our last night together, I...I never felt more like him," he explained, shaking his head in self-disgust.

"When you said we were done, I just lost it. The thought of not having you in my life was making me crazy. So I tried to reach you in the only way that I thought would make you see how good we are together. My perverse need to hear you say you belonged to me was disgusting, but I couldn't stop myself."

"That's why you left? Because you felt like you were turning into your father?" Noelle asked, and Jack nodded solemnly. "Even though you said you loved me?"

"It's the only reason. From the moment I saw you at your birthday party, I fell in love with you. You were the most breathtaking vision I'd ever seen as you carried on a conversation with yourself and downed a mini bottle of tequila." He laughed at her surprised look and he explained himself.

"I happened to be sitting in the dark corner of the library when you crashed my solo party. I hadn't even planned on going, but Ian convinced me that I should get to know all the family members since your parents were going to be my new clients. I slipped away for some peace and quiet, and then you drifted in like a breath of fresh air. I know I should have said something, but I was so tongue-tied. I couldn't even speak and then you were gone. I texted Ian back and told him I was

staying. The plan was to introduce myself to you and figure out how to court you.” He looked away from her for a moment before continuing on.

“But the intensity of my feelings for you scared the hell outta me. I found I couldn’t stop watching you, and I wanted to beat the shit out of any man foolish enough to step to you. Then you approached me, and I knew as soon as I touched your hand that everything had changed for me. I would never be the same. I spent the next twenty-four hours in a trance. You were all I could think about. I collected every piece of information I could find on you and would just stare at your pictures. The need to have you was so fierce and possessive, it scared even me.” He hung his head in shame as Noelle stared at him. She recalled what Vaughn Emerson said to her months ago.

“I went to his place and there was an open folder with a full dossier on you as well as pictures.”

Jack took a deep breath before continuing. “I felt like I couldn’t pursue you, because I didn’t trust that I wouldn’t consume you with my need and jealousy. So instead, I watched. Why do you think I came out to your house so much? Because I couldn’t get enough of your mother and her creepy Michelle Obama obsession?” Jack asked wryly and twisted his lips in self-disgust, raking a hand through his wild hair. “Like my obsession with you was any better. Hell, I’m listening to myself right now and getting creeped out.”

“I never knew you felt like that,” Noelle said softly, her eyes looking at him with wonder. “I thought you were this sophisticated guy who had women beating down his door, with no thought of your client’s gawky daughter. You never gave any indication that you were interested. If anything, you seemed disgusted when in my presence.”

The tortured look Jack gave her took her breath away. “You weren’t ready for any of this, Noelle. It would have overwhelmed you. Hell, my feelings for you sometimes still overwhelm me. I was scared that if we did pursue something, I would suffocate you and you’d leave me.” His hands clenched. “I wouldn’t have been able to bear that. You were so young and still had goals to accomplish. Those looks were for your family, for not realizing how special you are. You can’t imagine how many times I wanted to stand up for you and tell them to go fuck themselves,” Jack said with a sneer.

“I was there the night you asked your father for an advance on your inheritance. The way you left with your face full of angry determination let me know that perhaps you weren’t as young and naïve as I kept telling myself. So I reached out to Ira and you ladies did the rest.” He squeezed her hand gently, and she saw the pride in his eyes before they darkened with anger.

“Then the Remy thing happened, and I saw a way to get what I wanted while eliminating a problem. I’m sorry you had to suffer under the threat of blackmail. I would have stopped him, but apparently his knack for pissing people off finally caught up with him; though I did send a man over to clear his hard drive and get rid of any evidence of you in his life. I’m sorry, but I just have to do this. It’s been so long for me,” Jack finished as he bent down to give her a soft kiss on the lips. Noelle closed her eyes, reveling in the exquisite sensation and wanting to stay lost in the moment forever. Slowly she opened them to see him still close to her face.

“I was in complete hell after I left you. I hid in my house like a fucking coward and drank my sorrows away.” He rubbed the bruised side of his face with a grimace. “It took getting the sense knocked into me and you signing the divorce papers to make me realize that the best thing that ever happened to me was going to be gone. We were heading to the airport when we came upon the accident. God, to think I could have lost you

and the baby forever...” Jack pulled back to sit in the chair beside the hospital bed and put his hands in his face as he attempted to pull himself together.

Noelle watched this big, strong man of hers struggling for composure. For years she’d always known him as being unflappable. It pained her to see him like this because as much as she wanted to take him in her arms and comfort him, she couldn’t until they established some ground rules. Clearing his throat, Jack got up and went to the bathroom without looking at her. She heard water running and then five minutes later he came out. His red eyes were the only telltale sign that he’d shed some tears. He sat down in the chair next to the bed again, and although she was looking at the ceiling, she could feel his eyes on her. Finally, she spoke.

“I’ve been in love with you since the moment I laid eyes on you. You’ve lived in my dreams for the last four years of my life. Never did I imagine that I had any kind of chance with someone like you. I was just the stupid Kramer screw-up-”

“Don’t ever say that about yourself!” Jack said fiercely. “You are so much more than what you think. You’re smart, beautiful, and kindhearted. Who doesn’t adore you? Every time I turn around, you’ve got some guy fallin’ all over you. Whether it’s your classmate, a client, or that asshole Rothman; any man would recognize what a catch you are.”

“Then why didn’t you respect me enough to treat me like one?!” She shouted and winced at the pain it caused, before glaring at him. She tried to snatch her hand away but he gently

held fast. “I wanted to die when you left me. You led me to believe we could have something special and treated me like I was, but when the going got tough, Jack Sullivan got going. Do you even know what it felt like to be alone when I found out I was pregnant? You were the only person I wanted to tell and you weren’t available.” All the hurt and anger of the last few months was evident in her furious expression.

“I came down here ready to fight for us; to tell you about the baby and hope that you would be just as happy. I’ve fought my mother for you, and by the way, you’re going to have to tell me exactly why the hell she has it in for you so badly. I’ve also told my siblings in no uncertain terms that this is my life. Those that are skeptical and negative need not stay in it.” Noelle paused to take a deep breath and motioned for the cup of water.

Disbelief laced his voice as Jack helped her. “You took on your mother for me?”

Slowly Noelle drank most of the water and nodded her head vigorously. “I did because to me, you’re worth it. I’d take on a thousand Alicia’s for you,” she said seriously before taking a deep breath to negotiate the biggest deal of her life. *Please let this work*, she thought to herself. “I don’t want to be married.”

The silence in the room was deafening. Jack slowly straightened, eyes blazing with determination as he pulled his hand back and shoved both of them in his pants pockets. She knew he was resisting the urge to lean over her and be his extra persuasive self, which made her love him even more.

“Noelle, please don’t say that. Let me prove to you that I’m a better man than the jerk who ran out on you. I’m beggin’ you, darlin’. Don’t give up on us. Let me show you how good -”

Holding up her hand for silence, she interrupted him.” I don’t want to be married the way that we are. If we’re going to stay married, I have two stipulations and they are non-negotiable. The first one is you have to go to therapy. Until you deal with your parent’s issues and deaths, they will always be with us. *You are not and never will be your father,*” Noelle said firmly. “We can’t bring a child into our relationship with an issue as big and unresolved as this. I’ll go with you if you want, but I really think you could benefit from it, whether we stay together or not.”

Jack’s gaze on her was steady. “I already reached out to the shrink that used to counsel us as kids. My first session is actually in two weeks. Thank you for offering to attend with me, but I think I really need to go it alone for a while. What’s the other stipulation?”

“You have to date me. I want and deserve all the wining and dining that I should have gotten. I am never going to love anyone like I love you, Jackson Conall Sullivan, and maybe you *did* have my best interest at heart when you set things in motion, but every girl deserves romance dammit! I want-”

Her words were smothered under his devastating kiss, and she sighed into his soft lips as he whispered tenderly, “Done.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

One Year Anniversary...

The huge, rustic barn was packed to capacity for the wedding. The bridesmaids were encased in oyster silk dresses designed

to specifically compliment their body types, and the bouquets they held were a mix of pale pink peonies, white roses, and black dahlia's. The groomsmen were clad in black suits with white dress shirts and black cowboy boots.

Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman" filled the room and all eyes turned to the back of the church as the radiant bride appeared on her proud father's arm. She wore a strapless Vera Wang white satin frock with a V neck and A-line skirt made of tulle and satin. It was simple and classic, showing off her rich, brown skin and lush figure. The jeweled tiara atop her long, wild curls along with her necklace and earrings were created specifically for her by Vixen.

As they started the long walk down the petal-covered aisle, she only had eyes for the handsome groom, clad in his black, custom Tom Ford tux, and the beautiful baby girl, covered in frothy lace, in his arms. The look of love burning brightly in Jack's hazel eyes was enough to make Noelle's own fill with tears, and she had to restrain herself from running down the aisle to her man and their sweet baby girl.

Ruby Aileen Sullivan was three months old and the absolute apple of her parents' eye; as well as her grandparents, uncles, aunts... mailman... random sales clerk... pretty much anyone she came into contact with. Her complexion was the color of creamed coffee, and her big, round eyes were gray just like her mama's, with long, ink-black lashes. The fluffy, black curls covering her head were silky soft and striking against her big, rosy cheeks. She was named after her late Grandma Moira and Noelle's beloved Uncle Harvey, whose signature color had been Ruby Red.

Finally, Noelle reached her family and was only half-listening as her father announced he was giving her away. Before stepping aside, he pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Be happy.

We're all so proud of you, sweet pea," he said gruffly using his nickname for her, before turning to Jack and shaking his hand. "Look after my babies, Jackson."

"Yes, sir," Jack said solemnly as he shifted his beloved daughter to his other arm and returned his father-in-law's handshake. Noelle handed her bouquet which was a larger version of the bridesmaids to Sloane, her maid of honor before intertwining her hand in Jack's larger one. Noelle winked at Jack as she heard her mother sniffle loudly before it turned into full-on bawling from the front row.

After being notified of her accident, the entire Kramer family flew down and took up occupancy in the farmhouse, which drove Jack crazy. It was there that Noelle's parents apologized for their insensitive treatment of her. She was surprised to learn that Jack and her father had engaged in a serious conversation regarding his feelings towards her, and that Ronald Kramer had given their relationship his blessing. That was until he found out about the baby and Jack's knowledge of his wife's OxyContin addiction.

Alicia confessed to being so stressed creating the perfect image for herself and family that she just wanted to not feel anything at times. While shopping for a home in Florida, she'd begun to discreetly purchase the pills from a Florida senator's wife. After her third trip down to Florida in less than a month, Jack became concerned and arranged to have her followed. Although he'd been looking into facilities that could discreetly assist her, he admitted to blackmailing her to leave Noelle alone. After Noelle confessed to being pregnant by Jack, Alicia decided it was in her best interests to come clean with her husband.

Ronald Kramer was shocked and saddened that he'd been so clueless, that he hadn't even realized the one person he could

always count on hadn't been able to count on him. He was furious that Jack would attempt to blackmail her with the information, and the normally mild-mannered senator punched his much larger son-in-law in the jaw. Fists clenched, Jack informed Ronald that he deserved that, but there would not be a next time. Their relationships were a constant work in progress, but all parties were committed to making them work, especially for the baby's sake.

As they stood before Pastor Clemmons, he made them man and wife (only their close friends and family knew it was actually a vow renewal ceremony). *It was amazing how far they'd come in such a short time*, Noelle thought with a grateful heart. True to his word, Jack started his counseling sessions soon after they got back to New York. He also started an all-out dating blitz campaign, wooing Noelle with dinners, brunch dates, and flower deliveries to her home and office. He was there for every doctor's appointment and stocked her fridge and pantry with all her weird food cravings. As her belly grew, he gave her pedicures and treated her to sensual massages. They saw each other every day, and he was the perfect gentleman...much to Noelle's dismay and frustration.

No one told her that pregnancy wreaked havoc with your hormones and ramped up your sex drive. No matter how hot and heavy the petting became, Jack refused to sleep with her. Noelle yelled, begged, cajoled, threatened, and staged seductive scenarios, but he wouldn't budge. He definitely made sure she was always satisfied; but he was determined for her to see that his intentions were nothing less than honorable, and reluctantly left every night with a chaste kiss to her cheek and a serious case of blue balls.

When Noelle was seven months pregnant, they moved in together. Jack sold his loft in Manhattan and moved into Noelle's Brooklyn brownstone. They decorated the baby's room together, and soon the pale pink nursery with wild, floral

wallpaper was their favorite room as they anxiously awaited her arrival. Jack designed and created every single piece of wooden furniture in the room. As beautiful as each item was, none of them were her favorite, despite the time and love Jack put into them. Her favorite item was in a gold frame above the crib. It was Jack's Chinese lantern from the No Child Hungry fundraiser. Sent to Jack's office, Ian had given it to her the day they went to lunch with her mother. Worn and dirty, the words were still visible and legible in Jack's bold handwriting.

To Whoever Finds This,

Four years ago I met the most beautiful girl in the world and wished that if I was lucky enough, someday, somehow I'd be her husband. Fate has smiled upon me, because in three days my wish will be coming true, so it's time to pay it forward. My wish for you is that you find a love like this if you haven't already been blessed to meet him or her. I love her to the moon and back and want the whole world to know it, starting with you.

Jack C. Sullivan

New York City

Also included in the package was a lovely thank you note from an older, happily married farm couple in Michigan, wishing them a lifetime of happiness.

"I now pronounce you man and wife!" Heartfelt cheers and whoops of joy rang out as Jack and Noelle kissed sweetly and Ruby cooed excitedly. After they jumped the beautifully-handcrafted broom that was Guy's gift to them, pictures were taken and cocktail hour began outside under a million twinkling lights threaded among the trees.

While guests were feasting on delicious appetizers of shrimp and grits squares, braised short rib and bleu cheese crostini's, and chicken salad wonton cups from the bar outside in the cool spring air, Noelle and Avery's team removed all the pews from

the barn and transformed it into a beautiful reception area done in rustic elegance. It took ten people to transfer the enormous, beautiful seven-tiered, naked sponge cake that was decorated with fruit, nuts, and cream. After the transformation, everyone watched as Mr. & Mrs. Jack Sullivan danced their first dance to Whitney Houston's "I Believe in You & Me". Their eyes stayed locked together as they swayed in time to the music.

*I believe in you and me
I believe that we will be
In love eternally
As far as I can see
You will always be
The one for me
Oh yes you will*

"Happy, baby?" Jack asked huskily. All day long he could hardly keep his eyes off of her. She was just so damn pretty—and his. All his. He didn't know what he'd done right in this lifetime to be blessed with the two beautiful girls that he had, but he would do everything in his power to make sure he stayed in good favor for the rest of his days.

"Unbelievably so, Jack," Noelle said fervently as she smoothed short, black curls back from his forehead. Waking up next to him every morning was a dream come true and having Ruby in their lives was the icing on the cake.

"Me too. When do you think we should tell people that we're moving here permanently?" He asked as he twirled her around the dance floor. They'd been dividing their time between New York and Tennessee for the last five months as Jack's other business began to expand. Life in Brooklyn was good, but Whiskey Row just felt like home to them; somewhere that Ruby could grow up running around outside and having barbeques with family and friends.

*I believe in dreams again
I believe that love will never end
And like the river finds the sea
I was lost now I'm free
I believe in you and me*

*I will never leave your side
I will never hurt your pride
When all the chips are down
I will always be around
Just to be right there where you are my love
Oh I love you boy*

“Shhhh! My mother will hear you, and you know how much she loves to spend time with Ruby,” Noelle hissed as she frantically looked around for her mother. Thank God she appeared to be nowhere around. “I think she’s transferred her obsession from Mrs. O to our baby girl. Besides, I think you should tell them that you have other business investments that you need to take care of. You know, the ones you neglected to tell your wife that you’re part-owner of, remember?”

Noelle smiled sweetly as Jack tipped his head back, groaning up at the ceiling. “You’re never gonna let me live that down are you, darlin’? I’ve said I was sorry a hundred thousand times, and since then I’ve done all of the furniture for both of our homes like you asked-”

“I know, I know. I just like giving you shit once in a while. Besides, you more than made up for it with your romantic gesture,” she said, giggling as he leaned in close to nuzzle her neck.

“Oh you liked that one did you?” he teased, nipping her earlobe and sending tingles down her body. Jack felt her slight shiver and pulled her even tighter. *Man, he couldn't wait for their wedding night to start.* To mess up the glossy stuff

coating her sexy mouth and turn her tamed curls into the ‘just got ravished’ style he preferred.

“Best. Romantic. Gesture. Ever.” Noelle replied lovingly. One day during the redecorating process for the brownstone, Jack called her into the living room and said he wanted to show her something. Then he flipped the wooden coffee table over and pointed to something written on the inside of one of the legs. When she leaned down to look she had to read it ten times before she could fully comprehend it. Covering her mouth with both hands she raised wide eyes to meet his in disbelief. Solemnly he nodded his head opening his arms as she waddled over and threw herself at him. It was an inscription that Jack carved in when he was making the table for her. *J.C.S. + N.L.K* with a heart carved around them. Talks of renewing their vows again were back on the table that night.

“Uncle Ian looks pretty happy with himself, don’t you think?” Noelle asked as she caught her godfather’s eye and he blew her a kiss. *Happy was an understatement*, Jack thought. The slick bastard was radiating smugness as he mouthed the words ‘be happy’ to him. Jack nodded his head in acknowledgement. “I’ll tell you who doesn’t look that happy -Viv. Alexei is in hot pursuit of her tonight, and there’s nowhere for her to run,” Jack chuckled as he spied the big Russian looking at his godmother like she was his favorite snack of beluga caviar and blintzes. Vivienne was doing her best to avoid him by mingling with guests on the opposite side of the room. It was the cat and mouse game they had played all day.

Darby had found a way to fulfill his part of the bargain with Alexei. It cost him twenty thousand, and that was a deal considering the company he used was family. Darby had offered to pay for the wedding reception as long as they had it here in Whiskey Row; which let him off the hook with Alexei, because they all knew Vivienne would come for the wedding of one of her godsons regardless of where it was held. Yes, his

brother seemed genuinely happy with himself as he danced with Ruby in his arms-until his eyes would stray to Avery sitting with her fiancé Pierce. Jack wasn't worried. Judging from the way Avery's gaze drifted longingly to Darby while he played with her goddaughter, it was only a matter of time before his middle brother got what he wanted.

"Are you sure that we have to leave Ruby?" Jack asked changing the subject as he looked at his beautiful daughter. Every time he looked at her, he was in awe that he and Noelle had made such a perfect, little human being. He could still hear Noelle's shrieks of laughter when they brought baby girl home from the hospital and she caught him, Casey, and Darby cleaning their guns on the back porch. From the day he found out about Noelle's pregnancy, all of Jack's priorities shifted; he made sure that he worked from home more frequently. And whenever Noelle had to go in to the office, he brought Ruby with him, where she had her own space in his office. "It's not too late to change the flight and get a nanny to come-"

"Uh...no. While I can appreciate the love you have for our baby, this is our wedding night. You will be putting out tonight, Mr. Sullivan. Is that clear?" Noelle said saucily, planting a slow, sensual kiss on him that had his hands gripping her waist tightly before sliding down to cup her bottom and pull her closer to let her feel his erection pressing into her stomach.

Jack felt a surge of guilt as all thoughts of his baby girl fled his mind because he couldn't wait to get his wife alone. As much as he loved how beautiful Noelle looked in her wedding dress, he couldn't wait to see her out of it; to be buried between her silken thighs, inhaling every sound he could make her utter. They were going on a three- week tour of Europe for their honeymoon and, he planned to do wild, wicked things to her the entire trip. *I should probably warn her now that she will be*

coming back pregnant, he mused, staring down into her lovely, gray eyes.

“Crystal, Mrs. Sullivan,” Jack said tenderly against her lips amidst the catcalling.

“Mmmmm...I Love you, Mr. Sullivan,” Noelle whispered between kisses.

“I love you too, Mrs. Sullivan. Forever and always,” he whispered back.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The loud music from the reception covered the sound of their frantic steps up the stairs. Quickly he pulled her into the nearest room, kicking the door shut behind them. All night long he'd been unable to keep his eyes off of her. She was so beautiful in the satin dress that clung to her enticing figure, and he was finding it hard to contain his jealousy as she danced with several of the men in attendance.

When he could stand it no longer, he snatched her by the wrist; and now here they were, a little intoxicated, but by mutual agreement. He pushed her back against the door, hiking the skirt of her dress up before lifting her up, those long sleek legs encircling his waist. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and their lips met in hot frantic kisses, as she reached between them to hastily unbuckle his pants and pull him free of his boxers. He used one hand to slide her damp thong to the side, and her arousal was a heady scent that was better than any perfume he'd ever smelled.

Desire raged through them, and the need to come together was so great; they weren't

thinking about the consequences of their actions as he lined himself up with her wetness and thrust into her with a savage intensity. It had been too long. Hot silkiness encased his steel rod and the feeling was so, intense his legs almost gave out from beneath him. If there was a feeling better than this, He didn't want to know what it was. She moaned loudly against his lips at the invasion of his thick length, but quickly adjusted, eager to be fucked by him.

Pulling back slightly, he saw desire warring with defiance on her face. *Lord, she's beautiful*, he thought, a little awestruck to be here with her like this. She raised an eyebrow with a small smirk as if to say '*Is that all you got?*' Challenge accepted. He gripped her hips, flexing deeply inside of her, and she struggled to remain unaffected. Her body called his bluff as his cock was suddenly drenched in a burst of fresh juices. He groaned and pressed his forehead against hers, struggling not to come right then and there. His eyes drifted down to the swells of her breasts.

"Pull down your dress," he demanded raggedly; and she quickly obeyed, yanking the bodice of her gown down to reveal two, exquisite, chocolate mounds topped by enlarged, blackberry-colored nipples. His mouth went dry at the thought of her parading around bra-less all day. He lifted her higher and pulled one of the succulent tips into his mouth. Her head fell back against the door as she wantonly offered more of herself to him. He switched to the other bud, lavishing it with the same attention.

She tried to draw in a breath as bolts of electricity zigzagged up and down her spine at the feel of his firm lips and warm tongue paying homage to her womanly parts. He was driving

her crazy. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, she yanked him off her breasts to meet her fiery gaze. “Fuck. Me. Now.” She demanded imperiously.

Now he was the one smirking as he slowly withdrew the tip, then rammed back into her ever-increasing moistness. Once. Twice. She caught his rhythm quickly, and their dance for dominance was on. A fine sheen of perspiration coated her chest and sweat trickled down his neck as the flames of desire burned brightly out of control. Her fingers slid through his hair, and she pulled his lips back to hers, tightening her legs to lock him in while sliding up and down on his engorged cock. She whimpered as his deep strokes danced the thin line of pleasure and pain, but he didn't stop because he knew she could take it.

This woman was all fire and would die before backing down from a challenge. Over and over they came together against the door, making it rattle and shake beneath their fevered mating. Both were on the verge of an orgasm so powerful it would change them forever; and yet even in this very intense moment, their personalities refused to play nice with one another.

“You like this,” he stated arrogantly as he slowed his thrusts, circling his hips. Christ, he could feel his balls tightening, but he would not cum. Not until she admitted to him that she was as far gone as he. *He needed to hear her say it; to know he wasn't in this unstoppable madness by himself.* “Say you like the way I fuck you, and you can come. Don't try to lie to me either. Your pussy's so wet it could flood this room.”

She glared at him and worked her kegel muscles like crazy, enjoying the way his face

contorted as he struggled for control. “Like” was too mild a word for the way she felt about his loving, but she'd be

damned if she admitted it aloud. *He would break before her*, she vowed fiercely as she rode him like a jockey at the Kentucky Derby.

“You’re alright,” she taunted breathlessly. Clench. Up. Down. Clench. *Shiiiiit*. She was so close. “Say my name!” she dictated; and he groaned, slamming his mouth down on hers.

Neither would give in, but their sexual release was imminent. Suddenly, it was there, flinging them up at lightning speed to count every star in the sky. His muscles turned to stone, and he slapped at the door behind her as she shook uncontrollably in his arms. Finally, they broke apart, gasping for breath. “Casey,” she sighed raggedly as he thickly whispered, “Sidra.”

Avery felt guilty for seeking Darby out, but she was just as helplessly drawn to him as she was to the exquisite little girl he was singing softly to. She watched from the lounge doorway as Darby expertly changed Ruby’s diaper. His deep, melodic voice crooned Luke Bryan’s “Crash My Party” to the gurgling baby who kicked her chubby legs in the air.

*It don't matter what plans I got, I can break 'em.
Yeah, I can turn this thing around at the next red light
And I don't mind telling all the guys I can't meet 'em.*

*Hell, we can all go raise some hell on any other
night
what you're wearing.
falling down?
see it now.*

*Girl, I don't care, oh I just gotta see
Your hair, is it put up or
Oh I just have to*

*If you wanna call me, call me, call me you don't have to worry 'bout it baby.
You can wake me up in the dead of the night, wreck my plans, baby that's alright.
This is a drop everything kind of thing.*

*Swing on by I will pour you a drink.
The doors unlocked. I'll leave on the lights
Baby you can crash my party anytime.*

The sight of the two of them tugged at her heartstrings. The big, beautiful man caring for his tiny niece filled her with a craving for a family of her own. Avery sighed and saw Darby stiffen. She waited for him to turn around, but he didn't, even though he knew she was there. The silence stretched between them until she finally spoke. "You're so good with her."

Darby closed his eyes and prayed for the good Lord to give him strength. *Thou shall not covet another man's...*

Quietly he chuckled as he smoothed Ruby's dress back down. He tossed the dirty diaper into a nearby trashcan and applied sanitizer to his hands before picking her up and turning around. "No, she's good for us. Ain't that right, honey pie?" Darby crooned, bringing the baby close to his face. He was rewarded with the baby trying to bite his nose. "If you do that, how am I gonna be able to smell your delightful diapers, Ms. Ruby?"

Avery smiled, easily picturing him with his own brood of red-haired kids. Again silence stretched between them, and she wished she could trade places with Ruby who was now snuggled into her uncle's broad chest, drifting off to sleep contentedly.

"You clean up well," Avery said, gesturing to his tux. During the ceremony it was all she could do to keep from staring at him outright as he stood across from her. The only one to wear a black cowboy hat, Darby was breathtakingly handsome. He'd since ditched the hat to one of Noelle's nephews and his slicked back hairstyle made her think of old-school actors like Cary Grant.

"Awww, shucks. I was just trying to keep up with the prettiest girl in the room," he drawled, flashing a dazzling smile. She blushed, and Darby wondered for the hundredth time how Avery kept getting prettier and prettier every time he saw her. He could tell she'd lost a little bit of weight and wondered if it had to do with the bougie dickweed that was responsible for the ring on her finger. His eyes slid down to the gold band with a two carat diamond in the center. The ring was too plain

for someone as bright and vivacious as Avery. If she were his woman...his jaw clenched as he reminded himself that she wasn't— and it was best he didn't forget it.

“Are you excited about the pop-up shop this summer in the Hamptons?” Avery asked curiously. *Americana Traditions* was doing so well that they decided to open shop in East New York. Due to prior commitments, only Guy was available, so Darby decided to tag along. They would be residing there this summer, and since they hired *On a Whim* to plan all their events, Avery would be joining them as soon as her new office manager was trained.

Darby rolled his eyes and groaned. “Now you know schmoozing with uppity, rich folks ain't my thing. I'd much rather chill on a boat fly fishin' with cold beer. When are we supposed to be goin' house huntin'?”

Avery looked at him in surprise. “Oh, I thought you knew that we're all staying together at my parents' house in Southampton. It's close to the beach and shops. There's more than enough room for all of us. You can even bring someone if you like.”

She blushed furiously at his penetrating stare. Why did she say that? *Because you're supposedly so happy, and you want everyone you care about to be happy too, her conscience taunted.*

“I can bring someone, huh?” Darby asked casually. His stomach knotted with jealousy as a thought occurred to him. “Is that what you plan on doin'?”

Avery wanted the floor to open up and swallow her right about now. “No! I mean...no. Pierce is actually working on the west coast this summer, and we'll meet up if our schedules permit. We both understand that we have a lot on our plates right now. Understanding is really important in making a relationship work, don't you agree?”

Instead of responding, Darby glanced down at her hands. “So I guess congratulations are in order,” he said gesturing, towards her left hand and watching as she covered the ring by nervously clasping her hands tightly together.

“Oh, yeah thanks,” Avery said awkwardly. “Guess he finally saw the light.”

Darby didn't crack his usual easygoing smile; he just regarded her with some unfathomable emotion in his dark green eyes as he swayed side to side with Ruby sleeping on his shoulder. They smiled at each other as the baby exhaled a gentle snore.

“Why don't I take her?” Avery suggested coming forward with her arms outstretched. “You haven't eaten a thing all night.” At his raised eyebrow, she bit her bottom lip. Damn, now she'd been busted keeping tabs on him “Go get yourself something to eat, please. It's way too quiet between Casey and Sidra. I'm expecting fireworks at any minute, and I'll need your strength to keep them from ruining this perfect day,” she finished teasingly.

Darby raised his eyes to the ceiling above them. Earlier he'd seen Casey take Sidra by the hand and lead her up the stairs. He muttered, “You don't know the half of it.”

He was enveloped in Avery's flowery perfume as he placed Ruby in her arms. Darby smiled as she closed her eyes and held the baby, inhaling her special baby scent with a dreamy smile lighting up her gorgeous face. *She's a natural*, he thought. Darby could easily see her with a swollen belly, radiating a pregnancy glow. A sense of peace filled the room as they silently enjoyed one another's company.

Avery's biological clock was ticking so loudly; she was surprised Darby couldn't hear it. *This was heaven on earth: spending time with her precious goddaughter and Darby*, Avery thought. Her eyes flew open, and she took a step back from him. *O.M.G. What the hell was wrong with her???* Her fiancé was right down the hall and could easily have come looking for her. *It was time to go*, she thought with great reluctance. But she couldn't just yet. Although nothing had ever transpired between them, she felt like she owed Darby some sort of explanation.

His calls were the only thing that kept Avery sane during the challenging time of running the business solo and watching over Noelle. He was a breath of fresh air in comparison to

Pierce, who called her constantly, whining about when she was coming home or that he couldn't find something. With Darby it was so different. They'd talked about current events, favorite shows, and their bucket lists. He alternated between laughing with her and cursing his brother on Noelle's behalf as Avery aided her through that dark period.

"Darby, I-" she started to speak, but stopped when he slowly shook his head, also aware that the spell was broken. For a moment he'd allowed himself to believe that she was his girl, and Ruby was their baby. *Stupid, stupid, stupid him!* The good girls weren't for him and never would be. Would he never learn?

"You don't owe me any explanations. Just be happy, Ms. Avery," he said seriously. "Not everyone gets to be."

She watched him walk towards the door and had to swallow the rising protest in her throat. He paused in the doorway without turning around.

"That song I was singing?" Darby asked his hands in his pockets. He wouldn't, or couldn't, look back because he knew without a doubt that if he did, he would kiss her like he'd dreamed of doing since the first time he laid eyes on her.

"Yes, I'm familiar with it," Avery said softly as she held Ruby tightly to stop herself from running after him. The baby made a slight whimper and Avery kissed her curls, murmuring soothing sounds to her as she waited for Darby to speak.

"Anytime, Ms. Avery. Anytime," he said gently before walking out and leaving her craving more of him.

Epilogue

Vivienne Romankov sipped her champagne and watched as her youngest godson slipped away with Sidra. *Well I'll be damned*, she thought in amusement. It was about damn time that boy loosened up and had some fun. Ms. Thang would

certainly keep him on his toes. She turned away, careful to keep her gaze averted from across the room where she could feel the heat emanating from the laser-like stare HE had trained on her.

Desire unfurled slowly in her like a dormant genie finally being awakened; proving that after all these years, she still wasn't immune to his big, virile, Russian ass and probably never would be, damn him. A familiar tinkling laugh caught her attention, and she glanced to the right to see her daughter who'd avoided her as successfully as she had Alexei all night, laughing with Holt before going to join all the single women on the floor dying to catch the bride's bouquet.

Vivienne's grip on her glass tightened, recognizing the attraction between the two of them. The last thing she wanted was for her baby to be trapped in this godforsaken town with its deep secrets and evil residents. The laugh came again, and she flinched when Kat caught the bouquet. *No, no, no*, she thought frantically while everyone cheered. Her daughter brought it up to her face for a sniff, batting her eyelashes at Holt who looked like he wanted to ravish her on the spot. Alarmed, Vivienne turned around instinctively seeking Alexei's gaze to see what he thought of the whole thing, but he was no longer there.

Although disappointed, she recognized it for what it was— a sign for her to get the hell up out of Dodge while she still could. The cat and mouse game he'd played all day with her had strained her nerves to the breaking point; but she'd be damned if she let anyone see her sweat. Swiftly she made her way towards the exit.

“Coast finally cleared eh?” Ian asked, eyes filled with mirth and nibbling on a canapé as he blocked her way. He looked quite dashing in his navy blue suit, his long, silver hair in his signature man bun atop his head. She stopped and gave him a

look known to make grown men cry, but he appeared unperturbed, shrugging his shoulders and offering her a nibble.

“Bite me, Gandalf,” Viv said affectionately, leaning in to kiss his offered cheek. “Brunch this Sunday at the usual spot?”

“But of course, my dear,” he, said squeezing her waist and looking over her shoulder. Vivienne turned to follow his warm gaze that was focused on Noelle holding Ruby. Jack had his arms wrapped around both of them. They were surrounded by well-wishers laughing and smiling. For the mother and son dance, he’d spun her around the dance floor to Ben E. King’s “Stand By Me”, and Noelle danced with her father and then Ian to The Temptations “My Girl” and Coldplay’s “Yellow”. Vivienne’s heart swelled with love, so happy for her boy and his family. It almost put her in a forgiving mood. Almost.

“You know that our girl is dancing up in heaven, feeling all the love and joy down here, right?” she asked in a choked-up voice, blinking back tears.

Ian cleared his own throat and squeezed her harder, wanting to say more, but feared becoming emotional as well. Instead he said noncommittally, “Better hurry up, Cinderella. Midnight will be upon you soon.”

Vivienne swatted his arm with her beaded clutch and continued on towards the exit, turning one last time to look at her baby girl dancing in the big Swede’s arms. Oh how she wanted to snatch her away and never let her go! With a sigh, she continued on her way. Tomorrow she would strategize; tonight was for conceding cowardice and fleeing.

As she exited the building and hurried down the steps to her black limo, again there was the brief sense of disappointment that she would not be seeing Alexei. *It really was for the best*, she told herself resolutely, smiling at the driver holding the door open for her.

“Thanks. I need to get to the airport, ASAP,” Vivienne told him crisply and slid into the car. The faster she could put miles between them the better. She stiffened in awareness,

registering that she was not alone as the scent of expensive cigars, vetiver, citrus, and something woodsy assailed her senses. Seated across from her, oozing more masculinity and sex appeal than any middle-aged man had a right to, was her insanely handsome, estranged husband; the man that she'd successfully managed to avoid for the last eighteen years.

Alexei Romankov leaned forward in his seat. Triumph gleamed in his gorgeous, blue eyes as he grinned at her, displaying his brilliant, white teeth which were a stark contrast to his deeply tanned skin. The black waves falling across his forehead were streaked lightly with silver as was his neatly-shaped beard. *He was too damn good-looking for his own good and hers*, she thought resentfully, feeling her pulse quickening as she allowed herself the pleasure of drinking up the site of him. His tux fit his big body to perfection, and he looked exactly like what he was, a rich as Midas bastard that expected everyone to jump and do his bidding.

“What’s your hurry, Vivi?” he asked in that deep accented baritone that still made her knees weak and panties wet. *Damn, damn, damn! She was in big trouble.*

THE END

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