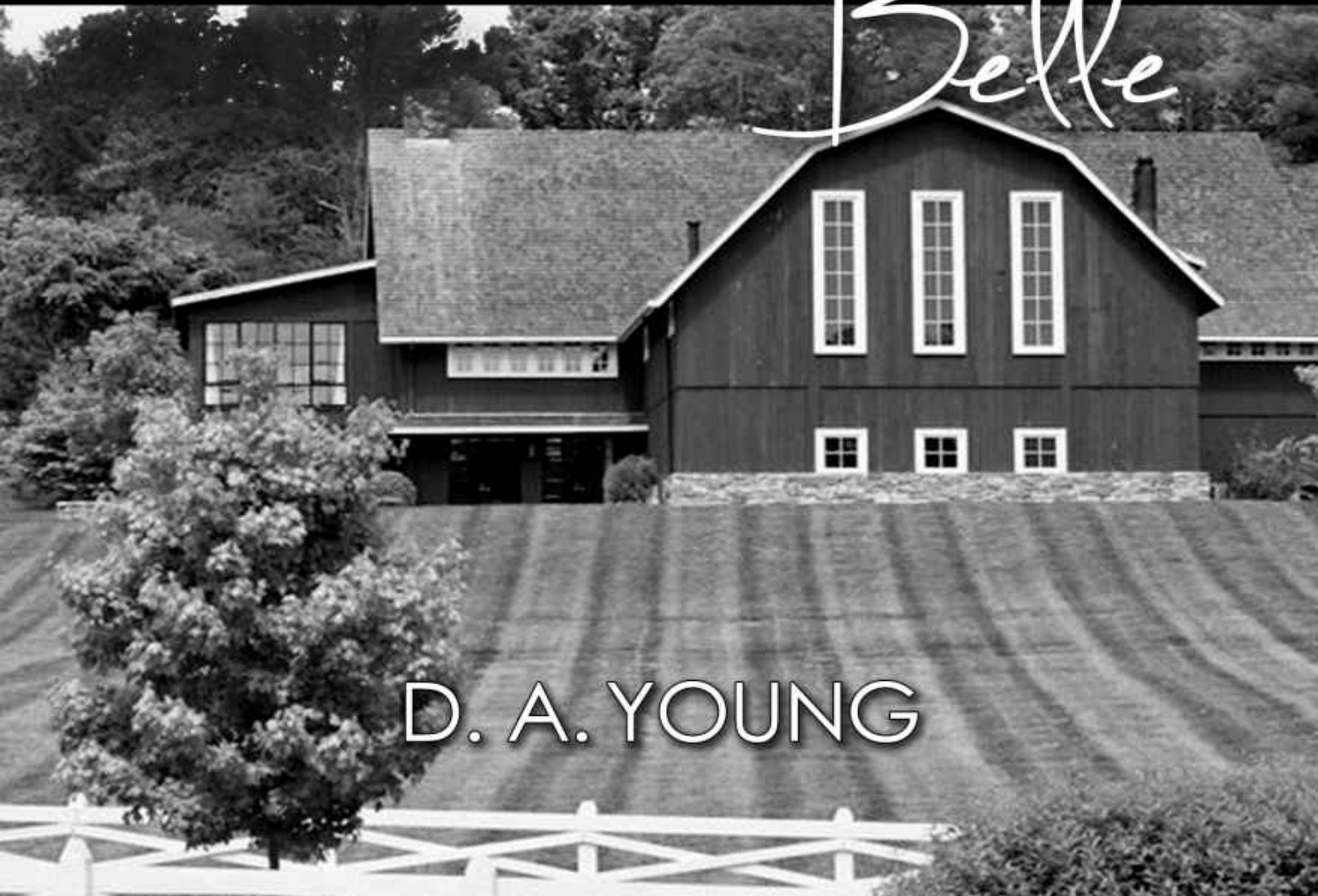




the Farmer & the Belle
Baymoor Series



D. A. YOUNG

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THE FARMER & THE BELLE

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 facetiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales or events is entirely coincidental.

THE FARMER & THE BELLE PLAYLIST

BODY AND SOUL - ANITA BAKER

FOREVER MINE – ANDRA DAY

WERK – RIHANNA

MY LOVE – JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE

LOVE IS ALL WE NEED – MARY J. BLIGE

PILLOW TALK – ZAYN

DIAMONDS – RIHANNA

SUPERSTAR – FLOETRY FT. COMMON

NEON LIGHTS – NATASHA BEDINGFIELD

GOLDEN – JILL SCOTT

DO YOU FEEL ME – ANTHONY HAMILTON

YOU'RE MY LADY – D'ANGELO

MS. INDEPENDENT – NE-YO

CAN'T GET ENOUGH – TAMIA

KNOCK YOU DOWN – KERI HILSON

I'M A STAR – CHRISSETTE MICHELE

DANCE TONIGHT – LUCY PEARL

I MISS YOU (Come Back Home) – MONIFAH

KING OF WISHFUL THINKING – GO WEST

ASK OF YOU – RAPHAEL SAADIQ

THE MAN – ALOE BLACC

LIVE YOUR LIFE – T.I. FT. RIHANNA

I WOULD DIE FOR YOU – PRINCE

SWEET THANG – CHAKA KHAN

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Thank you very much for taking the time to read my work! I'm a firm believer in God, doing my best, love, good times, family, friends, romance, HAWT (no, that's not a typo) sex, laughter and sentence enhancers. All of which I like to share in my writing. If you found that declaration to be offensive, you should probably pass

on my books. If you didn't, then enjoy and happy reading!

I'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions. Please email me at day_one2015@outlook.com

To Patrice Harrison and Karen Kunz (or my Glam Squad as I like to think of you ladies ☺) there are no words to truly express how incredibly thankful I am for all that you do for me. Thank you very much for sharing your wonderful talents, time and patience with me.

To my family and friends, thank you so much for all of your love, support and encouragement! For always being there for me and supporting my vision. I'm forever indebted and my love for you has no limits.

Sincerely,

D. A. Young

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

Prologue

1994

Las Vegas, Nevada

The mood inside the interview room of Child Protective Services was a somber one. The table and three chairs were occupied by two girls and a boy, or the Carlton siblings, as authorities had referred to them. The oldest girl Eliza had just turned eighteen and was doing her best to keep it together for her sixteen-year-old brother Graham and their eight-year-old sister Georgina. She watched with quiet despair as Graham gently tried to coax Georgina into talking, but to no avail. The younger girl hadn't uttered so much as a peep in the last thirty-six hours, and it was all Eliza's fault for deviating from the carefully laid plans she'd concocted.

She wasn't even aware that she was crying until she felt the salty sting from her tears slip into the cut on her left cheek. A male paramedic had tried to apply antiseptic to her wound, but she'd adamantly refused treatment until his female co-worker gently offered to do it instead. Discreetly Eliza tried to wipe her tears, but Georgina stopped coloring to stare at her with those big, solemn, brown eyes that had already seen far too much for her young years.

"I'm so sorry," Eliza said hoarsely, apologizing to her siblings, though her eyes remained locked on Georgie. She reached across the table and grabbed Graham's large hand and squeezed it tightly. "It's my fault that this happened-"

"No! You have nothing to be sorry for!" Graham interrupted her with a fierce look. "If anybody is to blame here, it's me. I'M the one who couldn't control his temper!" He gave a

derisive chuckle before continuing. "But I tell you what...I don't feel sorry in the least bit about doing it. Just the shit storm it created."

This time, it was Eliza's turn to defend. "We ALL know who's really at fault here. For now, let's just focus on making the situation better for all of us, because we sure as hell can't keep going like this." She took a deep breath, bracing herself for what she had to say next. "I called Uncle Nate, and he's on his way here to get you guys. The two of you will be going back to live with him and Aunt Valerie in Baymoor."

"What?!" Graham jerked his hand out of hers and stood up so fast, his chair toppled back underneath his force. At only sixteen, he was already an intimidating sight, with his brawny muscles and six foot- two-inch height. One look at him and trouble turned tail to run the other way. Up until thirty-six hours ago, he'd never had to utter a word or demonstrate his true strength. Then like Bruce Banner, he had shown them all what he could do and the end result had not been pretty. He paced, wall to wall, in the small room with frustration. "Why would you call him??? We have this under control, Eliza. Your boss will help us. He's helped us this far; we're almost home free."

But Eliza was already shaking her head as she too stood up because she was incredibly fatigued by their situation and the hopelessness of it all. "Calling Uncle Nate is what I should have done a long time ago, instead of trying to figure this out by myself. No judge is going to award two kids to a high school dropout. Look at me! Once it comes out that I've been working illegally for the last two years, we'd be done for. Yes, I have saved enough money for us to live cheaply until you turn eighteen and can help, but what about Georgie?" Eliza paused to take a deep breath, before continuing in a shaky voice, "She needs stability and lots of TLC. They can provide

that for her, in ways that we can't. Even though you're too stubborn to admit it, you need it too, Graham."

Facing the wall to hide his tears, Graham struggled to stay calm. He knew she was right, but they were all that he had left. He swiped away his tears with his forearm before turning to look at his sisters. Eliza, his beautiful older sister, who deliberately tried to downplay her looks, hoping to fade into the background and not draw attention to herself. Unfortunately, for her, that would never happen. She was too elegant and regal to NOT stand out, a trait that drove their mother Ingrid crazy. Then there was Georgina the baby, the child their mother loved beyond measure if she was having a good day without drugs or despised with fury and vitriol if on drugs. Sadly for Georgie, Ingrid's bad days far outnumbered her good ones.

Only Graham and Eliza remembered the good times with Ingrid before she started down the path of destruction and became a complete stranger to them. But not Georgie; no, she'd never known a parent's loving care, although her siblings tried their hardest to take care of her. Every dime Eliza made went into making sure they had food, clothes, and a roof over their heads. Ingrid did nothing to help. Her money from the state and her extracurricular bedroom activities supported her drug habit and whatever man was taking advantage of her. He walked over to Georgie, who was watching his every move, and bent down on one knee to make them eye level.

"Hey, Little Bit. How you holding up?" Graham asked gently. From his peripheral, he saw Eliza come forward to see their sister's response.

She gave him a slight nod but remained silent, and his heart broke all over again. Georgie never reacted; she just always

was because her feelings depended on Ingrid's mercurial moods. Graham watched her rub her right index finger and thumb together, recognizing it as her sign of anxiousness. Poor kid, she deserved so much better than the hand life had dealt her so far. They all did. Graham dropped his shoulders in defeat, knowing that his older sister was right.

But how was he supposed to make sure that Eliza would be okay so far away from them? What if something else happened and he wasn't there to protect her? He turned his head to look at her now leaning sideways against the wall watching them with her thin arms crossed protectively in front of her. Her long, dark hair was pulled back in a tangled ponytail and she had dark circles under her eyes. An angry red cut on her left cheek and her bruised swollen mouth told the story of the ordeal she'd endured, making him livid all over again. In her big, tear-filled eyes, he saw worry and love, making him want to insist she come with them. But he couldn't, because he saw something else. It was her silent plea for him to go along with her plan and not make waves, to release her from this nightmare so they all had a chance of making it out of the hell Ingrid Carlton had dragged them into.

How could he deny her after all she'd sacrificed? Eliza deserved to have a happy life without them as a responsibility. The heavy burden of a rebellious teenager and an introverted kid should have never been put on her frail shoulders in the first place. Graham felt a slight touch on his clenched fist. He looked back at Georgie who was still watching him, patiently waiting. She glanced at Eliza worriedly and then back at him. Slowly she nodded her head in agreement and then stood up and hugged him tightly. Fresh tears clouded his vision as he squeezed her back. Then she pulled away and walked over to Eliza, wrapping her arms tight around her waist, causing their older sister to break out in heart-wrenching sobs as she pulled Georgie close to her with one arm. With the other, she motioned for Graham to join them, which he did, wrapping his large arms around them.

They were so traumatized and emotionally overloaded that they didn't hear the door quietly open. The tall man standing in the doorway watched them, silent as he was too overcome by emotions to speak. The siblings' love for each other was heartbreaking and evident in the way the oldest girl clutched her brother and sister desperately while the big man-child's strong arms encircled them protectively. The youngest held tightly to her older siblings that were her anchors, for fear of drifting away. Shame engulfed him, making him sick to his stomach. He had failed them. He should have done MORE. Maybe flown out to visit or sent for them, instead of just sending money and calling. Instead, he'd forgotten who he was dealing with and chose to believe the lies that were told to him. And because he did, the unthinkable had occurred.

It took a moment, but finally, the man was able to speak. Humbly he greeted them; "Hello, children. I don't suppose you have room for one more?"

Chapter One

Georgina Carlton eyed the big white sign with the flashing blue bulbs surrounding it, atop the single-story, long, red bricked building. After she checked in at the Roosevelt Hotel down the street, the front desk clerk recommended Mo's Bar & Blues when she asked where in the area she could get a drink and relax. Judging from the live band jamming inside, she figured it was as good a place as any to let loose.

It had been one helluva day, and Georgina needed to de-stress in the worst way.

She'd had three meetings with high-end department stores to pitch her lingerie company *Feminine Intuition*. The buyers and financiers had grilled her so thoroughly regarding her product and financing, that she expected them to perform a cavity search on her as well. Then her flight from Las Vegas to Baltimore had been delayed, and Georgina had been forced to sit next to a mother with a colicky baby. While she was completely sympathetic to the tired woman who looked like she hadn't slept in ten years, her head was pounding from the poor red-faced, screaming baby who was obviously so uncomfortable.

She walked into the dark, smoky atmosphere and headed straight for the bar at the back. Pulling up a stool, she smiled politely at the bald, heavily tattooed bartender who greeted her. "Hey there, sugar. Welcome to Mo's. What'll it be?"

"Whiskey sprite lime cocktail, thank you. Could you start me a tab please?" As he turned to make her drink, she surveyed her surroundings. A band was playing loud New Orleans style jazz

music and the dance floor was packed. Everyone looked to be having a good time.

Georgina swayed to the music, careful not to make eye contact with several male patrons attempting to catch her eye. Tonight was all about chilling out before she headed to her destination tomorrow. She still couldn't believe that she was on her way back. It seemed like just yesterday that she was driving away and swearing never to return.

"Here you go, doll," the heavily tattooed bartender said an hour later, after placing a third drink in front of Georgina, as she finished the last of her crab pretzels. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten about the big soft pretzels with the gooey cheesy crab dip on top. She grinned, feeling loose and very relaxed after the delicious food and drinks. "Thanks. I think that's it for me. What do I owe you?"

"Your tab's already been taken care of," he grinned, as he slid his eyes to the right end of the bar, before winking at her and walking away to take another order.

Georgina turned to look down the bar and found herself staring into a pair of deep-set, dark eyes that belonged to one of the sexiest men she'd ever seen. *Oh, my.* From underneath his camel-colored Stetson, the hard planes of his face were softened by his extremely attractive features. Those dark gorgeous, sleepy-looking bedroom eyes were framed by thick, straight black eyebrows. He had a strong, straight nose and a pair of full, supple lips. He had high cheekbones and a chiseled jaw covered with a neatly-trimmed beard that ended in a point just beneath his chin, further enhancing his rugged sexiness. All of this temptation was dipped in a gorgeous, sienna package. In Georgina's polished little world, men just didn't look like him: so raw, sexy, and utterly masculine. *How very intriguing...*

He tipped his hat to her before taking a swig of his beer, never looking away from her. As he raised his arm, Georgina could see a tribal tattoo circling a bulging bicep underneath his white V-neck tee shirt. The snowy white of the shirt contrasted perfectly with his smooth, dark complexion. She raised her glass and smiled at him, mouthing the words “thank you”.

He stood up and sauntered her way. Georgina could see he was tall, standing at least six feet-four inches and well-muscled with broad shoulders. His gait was slow and confident, and the dark denim of his jeans hung low on his hips as they clung to his solid thighs. *Mmmmm*. Normally she wouldn't even bother with a second glance, but Georgina had to admit that she liked what she was seeing way too much to stop staring. Almost every woman in the room, and even a few men stopped what they were doing to take him in; his swag was that official. She could tell he was confident in his abilities as he appraised her. His smooth, full lips quirked into a little smile, causing her heart to gallop a little faster. *Simmer down, girl.*

Georgina's skin felt like it was on fire under this seductive stranger's intense gaze. She watched as he looked her up and down and found herself hoping he liked what he saw as much as she did. Up close, his beard looked soft and inviting. She longed to rub her cheek against it and trail kisses along his jaw. *Whoa. Where did that come from???*

Georgina was surprised by her reaction to him. Every move and decision in her life was orchestrated after very careful consideration on her part. She didn't do impulsive or flighty. EVER. The three sexual partners she'd allowed herself were safe, harmless men that hadn't been all that memorable. Unlike her mother, she'd picked boring yet stable lovers who wouldn't turn her neatly organized world upside down and then allow it to come crashing down around her.

This man hadn't even spoken to her yet and she had questions. *Did he have a happy trail that lead to his package? How big was he? Could he go the distance and fill her needs? What did he taste like? Would he be gentle and slow? Rough or aggressive?* All these questions were swimming in her head, and Georgina had the feeling that the answer to all of them was that he would not disappoint on any level. Suddenly he was standing next to her, and the big room seemed way too small and lacking in oxygen.

"May I?" he asked in a low, deep, sexy timbre, gesturing to the empty seat next to her. Good. Lord. His voice alone could bring her to the big "O".

"Please do," Georgina replied huskily. Taking a large swallow, she finished the last of her drink and smiled at him. "Thank you for the drinks and food; it was very kind of you." She held out her hand to him, "I'm...Gina."

It surprised the hell out of her, the instant she said it, and Georgina knew she was contemplating sleeping with him. *Like really badly.* Nobody referred to her as Gina. Friends and family called her Georgie. Everyone else, Georgina.

"Gina, it was my pleasure. I'm Jay." He held out his hand to her and she took it, immediately engulfed in the heat from his large callused hand. Firm grip and unwavering stare. The lethal combination caused zigzags of lust to travel through her, making her nipples harden, and woman parts that had long dried up to moisten. Georgina wanted to hold on forever, but reluctantly she gave him back his hand.

As Jay took the seat next to her, his large denim-covered thigh brushed against hers, and Georgina felt her panties dampen even more. Goodness, she was in a world of trouble if two touches in made her hornier than she'd ever been in her entire life.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in here before. I would definitely have remembered you," Jay said, giving a warm, slow smile that caused his bedroom eyes to twinkle sexily. Georgina watched his lips move and wondered what they would feel like on her body. How that beard would feel between her thighs...?

"Actually, I'm just passing through. I take it you're local?" she asked casually. *Better to have him talk than divulge any information about herself*, she thought, watching him studying her face carefully

"I work at a farm in the area. Every now and then I come in to relax. The food is excellent. What do you think about the band?" Jay leaned in closer and Georgina found it really hard to concentrate on what he was saying. He smelled heavenly, a mix of something woody and citrus spice. His eyes seemed to be even darker than before and his lips were a hair's breadth away. Her concentration was shot to hell. All she wanted to do was lick that full bottom lip and tug on it with her teeth. What harm could it do? It wasn't like they would ever see each other again, right? She licked her lips before replying in what she hoped was a seductive voice. "I like what I'm seeing so far."

Jay's eyes clouded with lust as he looked at her glistening lips. Fuck it. Georgina leaned in closer and slowly licked his full bottom lip. *Yummm*. He tasted like spearmint, beer, and endless possibilities. His fingers clenched his beer bottle tightly and he swallowed hard, eyes going impossibly black. Her own eyes were drawn to the smooth column of his throat,

and she wondered if his skin would taste as delicious as his mouth.

In the background, the band stopped playing, and Ne-Yo's "Miss Independent" came through the sound system. Abruptly he pulled back from her and set his bottle on the bar. Standing up, Jay grabbed her hand and pulled her flush against his hard, muscled frame. His long, heavy erection pressed into her abdomen, and Georgie bit her own lip to suppress a moan. So it wasn't just her. *Good*. Leaning down, he nipped the shell of her ear and the fleeting touch of his tongue caused her to break out in goose bumps and cling tightly to his muscular arms.

"Dance with me," he whispered and without waiting for an answer, Jay led her to the crowded dance floor.

He found a space in a dark corner and pulled her close. For a big man, Farmer Jay moved surprisingly well. Rhythm oozed from his body as he grabbed her curvy hips and pressed her closer, erection straining against his jeans. Georgina gave him a wicked grin before grabbing his cowboy hat and placing it atop her head. Without the hat, she saw that his thick hair was cropped, black, and very curly. He gave her a devastatingly sexy smile, displaying even, straight, white teeth and tried to pull her closer; but she had other plans.

Georgina whirled around, gave him her back and really let go, enjoying the music and company. She made sure that with every shimmy and shake, she brushed her behind against his thick hardness, increasing the wetness between her thighs. She heard Jay swear softly before emitting a groan and pulling her

even closer. Sweat made her short hair cling to her scalp as she worked it Beyoncé style.

A fine sheen appeared on her neck, and Georgina fanned herself and unbuttoned her suit jacket to cool off. Lord, it felt good to let loose, especially with an extremely sexy stranger who could keep up. Jay's heat surrounded her, and she could feel his cool breath on her neck. Georgina wished she were bold enough to slide his big hands at her waist up and have him caress her breasts.

Suddenly the music changed to Rihanna's "Work", and Georgie found herself spinning around into Jay's strong embrace. Looking up into those smoldering eyes, she prayed that she didn't look a sweaty mess. Apparently not, because he was staring at her with a yearning that her body was responding to. She was burning up with need for him and unable to resist it any longer. Her swollen nipples were sensitive as she brushed against his hard chest, and the moisture pooling between her legs had soaked through her panties. She slid her hands from his arms up to encircle his neck, trying to get closer as she inhaled his unique scent. He placed a hand at her nape and gently tilted her head back. From beneath his Stetson, Georgina watched him lower his face close to hers, bringing his lips dangerously close to hers.

"I think it's time for us to get out of here. What do you say?" Jay temptingly suggested. But he didn't give her time to answer as firm lips touched hers, the soft hair of his beard brushing against her flesh, adding another level of hotness to her body that had her past ready to combust. His tongue slid along the seam of her full lips coaxingly, and she

opened up to allow him access. Then Jay's tongue was sliding in and meshing with hers in the most sensual kiss Georgina

had ever received. His addicting flavor of manliness made her want to inhale him as he masterfully explored her mouth.

Closing her eyes, she pulled him closer and delved deeper into the kiss, giving as good as she got, her fingers sinking into his damp curls. Jay moved his hands from her waist to caress her full bottom, pulling her up onto her tippy toes so that her center was introduced to his erection.

Georgina moaned into his mouth and ground herself harder against him, one leg curling around his muscular calf. It had been way too long since she'd had sex, and even then, it had been barely memorable. Jay's actions seemed like his game would be Grade A. Finally, they came up for air. Jay did not remove his hands from her behind as he gave her a questioning look, clearly waiting for an answer. Instinctively Georgina knew he wouldn't do anything she didn't want him to or hurt her. She took a deep breath and made her decision. It was time to take that walk on the wild side that her good friend Renee was always urging her to do. Besides, it wasn't like they would ever see each other again, right?

Drawing his head back down to hers, she whispered her answer against his lips. "Let's get out of here, Farmer Jay."

Chapter Two

It was a beautiful, early spring morning in the Maryland countryside. The weather was perfection with a bright, blue, cloudless sky and a gentle breeze. Lush, green grass covered

the ground and flowers were starting to bloom. Mother Nature was evolving once again and creatures big and small were out to celebrate the changes. As usual, something as glorious as a new season was wasted on the workaholic driver of the navy blue Audi RS7 as she whizzed down the two-lane road, speaking hurriedly into her Bluetooth.

“How many pieces of the Nina corset have we sold since its launch three weeks ago?” Georgina asked. Before her assistant could answer she continued on, “Reach out to the manager of that new burlesque group at Caesar’s Forum. Please convey to him that we need his answer as to whether they will be utilizing our new collection or not. Let them know time is of the essence and if they delay their response, they’ll only be shooting themselves in the foot by pushing back their order by approximately six weeks.”

Georgina really hoped the Caesar’s deal would happen. She’d deliberately low-balled her bid to get the job; but her product was solid, so she had no doubt after she reeled them in, they would increase their order. After working in a dance troupe for the last decade, she knew the ins and outs of what was required to make a costume comfortable, flexible and visually appealing. She was confident *Feminine Intuition* could meet the burlesque group’s needs. Currently, her products were being sold through her online boutique, but she hoped to expand into department stores and a showroom of her own.

Selling her collection online suited Georgina perfectly at the moment. She didn’t have to rent a space or pay utilities, which would be added expenses on top of distributing paychecks. As it was, her company consisted of eight people, including her assistant Renee and six seamstresses. Currently, they worked out of the first floor of Georgina’s two-story home. A client the size of the burlesque group would definitely get the money flowing and enable them to get a bigger space.

“Ok, will do,” Renee Colton, who was not only Georgina’s assistant but a good friend replied readily. “Also, I heard back from my boy Kyle at Las Vegas Luxe magazine. As usual, you were right. He says that his editor *is* interested in doing a complimentary full page article on you, as long as you model some of the new collection. How does that sound?”

Georgina’s full lips curved up into a victorious grin. “It sounds like a plan, but only if it takes place at Red Rock Canyon, *and* I get two male models of my choice to pose with me. Tell Kyle that his boss has to pay their fees.”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone, before Renee spoke delicately, “Ummm, boss lady? You do realize that Mr. Capex is the one doing *us* a favor, right?”

“Yes, Renee, I’m very aware of what Kyle said to you. But what you guys don’t know is I’ve been assisting Daniel Capex’s mistresses with their intimate pieces since I was a twenty-year-old sales girl at Victoria’s Secret. After I left retail and school, he continued to seek my assistance and I became a personal shopper of sorts for these women. Now that I’m no longer dancing and have started my own company, I keep them laced in *Feminine Intuition* while supplying Daniel’s wife with our more conservative intimate apparel,” Georgina responded. At her assistant’s outraged gasp, she rolled her eyes. “Don’t feel bad for her, Renee. She privately orders her stash of *Feminine Intuition* for her pool boy and gardener through me. So now I figure I’m due, and it is time for them to pay up.”

“Damn, I want to be like you when I grow up, boss,” Renee’s admiring voice filled her ear. There was a slight pause before she added, “Except the part about being a thirty-year-old workaholic spinster with a non-existent social life and not even a damn cockroach to keep her company.”

Georgina sucked her teeth hard at her assistant's cackle. "You are seriously working overtime doing the running man, tap dancing *and* cabbage patching on my *last* nerve, Renee. Seriously, there are more important things in life than having a relationship. Being in one doesn't complete me, the same way *not* being in one doesn't break me. I don't want, nor do I have time for a relationship, let alone this vacation I'm taking."

"Ummmm... *WOW*. G, you do realize that you are on your way to see your uncle who just had a heart attack, don't you? I would hardly call the time you *reluctantly* took off a vacation," Renee reminded her sarcastically.

Even though her assistant couldn't see her face, Georgina had the good grace to be mortified before resolutely continuing on. "Well...yes, but that's neither here nor there. The point is, I took the time, and as soon as Uncle Nate is well, I'll be back home behind my desk where I'm supposed to be. There is no time to be sidetracked by things like relationships and taking time to smell the flowers," Georgina stated firmly.

"In order for this business to grow the way I know it can, it will need all of my attention. We've got great product, design, and hard workers. I just wish I had more capital to do everything I *really* want to do. Did you know Daniel Capex is offering to buy the business and let me have carte blanche in running it? *Carte. Blanche*. Can you imagine having access to that kind of money?! Buying trips to the Orient and Paris where I could bring more employees instead of it being just Lorena and myself! We could extend the trips to scour every market and vendor, leaving no button or fabric unexamined! It's a damn enticing offer, but I don't want to answer to anyone but myself."

“Look, there’s nothing wrong with having goals, but your aversion to enjoying life is particularly disturbing,” Renee reprimanded gently. “You need to find that balance. I can take care of the office while you’re out. After all, that’s why you pay me the big bucks, right? For now, I just want you to focus on your family. *Can you at least do that?* You haven’t seen your family in six months. Just relax and enjoy the time you have with them.”

The thought of relaxing caused a wave of panic to rush through Georgina and she almost started to hyperventilate. *Relax? Was Renee crazy?* She could relax later after she’d accomplished her goals. If you relaxed and ventured off the road to success, you could wind up in a ditch in Failure Town; that just wasn’t an option for her to contemplate.

“*Stop. It.*” Renee commanded, causing Georgina to break out of her reverie. “I can see those wheels spinning like you’re on the Daytona 500! All I’m saying is that you need to shake things up and live a little. Maybe walk on the wild side just once in your life.”

The thought of shaking things up was so abhorrent to Georgina, she had to fight back the urge to puke. She knew what “living a little” could get you. As a matter of fact, she was the *product* of it. But that was a story she’d filed under “Things Never to Discuss”. Georgina was tempted to tell her friend about the stranger from the bar. The stranger that had fucked her so rigorously, she had to force herself to sneak out of the hotel room because he’d dickmatized her faster than the speed of light. Even this morning as Georgina was getting dressed, she’d punished herself for her being so damn weak by refusing to allow herself the rite of passage, celebratory “I got some *goooooood* dick” dance. Stiffly she replied, “Despite what you may think, Renee, I’ve been known to walk on the wild side occasionally.”

Renee emitted a rude sound before saying sarcastically, “Please, the wildest thing you’ve ever done is shower without clothes, boss lady.”

Georgina shook her head in exasperation at her friend’s craziness. They’d met at UNLV when they were nineteen years old and had been inseparable ever since. Their strong friendship had endured her personal demons, as well as Renee’s two failed marriages. When Georgina finally left her dancing career to start her own business, Renee quit her job in finance to work for her part-time while going to night school to obtain a second degree. She was an invaluable asset to Georgina and together they were a formidable team.

“Renee, have I ever mentioned how much I appreciate the sarcasm and rudeness that you call being “refreshingly forthright”?” Georgina inquired sweetly as she opened the windows to allow the gentle breeze in. Up ahead she could see a small herd of deer coming out of the woods on her left and hopping across to the field on the other side of the road. That was certainly something you didn’t see in Las Vegas. She eased off the gas pedal, giving them time to cross.

“Mmmmm, no I don’t think so,” Renee replied, and Georgina could hear her busily typing on her desktop.

“Well, I do...when it’s directed at somebody else,” Georgina said pointedly. Her phone signaled an incoming call, and she glanced down to check the number. “Hey, smarty-pants, I’ll talk to you later. Eliza’s calling me.”

“Don’t forget to bring me back something cool! Bye, boss-lady-sister-friend!” Renee chirped and hung up.

Georgina switched over and greeted her older sister, “Hi, Eliza! How are you? All set for your trip?”

Her older sister replied cheerfully, “Hi, Georgie, I’m okay. Camille and I were on our way to the airport when I realized that you were headed back home today. So I thought I should call to see how *you* were doing?”

Georgina closed her eyes and mentally counted to ten, before responding, “Well, first of all, let’s be clear that this place is not *home*. It is simply somewhere I resided until I was able to escape.” *A place like this could never be my home*, she thought before continuing, “But I’m doing okay. Are you ready for your trip? I know my favorite niece is for sure.”

“You are the most contentious, ornery person I’ve ever met,” Eliza replied in exasperation. “*Not your home?* Are you kidding me right now? You lived there for ten years with the only people who ever gave a damn about any of us-”

“Could you pretty please with sugar, chocolate sauce, whip cream and a cherry on top put Camille on the phone?” Georgina interrupted her sister with such saccharine sweetness; she gave herself an instant cavity. “I haven’t spoken to her in ages.”

There was a pause on the other end before Eliza sighed, “You’re such a pain in my ass, but I love you, Georgina Marie Carlton. Take care of yourself and stay out of trouble.”

“OMG, you act like I go looking for crap to get into. I promise you, it isn’t even like that,” Georgina said crossly before continuing in a gentler tone, “But I love you too, Eliza Isabel Rossini, and I want you to have a great time on the cruise. You

totally deserve it. I know things haven't been easy for you since Davey passed away, so please try to have a good time."

"Thank you, G," Eliza replied quietly, and Georgina knew she was thinking of her husband who'd died of a brain aneurysm a year ago. As far as men went, there were only three that Georgina had ever respected enough to trust: her Uncle Nate, her brother Graham, and her late brother-in-law, David or Davey as she liked to call him. Even before he married Eliza, David had proved himself worthy of loyalty and trust to the Carlton siblings. He was their knight in shining armor who'd rescued them from purgatory.

No one, *absolutely no one* could say anything bad about Davey to Georgina. Her siblings had often teased her that David could shoot someone right in front of her and Georgina would want to know what that person did to piss *her* Davey off so badly. She remembered him long ago, taking her out for ice cream before she left for her "new and improved" life in Maryland. As Georgina ate her cookie dough ice cream, David slipped her a business card with all of his phone numbers on it.

Gently, he told Georgina that while he was sure that her aunt and uncle were very nice people, if she ever found herself in a similar situation as her previous one or worse; she was to call him and he would come. No matter where or what he was doing, if she needed him, he would be there. Wide-eyed, Georgina nodded her head in understanding and wondered, not for the first time, how exactly did his cape fit underneath his business suits?

"So are you there yet?" Eliza's words broke her out of her reverie. "I wanted to talk to Nate and Val before I left, but I was trying to give them time to get used to seeing their precious baby girl again."

“Not quite, but I’ll be reaching town in the next fifteen minutes,” Georgina murmured and was surprised to find herself feeling a little apprehensive. When she left Baymoor, she’d cut off all contact with everyone except her family. For a while, her friends made attempts to reach out to her, but Georgina wanting no reminders of ever having been there, rebuffed all attempts, and soon contact ceased altogether. She never inquired about anyone when she spoke with her aunt and uncle, and they never volunteered any information.

“Okay well here’s Camille. Have a good time and try to loosen up, Little Bit. Love you!” Eliza said.

“Dammit, I *am* loose!” Georgina muttered to herself, irritated that everyone kept implying she wasn’t. Her mood changed when she heard her niece’s sweet voice.

“Hi, Auntie G!” Camille’s soft voice filled her ear and for the first time that day, Georgina felt like everything was right in her world. The stress of worrying about Uncle Nate, increasing her business finances, and being stuck in godforsaken Baymoor faded away as Georgina lowered her guard and allowed her restless nature to be soothed by Camille’s loving personality.

Eight-year-old Camille was David and Eliza’s only child, and the most perfect human being ever created in Georgina’s opinion. From day one of her arrival, the entire family spoiled her, and through it all Camille remained pure, and as Aunt Valerie was fond of saying, an ‘old soul’. She reminded Georgina of that Manny Delgado character from the sitcom Modern Family.

“Hi, sweetheart, how are you? I miss you so much! Are you ready for the cruise?” Georgina asked and was rewarded with a big sigh on the other end of the phone.

“I’m doing really well, except for the fact that Mom won’t let me participate in the canasta and bridge events on the cruise. Then I told her I want to do the Macramé workshop, but I’m not allowed to repeat the words she used when I said that,” Camille said gloomily.

Macramé? Really? Georgina bit back a laugh, “Sweetie, how long has it been since your nanny retired?”

Sixty-five-year-old Doreen McGuire had been Camille’s nanny since she was a year old. She was a loud, boisterous Bostonian with a fondness for card games that was only exceeded by a love of all things macramé. She wore her dyed black hair in big Dolly Parton curls and cat’s eye glasses that she’d bedazzled herself.

When Georgina first met her, she wondered how her elegant sister and her equally elegant husband had ever moved in the same circle as the tight clothes and stilettos wearing woman, but Eliza simply shrugged and said that she was perfect for Camille. And she was. Exceedingly so. Despite her outlandish appearance, Irene was a retired headmistress from a prestigious school in Beacon Hill. She taught Camille how to speak Spanish and Chinese, the proper use of the English language, and proper posture. And unfortunately, all her favorite card games and macramé, which drove Eliza crazy.

“Mrs. McGuire retired last year to Florida and since she left, I haven’t indulged in a decent game of pinochle,” Camille said with sadness. “I tried to teach the kids at my school, but they’re only interested in silly things like American Girl and Skylanders.”

“Because that’s what kids your age are *supposed* to be interested in, babygirl,” Georgina said gently. “Maybe they’re not cool enough to have nannies who teach them card games like the ones you like, but I bet it works both ways. You could probably learn something from them as well.”

Her phone beeped again and she glanced down, surprised to see her former employer’s number flashing. “Hey, Camille, I have to go, but please give your mom a big hug and kiss for me. I want you guys to have lots of fun on your cruise. I love you, babygirl!”

“I love you lots, Aunt Georgie. Kiss Gigi and Papa for me. And don’t forget to have fun!”

Georgina sighed morosely, “That’s what everyone keeps telling me.”

Maxwell Hayes, proprietor of *Cinnamon Farms*, sat at the head of the long conference table, silently observing the tray that had been placed in front of him. He could feel the eyes of his eight employees watching him like a hawk, but refused to acknowledge them just yet. Today was a big day for them. Six months ago he’d told his preservationist department that he wanted new flavors added to their condiment collection. Max warned them that they needed to *BRING IT*, and up until last night, they’d been hard at work in their eagerness to please and ambition to get ahead. The stakes were too high for them

not to succeed. Before him spread like a feast were the results of their hard labor. He read the names on the five small mason jars: *Strawberry Balsamic Chipotle Preserves, Peach and Red Onion Chutney, Apple Sauerkraut, Hot Bourbon Honey Butter, and Ramp Pesto.*

The air in the room was rife with tension as he picked up a spoon and dipped it into the strawberry preserves jar, scooping up a healthy amount of the rich red jam. He let his laser-like stare touch each person at the table as he tasted the preserves and then chewed thoughtfully, slowly savoring the sweet, tangy heat. His poker face gave nothing away as he swallowed. Next, Max picked up the tall glass of cucumber-mint water and took a sip of the icy beverage to cleanse his palette. Then he picked up the card with ingredients listed on it and perused it. Max repeated this entire process with the four remaining mason jars, without saying a word. When he was finally done, he leaned back in his chair and gave the jars a contemplative look as he rested his elbows on the chair arms and his hands formed a steeple with his fingers.

To his employees who were anxiously awaiting his reaction, he appeared to be deep in thought. And he was, just not on the condiments. No, his mind was a million miles away on the sassy little beauty who'd snuck away in the middle of the night...

It was a chance meeting that probably never would have happened if he hadn't gone into Baltimore yesterday afternoon to deliver a filly to a family. Max had stayed longer than he planned in order to get the animal acclimated to her new surroundings which the family appreciated. As first-time horse owners, they were filled with anxiety and wanted to ensure that they would be caring for the horse correctly. Max could understand and appreciate that, as it was always hard for him to part with a member of his farm animal family. By the time

he left their home, the sun had set, so he decided to stop at one of his favorite bars for their famous crab cakes with spicy beer hollandaise sauce.

His food was barely placed in front of him when the door opened and SHE strolled in, looking like she owned the place as she surveyed the bar with a raised eyebrow. Her vibe screamed, "look if you must, but don't touch or attempt to talk to me". Max's first impression of the petite dynamo was that she looked like a throwback from the sixties with her reddish-brown, tousled pixie cut and large doe-like chocolate brown eyes. Even from a distance he could see how thick and long her dark lashes were against cinnamon-colored skin that was smooth and satiny looking. As she approached the bar with her no-nonsense stride, Max could see the smattering of freckles splattered across her snub nose, and her bare, lush mouth was sexy with the top lip being slightly fuller than the bottom one. With her fresh-faced beauty and short haircut, she greatly resembled a younger Lisa Bonet.

His eyes slid down her petite body covered in a severe cut, no-nonsense black suit and a crisp white blouse complete with a neck bow. It was very schoolmarm-looking and screamed that she wanted to be taken seriously. Hardly the kind of attire one wore to a loud, raucous bar; and Max smiled with appreciation because no matter how much it covered, the suit couldn't hide the body underneath it. He admired the way the jacket caressed her full breasts and nipped in to hug her tiny waist while the pants lovingly clung to her curvy hips. Max groaned under his breath as he was treated to a view of her plump, apple-bottom backside when she walked by him and took a seat at the opposite end of the bar. He shifted slightly as the tightening in his groin area became uncomfortable. She was built for giving and receiving pleasure, and he found himself wanting to be the one doing both the taking and giving.

Max continued to observe her as she studiously avoided eye contact with anyone, save the bartender. Posture erect, she kept her eyes on the band with a closed expression. When the bartender brought her first drink, she practically downed it. Then her head started to bob in time to the band's rhythm. After drink two, her fingers started to snap in time to the music as well, while she perused the menu. Crab cakes forgotten, Max watched as she sang along with the singer. The way her sexy lips formed the words, had him picturing them wrapped around his cock. Or making her bite them as he thrust into her, with unrestrained lust.

"Are the crab cakes not to your liking, boss?" the bartender, who'd introduced himself as Danny, asked when he brought Max another beer which he took gratefully.

"Appreciate it, man. The food is just fine; I'm just not as hungry as I thought, I guess," Max replied, continuing to watch the woman. Which was true. He wasn't hungry for anything on Mo's menu. "Have you ever seen her in here before?"

Danny turned to follow his gaze before turning back with a grin. "Nope, but she's certainly a looker. Word of advice, you'd best make a move. You ain't the only one looking."

Max turned to survey the men in the bar and wasn't surprised to find the bartender's statement to be true. What he did find surprising was the sudden rush of fierce possessiveness he felt for the woman. "I'm picking up her tab."

Danny nodded his head and tapped the bar good-naturedly, "You got it, boss."

Max watched as the bartender turned and headed back to the opposite side of the bar. He wasn't really sure why he'd done that and doubted that she would accept his offer. She looked like the kind of woman that handled her business and didn't need a man doing anything for her. The only thing Max was sure of was that he wanted her to notice him. He continued to drink his beer as he waited. As Danny bent close to her and relayed the message, Max felt a strong sense of irritation, thinking that the bartender didn't need to be that close to her.

Finally, she looked his way, and the jolt of her eyes on him caused his dick to turn hard enough to drill through concrete. He watched as her lovely brown eyes filled with interest and could tell she approved of what she saw. When she mouthed the words "thank you", he decided only a fool would wait a moment longer.

He stood up from his stool and walked over to her, and things progressed quickly from there. When she said her name was Gina, Max could see the lie in her beautiful eyes. Call it a past occupational hazard. Turnabout was fair play so he introduced himself as Jay. When she leaned in and enveloped him in her flowery scent and licked his bottom lip, something wild and primal shot through him. It was all he could do not to grab her and find a dark corner to have his way with her. Instead, they hit the dance floor, and despite her innocent, prim and proper-looking appearance, she was a completely uninhibited dancer. He briefly wondered how she could move so well in her suit, but she was managing excellently with fluid moves and that succulent ass grinding into his crotch. She had him about to explode like a schoolboy seeing a naked woman for the first time.

“Oh crap, he’s going into lawyer-mode on us,” someone muttered, interrupting his reverie and there were a few nervous laughs in response. They quickly waned off when Max raised an eyebrow.

Shit, he'd forgotten he was in a meeting. Briefly, his eyes dropped to his crotch and wasn't surprised to find himself rock hard again. Hell, he'd woken up hard and seriously pissed off, thanks to "Gina". He'd shut his eyes for a brief moment and then woke to find her gone. Max was beyond offended by her disappearing act as no woman had ever left his bed *willingly*. Over and over he'd gone over the "Satisfied Lover" checklist. *Level of arousal? Saturated to the point of dripping. Soundcheck? Moans and wails like she'd caught the Holy Ghost, and loud enough to wake the dead. His technique? She'd bitten her lips, his lips, clutched at the headboard, and clung to him like a kudzu vine as he familiarized himself over and over again with the best pussy he'd ever had the pleasure of being balls deep in.*

Clearing his throat, Max finally spoke, "This is good stuff, ladies and gentlemen. *Damn good stuff*. Congratulations on a job well done." He grinned as cheers and whistles filled the room. "Now, let's talk about packaging. What were you guys thinking?"

"Something simple that allows what's inside to be the main attraction?" Jeff Willis, his lead preservationist inquired.

Max nodded his head thoughtfully. "Okay, I can see that. I want to do a butcher paper label. All writing and pictures in black. Ingredients printed in Calibri font, but actual title in cursive font; make it simple but elegant. Get with Donna in the main office so she can start submitting inquiries to graphic design companies. Something else that would be great: a section on the jars suggesting what the condiments pair great with."

"I like where this is going, boss. What's the ETA for completing this project?" Jeff asked, pulling out his

smartphone. He opened up his note app and looked at Max expectantly.

“I want everything ready to go in six weeks’ time but available the week before Mother’s Day. I will need to have approved and finalized the packaging two weeks from now. Let Donna know that after packaging is complete; pictures need to be taken and uploaded to our company website. Everything is to be placed under *New Arrivals* and available for pre-ordering.” Max finished just as his phone started ringing. He pulled it out of his back pocket saw it was his good friend and town sheriff, Wade Holloway. He responded with an auto message that he was busy and would call back later.

“Yes, sir. I’m heading over that way now,” Jeff responded as he pocketed his phone and stood up.

“Thank you, Jeff. Stick around for a minute, though, okay?” Max asked, and Jeff sat back down. Then Max turned to the rest of his employees, “Great job again, everyone. I had no doubts you would rise to the challenge. I want you guys to go with Jeff to the main office and see Linda in payroll. I believe she has pay rate increase forms ready for all of you to sign.”

Each employee thanked him profusely on their way out, and then he was alone. Max picked up his glass and finished off the cucumber-mint water. His phone rang so he pulled it out and saw it was Wade calling again. This time, he picked up.

“What’s up, man?” Max asked as he picked up his spoon and helped himself to another taste of the apple sauerkraut. The mixture of spicy cabbage, juicy apples and fennel was pretty tasty and he planned to take it home with him to put on the spicy chicken sausage links later tonight. “Want to come through for dinner? I plan on grilling links and pork ribs with potato salad. Got some new condiments to go with them.”

“You know I’m there, brother,” Wade said enthusiastically.
“Appreciate the invite. Unfortunately, this isn’t a courtesy call, Max. I need a *really* big favor.”

“Sorry, I can’t, I’m busy,” Max responded automatically. No. *Hell. No.* The last time he’d helped his buddy out he was felt up by a bunch of sassy, seventy-plus-year-old women. Three months ago Wade called and asked if he could assist in escorting some of the town’s Golden Age church members to their homes from a birthday party. Puzzled as to why his friend sounded so harried, Max said yes. How hard could it be? As it turned out, pretty damn hard.

The birthday “girl” Esmeralda Gonzales decided that turning seventy-four called for a special celebration and spiked her guests’ celebratory grape cider liberally with Moscato. When Max arrived at the Gonzales residence, he was shocked to see the church elders, tipsy as hell in their skivvies (a sight he desperately wished he could un-see) and yelling “YOLO” at the top of their surprisingly strong lungs. They were dancing a conga line to Carlos Santana’s “Oye Como Va” in the back yard, and there was the strong stench of marijuana in the air, which church choir director Oswald Bingham indignantly claimed was for medicinal purposes only.

Wade and his deputies had their hands full trying to get everyone dressed, so Max agreed to help out by driving some of the guests’ home. It was the longest two hours of his life as he drove all over town, dodging grabby hands and repeating the same process of driving to a home, turning off the truck and pocketing the keys before escorting his passenger to the door. The pocketing of keys was necessary he discovered after he came back to the truck to find that Reverend Armisha Johnson, the feistiest of the group, dropped the keys into her bosom and coquettishly invited him to get them.

“Come on, ‘Chocolate Thunder’,” Wade teased. “Surely you’re not still mad about the ‘Topsy Tempresses’ are you?”

Max scowled as he waited on it. *Five...four...three...two...* On cue, Wade burst into uncontrollable laughter, something he’d been known to do ever since Max told him what occurred and the nickname the women had christened him with.

“No, I’m mad because I have the keen ability to pick assholes for friends,” he replied dryly, causing Wade to laugh even harder.

“Well, you should’ve taken one of them up on their offer. Then maybe someone could finally claim their winnings from the town pool wager. What’s it going on, eight years since you hit town?” Wade speculated. “You do know they continue to put money in it as religiously as if it were a church offering don’t you?”

Max grimaced thinking of the silly-ass bet the local women had made to wed and bed him and not necessarily in that order. The ratio of women to men in Baymoor was six-to-one as he’d discovered after several tense and awkward run-ins with some of the more forward women in town. His first official week living here, the farmhouse’s huge kitchen table was continuously laden with casseroles, cakes, and pies. His uncle’s longtime cook Betty assessed the situation with a glance and declared herself on vacation. Untying her apron, she instructed them to call her when they were down to six meals.

Because of his proper boarding school upbringing, Max spent a good two hours handwriting proper thank you notes to every one of the ladies for their hard work. His uncle, Wade and his

employees gave him tons of shit about it, but that was how he'd been raised.

The pool was created because Max had never displayed the slightest bit of interest in any of the ladies of Baymoor. Displaying an interest would lead to a frenzied speculation on wedding dates and picking out china patterns and baby names. Max would rather have his prize stallion Apache kick him in the nuts than endure crap like that. But he did have needs, which he took care of by traveling to D.C. to visit an old friend that he'd established a longstanding agreement with. Max was of the old adage "Don't eat, shit, or fuck where you sleep".

"I still think you made that story up," Wade remarked conversationally. "But that's not the reason I'm calling. As you know, the town is planning Nate Banks' celebratory party. We've got the town hall all decorated and the deejay hired. Sound good so far?"

"Yeah, that sounds really good," Max assured him. The Bankses were good people and great customers of *Cinnamon Farms* since opening their restaurant, *The Comfort Table* more than twenty-six years ago. Nate and his wife Valerie had been good friends as well with his late uncle, Walter Jennings, who left the farm to Max when he passed away two years ago from pneumonia. Since Max permanently moved to Baymoor six years ago, the couple had become friends of his as well. "So what do you need from me?"

"Thanks, man. I realize you're busy but..." Wade paused dramatically, "The mayor has just informed me that the Baymoor events committee is nominating you to be the liaison in dealing with "Templeton". All you would need to do is discuss how food preparation is going with him and keep the committee posted."

“Templeton” was the nickname that he and Wade had secretly given Raymond Beauvoir, the executive chef at *The Comfort Table*. And just like the rat from the book *Charlotte’s Web*, Raymond was wily and poorly dispositional. He catered to no one and according to him, answered only to the Father Almighty. But he made Cajun and Creole food fit for the gods. It was one of the reasons that the Bankses were willing to overlook his surliness. Although Max feared no man, something about Raymond, (*who greatly resembled Uncle Ruckus from The Boondocks comic strips*) and his maniacal-looking glass eye (*according to him, he’d lost the real one in an alligator wrestling match in the deepest, darkest part of Louisiana’s bayou*) made him just a little uncomfortable.

“Thanks, for the nomination, but I’m going to have to graciously pass on it,” Max replied dryly. “Why can’t someone else do it?”

Wade sighed and then explained with great patience as if talking to a toddler, “He made Racine Wilmington cry yesterday and chased Big Ed Sanders out the back door with a rolling pin this morning when he attempted to talk to him. Now if I have to talk to him and he gives me any of his fucking attitude or better yet threatens me with another voodoo spell, I’m gonna have to shoot the son of a bitch. C’mon, I promise not to give you any more “Chocolate Thunder” business for forty-eight hours.”

Max grunted with displeasure. “Alright, I’ll go talk to him since you’re such a big chickenshit. But scratch that forty-eight-hour bullshit you’re talking. You’re not going to mention that “Chocolate Thunder” shit anymore. If you break the promise, you have to let your nieces paint your fingernails the color of my choice,” Max laughed diabolically when Wade cursed him under his breath. “*And* keep it on with regular manicures for four months.”

“Fair enough,” Wade agreed reluctantly. “But I’m hoping you’ll go easy on me, seeing as how I’ve been doing *my* part to keep the town ladies happy, unlike your picky ass.”

“It’s called having standards; you should try it,” Max suggested and disconnected the call. Again he found himself thinking about “Gina” and her kisses. Those sizzling kisses as her soft full mouth moved under his erotically; her tongue greedily melding with his and allowing him to taste her sweetness. She’d molded that sexy little body tightly to his, and despite the height difference, they’d fit together perfectly. Max could honestly say that being with her was hands down the best sexual experience of his life. His mind flashed an image of another beauty that-

No, don’t go there, he told himself, assuaged by the familiar pang of guilt. With a sigh, he rubbed his beard in frustration as he tried to repress painful memories. Max was frustrated that Gina had left, but he figured it was for the best. After all, everything happens for a reason, and if things were meant to be, “they” would have happened.

Chapter Three

Baymoor, Maryland was a small town. The population was 8,998, soon to be 9,001, once town treasurer Frank Carson’s wife gave birth to the town’s first set of triplets in October. The entire town eagerly awaited the birth of these babies. A parade was already being planned in their honor. There was even talk of Mrs. Carson receiving the key to the “city”. Parades were held quarterly and festivals, monthly. The mayor was a fourth generation mayor in his family who, like his predecessors, believed that these kinds of events brought people closer.

That's the kind of town Baymoor was —community oriented. Everyone knew everyone. From birth to kindergarten, elementary school to high school, in that order. Sure some people graduated high school and took off for the brighter lights of a bigger city, but when it was time to settle down and raise a family, you simply came back home. Home to a place where everyone knew your name. A place that celebrated and took pride in its citizens. For instance, when Helen Vales' wienie dog, Ballpark took first place on that well-known dog show, he got to ride the big donut float during the annual January Donut Festival. When the high school cheerleading team was going to compete at state competitions, anybody who could thread a needle was volunteering their services to the *No Wool Over My Eyes* sewing club to help make new uniforms. Another bonus to living in Baymoor was the crime rate was almost nonexistent. The last break-in known was back in 2011 when a mama raccoon and her three young kids broke into *Reyes Grocers* and trashed the supermarket looking for food. *Who knew raccoons liked wasabi hummus?*

Voted number one at least eight times for best American small-town living, Baymoor had even been the number one pick for that movie about that red-headed Julia actress, who kept running away from getting married. With its lush greenery and pretty season changes, the quaint and charming town was often likened to a Norman Rockwell painting, with a touch of sass like Bluebell on the CW show "Hart of Dixie". But the townspeople decided they didn't want any of those "Hollywood" types coming around and messing things up like Bruce Willis did Idaho. The mayor had backed their decision one hundred percent.

It wasn't that Baymoor wasn't sophisticated enough for Hollywood because it was. There was a winery, brewery, restaurants, boutiques, and specialty shops; hell there was even a mall with a Target! Who could want more???

Georgina Carlton did. She was thinking something along those lines as she looked out the window of her Uncle Nate's hospital room. She had lived in Baymoor with her aunt and uncle from the age of eight until she turned eighteen. The day after high school graduation she'd driven out of town with \$2,500.00 in her pocket, determined to never come back to this godforsaken town. Because Georgina was a bright light, big city girl; and you only had to look at her to know it.

Her hair was expertly cut and colored, nails, French-manicured, and her skin was so smooth and clear it could have been photoshopped. She visited the Iron Maiden Beauty Salon & Spa at the Mandalay Bay religiously to maintain her best image which was important in her line of work, especially with her body. Ten years of dance had paid off. At five-foot-two inches, Georgina's posture was always erect. Her legs and arms were sleek, toned, and strong. She was proud of how well she took care of her body. For years, it had been her livelihood as she performed with the acrobatic dance company El Sol & Le Moon all over the world.

Now retired from dancing, all she'd wanted to do was get her own business up and running, but the owners of the dance company had called and asked her to interview for another position with the company as a talent scout for them. If she got the job, she would be able to view performers all over the world, all expenses paid. Aside from having her own business, it was the perfect dream job, but she wouldn't know anything more until she went back to Las Vegas in...what was that prison sentence again? Oh yes, one week.

That was how long she would be stuck in Baymoor. One miserable week in a town that made Mayberry look like the ghetto and where everyone knew everyone. The pharmacist knew your monthly and looked at you suspiciously if you didn't come in to get supplies for your "friend" on time. Old

acquaintances looked at you with pity because you didn't have a significant other and no potential suitors in sight. They were like the blue people in the Avatar movie. Once they got their tails out, hide yours or you would be mated for life.

To Georgina, they were creepy because on the outside they were so damned nice and helpful. They wanted to make you feel right at home. Whenever she spoke to someone, she could almost hear the Beauty and the Beast song "Be Our Guest" roaring in her ears. If they really wanted to make her feel at home, someone should offer to sell her drugs or snatch her purse, but only if they gave it back afterward...which wasn't too realistic, she supposed. But for Georgina, some of the residents were just like the witch from the Hansel & Gretel fairytale, the one that encouraged you to indulge yourself and have fun. Then when you least expected it-

"Are you okay, Georgie?" Valerie's soft voice interrupted her thoughts. Georgina turned to look at her aunt and smiled. At fifty-eight, her aunt was still the prettiest woman in the world to her. Her mahogany skin was radiant, and she had great character lines around her eyes. Valerie's oval face radiated serenity, and her wise green eyes were always filled with love and kindness. Her long, black locs now had more silver in them.

There was nothing in this world that Georgina wouldn't do for this woman who had taken better care of her than her own mother. When Valerie called to let her know about her beloved uncle, Georgina had dropped everything and was on her way to Baymoor twenty-four hours later. Nate and Valerie Banks were her parents in every way except biologically. She took the seat next to her aunt and reached over to hold her hand.

"What happened, Aunt Val?" she asked gently, watching as Valerie closed her eyes took a deep breath and slowly released

it.

“We were coming home from church and your uncle said he didn’t feel so well. After pulling into the driveway, he started pulling at his tie to loosen it and instructed me to call 911. I did as he asked and heard a thump just as the operator answered. I hurried around to the other side of the truck and screamed as I saw Nate lying there clutching his chest. I tried to stay calm as I relayed what was happening to the operator, holding his head in my lap and begging him to stay with me. The paramedics were there soon after.” Valerie grabbed one of Georgina’s hands and clasped it tightly in hers. She frowned slightly before continuing in a disapproving tone, “It’s been kind of hectic preparing the new seasonal menu. He’d been working so much lately at the restaurant and *Cinnamon Farms*. The doctor said due to his high blood pressure, he’d suffered a heart attack. All of our employees and friends have come to the hospital to keep me company.” She patted her niece’s hand gently, “Max has been coming over in the evenings to keep me company.

“Who’s Max?” Georgina asked curiously, feeling even more guilt heaped onto her shoulders. *Great. One more thing or person she didn’t know about in their lives. They knew about her friends and always asked about them. Gaaaah, she was such a selfish bitch!*

“Max Hayes is the owner of *Cinnamon Farms* and a very good friend of ours,” Valerie explained to her. “He was Walter Jennings’ nephew and moved here eight years ago after he quit being a lawyer abroad to work alongside his uncle. When Walter passed away from pneumonia two years ago, he left the farm to Max,” Valerie smiled fondly. “Did you know that working at the farm was Nate’s first job? Remember how Walter used to let you and Chelsea Reyes set up your lemonade stands during the farmer’s markets on the weekends?”

Georgie smiled fondly; she did remember, and Farmer Jennings had always been kind to her. Whenever they went to visit the farm, he would always make sure to send her home with a picnic basket full of goodies that his cook Betty prepared. No matter how long his day had been, he would always make time to hear all about hers.

One summer she really wanted to buy a gift for Uncle Nate and Aunt Valerie's twelve-year anniversary. Farmer Jennings helped her set up the lemonade stand by the kitchen. She'd sold lemonade to all of his employees for two weeks straight. When she had enough money, he took her to Washington D. C. to purchase a gift certificate at a fancy restaurant Nate mentioned he'd like to take Valerie to and matched her seventy dollars. The look of delight on their faces when she presented them with their gift was one she would never forget. Yes, Walter Jennings had been pretty special, and Georgina felt remorseful that she hadn't known of his passing. For that, she would have come back to pay her respects. She was also a little curious about the person who would leave Europe to live in a small town. In Georgina's mind, there was no way Baymoor could ever measure up to the glitz and glamor of living abroad.

Georgina turned to look at her uncle. Even in sleep he was larger than life. At the age of fifty-eight, his body was still in great condition, and gray was just starting to touch his temple. His face was smooth except for the telling laugh lines by the corner of his eyes and mouth. Even though they came to visit her yearly in Las Vegas, emailed and Skyped, she felt guilty for having stayed away for so long. When she graduated from college, it was during the holidays, the busiest time of the year for their restaurant, and they still came to support her. He stirred in his sleep before slowly focusing his gaze on the two of them. First, he smiled tenderly at his wife, then realizing it was Georgina sitting next to her, his eyes widened.

“Georgie? What are you doing here?” he asked in a raspy voice. She moved to hug him, her throat closing up, and she struggled not to cry as he pulled her toward him weakly.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t come? Graham is on assignment, but I know he’ll be calling as soon as he gets the news. Eliza will be calling once she and Camille get settled in at their destination. You scared us something awful, but I’m so, so glad to see your wonderful smile.” She kissed his forehead just the way he used to kiss hers when she was little. Nate chuckled and then turned to look at his wife solemnly. He held out his hand for her, and Valerie rushed to his side to clasp it tightly in both of hers, tears filling her eyes.

“Val you see this?! Our little princess is home. Don’t cry, baby. I’m sorry I scared you. I’m alright, *ssshhh*,” he soothingly whispered to her. Valerie’s shoulders shook as she struggled to control her emotions, and Nate felt his throat tighten as he tried to hide his feelings from his wife. They were each other’s world, and all he could think about when the first pain struck, was making sure she would be okay. With her anguished cries in his ears, he prayed to the good Lord not to call him home just yet. He had too much living to do and three wonderful kids to help get settled and find happiness. His prayers had been answered, and now he would fulfill his promise.

The three of them stayed like that, quietly talking and getting caught up before Georgina reluctantly detracted herself.

“Well, I’m going to leave you two lovebirds alone now. I was going to stop by the restaurant and kill some time. Check-in time at the inn isn’t until 2 p.m.,” she said with a bright smile. Immediately there were protests to her plans.

“You’re staying with us, young lady! I am staying with Nate for the next two days, and then we’ll see you at home,” Val said in a stern voice. “This is your first time home in forever, so the only place you can check yourself into is your old room,” Valerie said in a tone that brooked no further argument. She looked at Nate for support and found him scowling at their niece as well.

“*Georgina Marie Carlton*. You are my flesh and blood. Our home is your home. Are you trying to disgrace us in this town with talk that we denied our kin her home?” he asked indignantly as Valerie pursed her lips and shook her head disapprovingly. “You still have your key, right?”

She blinked back tears, as again the shame at having stayed away for so long, threatened to overwhelm her.

“Okay, yes I do, sir. Thank you, guys.” Bending down she quickly kissed her uncle’s cheek and hugged her aunt, closing her eyes as she inhaled the familiar Dior perfume that had been Valerie’s signature scent forever.

Outside of the hospital, the cool spring breeze gave her goose bumps, reminding her that she wasn’t in Las Vegas anymore. As she got into her rental car and started driving through town, Georgina noticed the changes since she’d been gone. The majority of four-way stops had been replaced with traffic lights. There was now a recreation center next to the senior center. The town park had expanded to include a skate park, basketball and tennis courts, and hiking trails. Along Main Street, new additions included Fluidity, a yoga and Pilates studio, Atlantis Spa, food trucks, and Serving Goddess, a hair and nail salon. But the majority of the buildings remained brick and designed in a mix of Federal, Victorian, and 20th century periods. As a matter of fact, sixty-five of the buildings were noted in the National Register of Historic Places.

Georgina smiled fondly as she recalled her family going to movie night in the town square that was tree-lined with a mixture of magnolias, sycamores, bald cypress, and tulip poplars. That was certainly something she missed living in the desert—all the gorgeous greenery.

She found a parking spot in front of *The Comfort Table* restaurant and sat for a moment to take it all in. They had expanded the outside to include rustic-looking wooden picnic tables and benches with big white umbrellas shading them. The tables were filled with customers enjoying lunch. From the expressions on their faces, she knew the food was good. Suddenly Georgina was hungry, not just for food, but surprisingly for the familiarity of this place.

She got out of her car and walked in. The place was packed, and she could feel curious glances being thrown her way by folks she did not recognize. Georgina took in the changes since she'd last been there. The décor was now modern rustic, the exposed brick walls held a mixture of framed black and white pictures of people and places in Baymoor and mirrors of varying sizes. Instead of individual tables, there were more long wooden picnic tables and benches covered with crisp white linen and geometric shaped wood candle holders. Customer service was also different. Before you waited to be seated and then your server took your order. Now you stood in line and placed your order and a member of the staff brought your food to you. The café was designed so that you had to share space next to whoever decided to sit at the table and get to know them if you didn't already.

Nate and Valerie believed in being neighborly and held strong ties to the community. On weekends, Valerie did storytelling at the library, and three times a month Nate hosted cooking classes in addition to working at Cinnamon Farms and planning events hosted there. Georgina took her place at the end of the line and searched the staff for a familiar face but

didn't recognize anyone from the group dressed identically in white short-sleeved button-down dress shirts and dark denim jeans. Their outfits were covered by long, khaki bib aprons and matching baseball caps. She noticed three young women standing together laughing and talking. They were not assisting any of the customers in the dining room, and Georgina knew her aunt and uncle would not approve of such idleness.

“Welcome to The Comfort Table, ma'am. What would you like to order today?” the young brunette cashier whose badge read the name April printed on it asked with a smile, revealing a mouthful of braces. Behind her was a vintage mirror that took up the entire top half of the wall so you could see who was eating, coming or going from the café. On the left side of the cashier were dozens of different types of daily made pastries. The right side showcased various condiments locally made to compliment them.

“April, it's been a very long time since I've eaten here. What would you recommend?” Georgina replied, smiling back at her.

“I would recommend our shrimp n' grits. It never disappoints,” April smiled at her encouragingly. “Our chef swears that every time he makes it, he can feel his mama hugging him from Heaven.”

“Ok, sounds good to me. I would also like to order a lemonade. What's the damage?” Georgina asked, rummaging through her purse for her wallet.

Suddenly the doors to the back room swung open, making the employees behind the counter jump back as a tall, bald black man appeared. The ferocious scowl on his face had been there since the day he was born, folks liked to say. A thick salt and

pepper mustache decorated his top lip. Unlike the staff, his uniform was a white chef's coat with the name Raymond stitched on the left chest pocket. Black pants and orange cross completed his outfit. He spoke to the employees in a thick Cajun accent, "What in the hell are y'all doin'?! Get back to work, if you plan on eatin' at family meal!"

They scurried to do his bidding under his watchful eye; satisfied that they were working, he turned his hawk-eyed gaze to the patrons, who studiously avoided making eye contact with him. Then Raymond looked over to where Georgina was standing, and his mouth broke into a huge smile. He headed her way with his arms outstretched. She smiled tearfully at him and eagerly went into his arms. For the third time today, she was overcome by emotion at seeing a familiar face. All the special meals he had created just for her. It had been Raymond's idea to let her make the kids menu when she had come out of her "phase". He'd regaled her with so many tales of growing up in Louisiana's bayou, that Georgina felt that if she was ever dropped in the middle of the swamp she would know exactly how to navigate it.

Raymond engulfed her in a bear hug that lifted her off the ground, making her squeal with delight while other patrons looked on in awe at her bravery.

"*Cherie!* When you get back to town? You a sore sight for old Raymond's eyes! It's been what twelve years, *ma petite amie?* You like to give old Raymond an attack of the heart too," he scolded, tears in his eyes. Keeping her close to him, he faced the restaurant. "Everybody! Everybody! This here is Nate and Valerie's niece. She's their baby, all grown up, come back to see us!! Let's give her a warm Baymoor welcome!"

Immediately people rushed forward to swarm her as they welcomed her and inquired about her plans while in town.

Georgina who was an intensely private person tried not to feel overwhelmed by the claustrophobic feeling of small-town nosiness. She was attempting to politely extract herself from the group when the bell chimed overhead, announcing the arrival of a newcomer.

Chapter Four

After leaving the preservation kitchen, Max headed for the main office to speak to Donna Courtland, *Cinnamon Farms*' office manager. Max waved to his second-in-command, a large burly Scotsman named Tavish McBain who happened to be pulling into a parking spot as Max reached the office door.

“Isn’t it a beautiful day, boss?” Tavish asked jovially as he stepped out of an old, paint- peeled, two-seater Toyota truck. The battered vehicle had definitely seen better days and had been around for at least twenty years. Although it looked like shit on the outside, it ran smooth as butter, thanks to Uncle Walter ensuring that it was serviced like clockwork. It was now used in the orchards and vegetable gardens.

Max grinned as he watched the other man pull his shockingly red shoulder-length curls into a ponytail. “Definitely can’t complain about it, Tavish. How did it go in the orchards today? New hires getting the hang of the routine?”

“Aye, took to it like ducks to water, they did,” Tavish replied enthusiastically with a big grin. “Nothing like seeing folks appreciate the land and all the good that can come from it. I sent them to the dining hall for breakfast. I’m headed that way as soon as I pop in to say hi to a certain bonnie lass.”

Max narrowed his eyes at him, “Remind me to make sure you are enrolled in the mandatory sexual harassment class the new hires will be taking shortly.”

Tavish’s mischievous blue eyes widened innocently, “Ach, and why would I be taking that class again? You’ve made me take it six times already, not that I’m keeping track or anything.”

“Because I keep hoping that the information in it will stick, and you’ll get your hound dog ass under control, McBain,” Max explained sarcastically, causing Tavish to throw his head back and howl with laughter.

“I hear you, boss, just giving you some shit. Donna asked me to stop by and grab Marla’s W-2 as she canna leave the hall until later and the office closes early,” he explained referring to Marla Davis, head chef of the dining hall.

“All right, sounds good. I’m going to have a few words with Donna, and then I’m heading out. Think I’ll use this truck since mine is back at the main house,” Max informed him as they walked into the building and the Scotsman handed him the keys. Secretly he was relieved that Tavish had no designs on Donna. Younger than Max by two years, the Scotsman was a ladies’ man for sure; in the year he’d been working for Max, the farm had seen more than its fair share of local female visitors eager to take one of Tavish’s tours. Unlike Max who followed Nancy Regan’s advice to just say no, Tavish always said yes to their outrageous offers.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Donna chirped, smiling at them. Max smiled warmly at her. Donna Courtland held a special place in his heart. Before leaving his previous profession, she was his personal assistant and was so efficient it was scary. Twenty years older than Max, she’d taken him under her wing and was his eyes and ears as he navigated the shark-infested waters of the law firm on his way to the top. When Max informed her that he was giving his notice, all she’d said was, “Oh goody. Where are we going?”

As a result, Max spoke to his uncle about her, and Walter agreed that he could use someone with her skills in the main office. Donna was hired on as a receptionist, and when her predecessor retired four years ago, she smoothly transitioned into the role of office manager.

“Good morning, Donna. I can’t stay; just came in to let you know I’m heading over to *The Comfort Table*. Jeff get that stuff to you?” Max asked.

“Indeed, he did,” Donna confirmed. “I’m just crunching the numbers now on how much the project will cost us. When I get the results back I’ll email them to you with a suggested retail price, sir.”

“Perfect. Are you coming to the house for dinner? We’re grilling if you’re interested,” Max offered, watching her eyes light up as she handed Tavish an envelope.

“I’ll be there. Can I bring a date?” she asked.

“You wound me, lassie!” Tavish cried, placing a hand on his chest as if in pain. “I’m an *eijit* for waiting too long, aren’t I?”

Now you've gone and let some *dobber* sweep you off your feet." He gave a deep heartfelt sigh as he looked at Donna sorrowfully. The Scotsman was a flirt of the first order and not the least bit perturbed by the twenty-two-year age difference between himself and Donna.

The older woman rolled her eyes and reached up to pat his broad shoulder. "I'm sure you'll get over it as soon as you get to the dining hall and see Kendra. Or maybe Lauren? No, no it must be Olivia-

"Alright, alright; you've made your point, Donna," Tavish interrupted her hastily as he saw the storm clouds gathering on Max's face. He shrugged innocently at their boss "Whaaat? I canna help the way the lassies feel about me. I assure you I've been on my best behavior."

"Save it, MacBain. I should be back in an hour. Call my cell if either of you need anything," Max informed them, before leaving the office. He got into the beat up truck and started it, grinning as the engine came to life smoothly. As he drove down the long road towards the main entrance of the five-thousand-acre farm, he was filled with the usual strong sense of pride as he viewed his property. If someone had told Max that he would walk away from his dream profession as a lawyer to become a farmer, he would have insisted they be drug-tested on the spot.

But now he couldn't imagine anything better than getting up at the crack of dawn to work this land that had been in his family for the last hundred years. One of a few black-owned farms around, *Cinnamon Farms* was also one of the busiest farmsteads in Wilkins County with a great breeding program for horses, cows, geese, pigs, ducks, sheep, chickens, and turkeys. According to Walter Jennings, another reason *Cinnamon Farms* was so successful was because he'd had the

good business sense to marry his ex-wife, Clarissa Pembroke, a San Francisco socialite whom he'd met while selling a prize bull to a farmer in St. Helena, California. The farmer had been gracious enough to invite Walter to a friend's barbecue and Clarissa happened to be there. It was lust mistaken for love at first sight, and they married a week later. It was easily the most impulsive thing the steadfast quiet farmer had ever done, and they would come to regret it.

The new Mrs. Jennings hated farm life. Four months into marriage, she packed up and headed back to San Francisco, or civilization as she liked to call it, leaving poor Farmer Jennings heartbroken; but somewhat relieved. Though they were both devastated to have a divorce under their belts, the Jennings' quickly realized that there was a great business opportunity in the mess that was their failed marriage.

Mrs. Jennings decided to open specialty food shops. Partnering with her ex, they chose to do cheeses, charcuterie, fruit, and pates, all created on the farm. They made specialty baskets that were shipped all over the country, making the farm one of the most profitable and economically sound farmsteads in the U.S.

As quiet and introverted as he was, Walter Jennings was more than willing to open the farm gates to the public during certain times of the year. For fall, the pumpkin patch and fields were open to the public for hayrides, corn mazes, and picking pumpkins. When the lake froze over during winter, it was the local ice skating rink. With spring came the big Easter egg hunt and carnival, which Max and Donna were currently prepping for.

Max looked both ways carefully before exiting to his right on the empty two-lane road and headed to town. He smiled and shook his head, still unable to believe that he wasn't bored yet

with small town living. In his former profession as a corporate litigator, Max had lived abroad in Bern, Switzerland, though he'd rarely been home enough to enjoy the city or the ultra-modern condo he'd purchased. The prestigious international law firm that hired Max at the age of twenty-six sent him all over the world, and he'd enjoyed traveling to cities like Macau, Athens, Brussels, Madrid, and Sydney.

It was a beautiful, fast-paced rollercoaster ride that Max got on without hesitation and enjoyed to the fullest. Work was an exciting challenge; attractive women throwing themselves at him were plentiful, and bonuses flowed regularly into his checking account. Yes, life was good and Max had no intentions of slowing down. He was the first one in the office and the last one to leave his desk every night, logging countless hours in his ambitious goal to make history by becoming the youngest junior partner in the firm's history by the age of thirty. There wasn't a moment to lose in that intensely driven rat race as he worked tirelessly to exceed the firm's expectations. But life has a funny way of knowing what you need before you do, and suddenly the ride came to a stop with a screeching halt and Max jumped off. He'd never looked back or for a faster ride to get on.

Instead, Max had found a slower paced ride in Baymoor, Maryland where he could breathe and work at his own pace. Yes, farm life was hard demanding work, but it brought Max a sense of fulfillment and great enjoyment. He'd turned his back on making millions, shrugged off his parent's profound disappointment, and up until last night, Max would have sworn that his life was perfect and not lacking in any way, shape or form. Until "Gina" walked into Mo's and proved him wrong. As he was still thinking about her, he realized he had two choices: One, he could pack up and head to D.C. after everyone left tonight; or two, ask a really good friend to help him find "Gina".

“Fuck it,” he muttered and pulled his iPhone from his shirt pocket and pressed a button. “Siri, call Casey Sullivan.”

Max placed the call on speaker and waited. The phone rang three times before a sultry-voiced woman answered, “Hello?”

Max smiled, thinking about the beautiful woman on the other end of the phone. “Don’t you ever let him up for air, Sidra?”

“Good morning to you too, Maxwell,” Sidra greeted him cheerfully. “And the answer to your question is *no*. I just got back into town last night and am only here for three days. You’re lucky I happened to be reaching for the phone or you wouldn’t have gotten a call back for a couple of days.”

“Well now, I’m really grateful. Any chance I could get two minutes of his time?” Max asked as he drove down Main Street and pulled up to the cafe.

“Okay, but time starts...now!” Sidra warned. As he turned the truck off, Max heard her say something to Casey and then her laughter. He still couldn’t believe that his good friend was now in a relationship. For the last four years, Casey Sullivan was graced with the title of being “D.C.’s Sexiest Bachelor”, which he wore reluctantly and with embarrassing humility. Then a couple of months ago, he enthusiastically stripped himself of the title by committing himself to a relationship with Sidra Barton, a beautiful dee-jay that kept him on his toes.

“This better be good, brother. I know you heard my woman say we’re workin’ with limited time,” Casey growled into the phone.

“Trust me it is, otherwise, I would have hung up when she laughed her “barely this side of sane” laugh,” Max responded. “I need your friend to get information for me. He available?”

Casey’s “friend” was a jack-of-all-trades. An excellent hacker and former employee of the NSA, he was now in the information business. If there was information to be found on anyone, he could find it. The price for information wasn’t cheap, and Max had to ask himself again if “Gina” was worth it. His question was answered as he grew hard again with the memory of her satin tongue stroking his and the way her lips had clung to his desperately as he bottomed out in her silken heat.

“If I’m not mistaken, he’s out of the country. You need somethin’ buddy? Not that you can’t afford it, but you know the price won’t be cheap,” Casey warned.

Max reached the entrance door to *The Comfort Table* and opened it. He could see the restaurant was busy, but he easily spotted the man he’d come to talk to, standing on the outskirts of a small group of people. Raymond wore the oddest expression on his face, and for a moment, Max was concerned that he was in pain and like Nate having a heart attack. Then Raymond let out a laugh that sounded like a wounded grizzly bear and Max realized he was seeing the grouchy old bastard happy for the first time in the eight years that he’d lived here. And all his happiness was directed at the petite woman standing next to him.

Satisfaction surged through Max as he met her startled wide-eyed gaze, and his lips curled up into a victorious grin.

“Max? You still there?” Casey asked impatiently. “My woman says your two minutes are up and I’m inclined to agree with her.”

“Seriously, could you be any more pussywhipped?” Max inquired. “Cancel that request. Later, Case.”

What the hell was JAY doing here?! Had he followed her?? He must have. Yes, that was it. He was stalking her! It figured that the one time she decided to be impulsive and drop her panties, he turned out to be a psychopath! Despite her internal freakout, Georgina struggled to keep her face expressionless as she watched him strolling towards her, looking sexier than any lunatic had the right to look as he smiled smugly at her. It was probably the look he gave all of his victims before he peeled their skin off and used it as sofa covers. Except she wasn't anybody's victim.

Casually she reached inside of her bag and was annoyed to come out empty-handed. *Damn.* She'd left *Effie* in her glove compartment. *Effie* was the name she'd lovingly bestowed upon the semi-automatic pistol her big brother Graham had gifted her with two birthdays ago. Most men might give their sisters gifts like jewelry, flowers, and chocolates, but Graham Carlton wasn't like most men. He gave his sisters useful life-saving gifts like guns, survival kits, and shooting and self-defense classes. Never had Georgina been more thankful for his sweet and thoughtful gesture or pissed at herself than now. She needed to alert Raymond that they had a serious psycho situation on their hands-

“Well if isn't Old MacDonald,” Raymond announced with a loud cackle, interrupting Georgina's train of thought. “Shouldn't you be off somewhere getting all your moo-moo's together?”

Sensing a potential showdown, the crowd quickly dispersed back to their seats, eager to enjoy a blustering tirade of Raymond's which could be amusing as long as you weren't the intended target. Georgina knew this little skirmish would be all over town within the hour. *Wait...Raymond knew Jay?* The sinking feeling in her stomach let her know she wasn't going to like where this was going. She watched Stalker Guy's lips tighten at the older man's mocking tone.

Max's gaze remained locked on the woman in front of him as he addressed Raymond. "Actually, I got called in to help tame a stubborn and unruly jackass that's been causing unnecessary problems. Know anything about that?"

She'd traded in her black suit for a crisp white button-down shirt, a fitted knee-length black leather skirt that clung to her body in all the right places, and wine-colored ankle boots that matched her oversized purse. *Why did women carry such large purses?* Max wondered as his eyes rose to meet hers. Judging from the way her pretty lips were pursed as if she were sucking lemons and her ire-filled brown eyes were snapping, she planned on taking his head off and stuffing her trophy in that big ass purse. Clearly she was not happy to see him. Well too fucking bad for her because he wasn't going to let her get away again.

"Say what?? Now wait just a damn minute, Mr. E-I-E-I-O," Raymond blustered, but Max held up his hand.

"Relax, I'm just serious, old man," Max said with a cordial smile. "On behalf of the town, I'd like to extend our heartfelt thanks in assisting with *your boss's* party. I know how much the Bankses will appreciate hearing about your *sunny* personality and willingness to be a team player in planning the event. Did you have a minute to discuss the menu?"

“It looks like I arrived just in time, Raymond! You’re helping to plan a party for my uncle? Oh, I can’t wait to see what you make! The *entire* drive here, all I could think about was eating some of your fantastic cooking! I’d be more than happy to assist if you don’t mind,” Georgina said sweetly, hoping to diffuse a potentially flammable situation.

Max rolled his eyes as he fought the urge to snatch the perfectly manicured hand off of Raymond’s arm while the chef spluttered and blushed ten different shades of red. His eyes met hers, and she must have sensed his irritation when he deliberately dropped his gaze back down to “Templeton’s” arm, and she hastily removed it. So she was Nate and Valerie’s niece and she’d probably come home because of Nate’s heart attack. Which meant she could be staying a while. Perfect.

Feeling annoyed that she had obeyed his silent warning so readily, Georgina decided to introduce herself as if they had never met. “I’m Georgina Carlton,” she said coolly and held her hand out.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Max Hayes and welcome to Baymoor. Georgina...why do I feel like we’ve already met, hmmm?” Max teased with a grin. He grinned wider as her eyes narrowed even more. *Georgina*. How prim and uptight sounding. It suited her perfectly, Max decided.

He took her hand into his, and electricity passed between them again as they stared at one another. Georgina felt the heat from his touch down to the balls of her feet. Quickly she yanked her hand back, barely suppressing the urge to rub it against her thigh to rid herself of the tingling sensation. She needed to stay alert and away from him. But he refused to be denied as he perused her from head to toe again, and she felt the slow blistering heat of his gaze. It was the same look he’d given her

naked body before bringing her to extreme heights of pleasure last night. An image of him spreading her thighs wide as he plunged deeply into her flashed through her mind. *The way his beard rubbed against her aching nipples....*

Wait...Max. Hayes. As in Framer Hayes, Nate and Valerie's good friend and business associate that'd traded the successful career of international law in for a tractor riding life? He'd lied last night probably in the hopes of never seeing her again. The irony of his strategy was not lost on Georgina. Oh God, how humiliating was that? Max/Jay had given her the best sex of her life, and she hadn't even known his real name! At least she'd given some sort of variation of hers. Georgina made a mental note to fire Renee when she got back to Las Vegas as this was all her fault. Come on, boss, be adventurous, walk on the wild side....

She gave "Max the Ass" a dirty look, "Funny...you don't look like a Max to me."

His grin widened and his dark eyes were brimming with humor at her expense. "Oh yeah? What do I look like exactly?"

Her own grin was on the nastier side as she smoothly returned, "Several other choice names come to mind."

Georgina turned to Raymond who was watching their exchange suspiciously. "Well it sounds like you've got an important meeting, Ray. I won't keep you any longer. I'm just going to sit and enjoy your famous shrimp 'n' grits before I go. I'll be back tomorrow, okay?"

Raymond pulled her in for another heartfelt hug that she eagerly returned. "That sounds really good, cherie. I'll have

my sous chef Mario put together a basket for you to take. Just like old times, right? Alright now, you take care.”

He let her go and walked off without acknowledging Max. To April, he called, “Make sure pretty boy here gets the usual!”

Max took that as a sign that he should follow after him. But before he did, he leaned down to whisper into Georgina’s ear, “For the record, I’m cool with what you were calling me last night.”

“I don’t recall saying your name, *Jay*,” she sneered, lifting her chin defiantly at him. Georgina really hoped he couldn’t see the effect his nearness was having on her body. Her nipples were so hard they were pressing against the front of her blouse and goosebumps had broken out all over her body.

“Well, close enough,” Max said in a low seductive voice, enjoying their banter. “Most people tend to get my name and “God” confused. It’s an understandable mix-up baby.”

He smirked at her mortified expression before walking away. This morning he’d looked at the empty condom wrappers on the hotel floor and counted. Six total. That meant there were six more in the box on the nightstand. Furious, Max had grabbed the box and taken it with him, because he’d hoped that somewhere in the near future he would find “Gina” and be doing the same thing they’d done last night.

Hopefully sooner rather than later, Max thought smiling as he felt her eyes burning a hole in his back. He knew it depended on how pissed she was at his slight deception. What started out as a shitty day was quickly turning into one of the best days of his life, and it was all because of her. *Georgina*.

Chapter Five

Georgina avoided the speculative looks from the other patrons as she navigated her way through the busy restaurant to an empty picnic table in the corner. A busboy brought her lemonade; she smiled her thanks as she reached into her bag and pulled out her notebook, determined not to give “Max the Ass” another thought as she waited for her food. *He certainly did not look like a farmer*, Georgina told herself in a snide tone. More like a playboy. She could easily picture him in a designer tux racing through the streets of Monaco, behind the wheel of a Ferrari with a beautiful girl in the passenger seat.

A beep signaled an incoming text. Georgina pulled out her phone to see Renee had sent her two article links. One was written by a well-known financial guru about successful businesses that were started on grants and helpful tips when applying. The second link was a how to bring him to his knees by getting on yours by Cosmo Magazine.

“Humph, heffa, the only time I get on my knees is to pray,” she mumbled to herself and then blushed hotly as her mind flashed back to last night. Well, technically she’d been sitting...

“Hello! My name is Chandra and I’ll be taking care of you today. I believe this hot plate of Chef Raymond’s legendary shrimp ‘n’ grits belongs to you, beautiful lady.” The owner of the cheery voice was a middle-aged, attractive black woman with auburn Senegalese twists and a warm smile that lit up her entire face. She was holding a large, steaming plate and a smaller one on a tray. “Please be careful, the plate is hot. I also

have a crystallized ginger lemon square that chef is insisting you try.”

“Hi, Chandra, you have no idea how homesick I’ve been for this dish, thank you,” Georgina beamed. “Please tell chef I said thank you as well.”

“Will do, honey. It seems like you are something of a celebrity around here. First time back home in a while, huh?” Chandra asked, missing the closed off expression that came over Georgina’s face as she arranged the plates. Chandra continued on, “You know my niece has been gone for a minute, and our whole family’s been real cut up about it. Especially her fiancée. Maybe you coming home will start a trend and she’ll return. Now wouldn’t that be something?”

The server straightened and gave Georgina another smile; only this one didn’t reach her eyes. “Oh, look at me just rambling on. Pay no attention to me, baby. I’m just an old lady rambling on.”

“No, no, you’re fine. What’s your niece’s name?” Georgina asked curiously. While Baymoor wasn’t her cup of tea, she’d never heard anyone else leaving on bad terms or expressing a desire to leave as vocally as she had.

“Annabelle Gaines. You ladies might have gone to school together. Maybe you know her?” Chandra suggested and Georgina smiled.

“I did know her. We were pretty much in each other’s classes the entire time I went to school here,” she replied, thinking of the quiet, slender girl that could usually be found with a book in her hand. “She was always good people. How long has she been gone?”

“Well, it’s been a little over two years now. She just up and left. Police suspected foul play for a while, but we’ve never found any good or bad evidence to determine exactly what happened,” Chandra softly said, and Georgina felt terrible about what she was hearing. Annabelle had been part of the group who’d reached out to her and she’d ignored the attempt. Her appalling behavior towards her friends was ten levels lower than a snake’s belly.

“Oh well, maybe while you’re here you can catch up with my other niece Inez. I’m sure I don’t need to jog your memory about that one, do I?” Chandra asked with a chuckle; “That one was born infamous!”

“No, ma’am you certainly don’t,” Georgina answered, nodding her head in agreement. Inez Gaines was Annabelle’s older cousin and hell on wheels. Georgina and her friends used to trail after the bold and fearless trendsetter, pretending to be her. It wasn’t a big surprise to anybody when she was crowned the winner of the Miss World Beauty pageant, but her path of self-destruction afterward was. Now looking at the time frame of Annabelle’s disappearance, Georgina was certain it had something to do with Inez’s behavior, as the two cousins were extremely close.

A shadow fell over the table, and she looked up to see “Max the Ass” standing by the table with his own plate of food. Georgina’s eyes narrowed as Chandra hastened to take the plate from him. “Oh my word! I’m so sorry, Max! I didn’t realize you would be joining this kind lady. Well have a seat, and I’ll be back to check on you two shortly.”

Max gave her one of his sexy smiles and pulled out a chair. “Thank you very much, Chandra.”

Georgina's watched their server leave, making sure she was out of earshot before turning back to face her uninvited companion with a scowl. "Go away."

"Do you know that you look like one of those emojis when you slit your eyes and flat-line your mouth like that?" Max grinned as Georgina quickly rearranged her features. "It would appear that your coming back to town is big news?" he inquired, picking up his salmon burger and taking a big bite. Damn, for food this good, Max could put up with "Templeton's" crazy ass. The burger was seasoned to perfection and juicy, with the creole remoulade sauce and bib lettuce on a buttery brioche bun. "So how long are you staying?"

"None of your business." Deciding to ignore him, she focused instead on her food and took a healthy bite of her own and closed her eyes as the rich flavors hit her taste buds. *Yassss*. It was even better than she remembered. The spicy tasso ham, fresh shrimp, peppers, and onions were a wonderful combination and complimented the stone ground grits with white cheddar nicely. Lord, she missed eating food this good. Georgina had always been a curvy girl, and as a dancer, she kept herself to a strict eating regimen and exercised fanatically. Now that her dancing days were behind her, she allowed herself two cheat days a week. She knew she was in deep trouble, not only with the insanely good-looking and charming man sitting across from her, but also with the fresh down-home cooking she would now have unlimited access to. Georgina opened her eyes to find Max watching her intently and knew the hunger in his dark eyes had nothing to do with food.

"I'm sorry that I misled you last night, Georgina. For the record, it wasn't an actual lie. My full name is Maxwell Jason Hayes," he replied sincerely, watching as she rolled her eyes. But was he really sorry? Instinct told him that if he had stated

who he really was, she still might not have been as friendly. Then on the dance floor she'd bewitched him with her sexiness and before he knew it, he was propositioning her, and she was saying yes.

"So how does it feel to be back?" he tried to change the subject and saw her shoulders stiffen in response.

"That's it? That's all you're going to say about last night?" she whispered furiously, bristling with hostility. Last night he'd given her the best sex of her life, and while she had relived every touch, kiss, and caress since then, he appeared nonchalant, as if he did that sort of thing every damn day. Unbelievable. Then again, maybe it wasn't; after all, she really didn't know him. Maybe he did do it every day.

The intense look Max gave her made her stop mid chew. It was hot and desire-filled as his eyes touched every part of her above the table. A shiver went down her spine, and Georgina felt her breasts swell in response and her nipples ached to be touched by him again.

"I have plenty to say about last night. Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't it *you* who snuck out on *me*? You didn't even leave a number where I could reach you. Please stop trying to act like you're the injured party here, Georgina. We both know that if I had been some random stranger, you would have been home free." Max took another bite of his burger before continuing, "But if you were honest with yourself, you weren't looking for anything long term anyway." At her puzzled look, he explained, "I noticed the way you hesitated over your name."

Georgina looked around before leaning in to whisper furiously, "That's exactly the point! I wanted a random stranger, not somebody who I would run into while I'm here. If you already

knew that I was lying about my name, why'd you continue to pursue it? That makes *you* the bigger deceiver. And according to my aunt who couldn't stop singing your praises, you're damn near like family! Gross!"

Max raised an eyebrow. "We're nowhere close to being blood-related, Georgina. I'm sorry for responding in that manner to you, but I'm not sorry for what happened. I had a good time and so did you. Now how long are you in town for?"

"Why do you want to know so badly? I thought I made it clear that it's none of your business," she replied waspishly, piercing a plump shrimp with a vicious stab of her fork, she shoved it in her mouth, chewing viciously, but not tasting it. Georgina didn't know who she was more pissed at: him, for being sneakier than her or herself for liking the way he said her name, in that low, rolling drawl.

"Okay fine. What is it that you do, Georgina?" Max asked with a grin, liking her fire and sass. He wondered if she would smack him if he mentioned how adorable she looked when she was mad. "I mean, you already know that I'm a farmer, and that was the truth."

Georgina gave a sigh. "If you must know, I own an intimate apparel business called *Feminine Intuition*."

Max was impressed that she owned a lingerie apparel company, and it was one he was very familiar with. His companion in D.C. dressed in Georgina's sexy pieces, and he'd liked them so much, Max had given her money to ensure that was what she was always dressed in whenever he visited. He thought about the sexy wisps of emerald lace he'd almost destroyed in his eagerness to get to her body. "If those were your designs last night, I have to say you are quite talented. Now tell me again how long you're in town for?"

“Look, I’m really not sure what your angle is here, but I’d rather not do *this* with you,” Georgina stated bluntly as she gathered her things, appetite now officially gone. “We had a one-night thing, and it was cool...if we were never going to see each other again. Unfortunately, we did, and now I want to forget the whole thing ever happened and just be on my merry way.”

Max gave her an assessing gaze. “So you’re running away again?”

She paused halfway out of her chair. “Excuse me?”

“That’s what you do right?” Max watched as she plopped her tempting ass back in the chair and glared at him. “You run when you don’t like a situation or are unsure of yourself.” The look on her face told him he should quit while he was ahead, but old habits die hard, and Max was now in lawyer mode presenting facts. “You. Are. A. Runner. Last night we blazed hot enough to make the hotel catch fire. You couldn’t get enough of me as you rode my face and my dick, which I enjoyed every minute of, by the way. Then next thing I know, you took off and I honestly think it’s because you liked it as much as I did.”

“You’ve got an over-inflated ego, Hayes. It wasn’t that good,” Georgina said dismissively, even though her face was flaming because she hadn’t just liked it, she’d *loved* it.

Max watched as her fingernails tapped the table impatiently, but Georgina’s eyes remained focused on him as he leaned in close enough to be engulfed by the seductive scent of her flowery perfume. “Well if that’s the case, why do your eyes dilate whenever I reference last night? Or your breathing

hitches and you lick your lips? What I don't understand is why you're being so weird about it? We were two consenting adults that had a great time together. I'd be lying to myself if I said I wasn't interested in doing it again. Even now you're all defensive and ready to escape this conversation because it's too real for you. At least be honest with me. I believe I deserve it after you ran out with no explanation."

Georgina closed her eyes and vigorously rubbed her right thumb and index finger together because Max was right. There was no need for her to be such a bitch because she had some issues. Last night happened because she wanted it just as much as he did. She stilled and opened her eyes, swallowing audibly as his large hand covered hers, effectively stopping her nervous gesture. Max's eyes were gentle.

"Look, Georgina, I'm sorry if I'm backing you into a corner and coming on too strong. You don't have to say anything, and I won't bother you anymore," he said quietly. "The town's not that big so we're bound to run into each other. You don't have to worry about me saying anything about last night either."

Max pulled his hand back and stood up. Silently Georgina watched as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He selected a twenty-dollar bill and placed it on the table between their plates for Chandra. Then he gave Georgina a smile that she instantly hated. It wasn't like his previous heart-stopping, panty-wetting smiles that translated into "I will ruin you for anyone else". No, this one was very different. It screamed, "Yikes! I had no idea you were *so* damaged."

"Yeah, see you around," she mumbled even as her lady parts wept with sadness at his retreat. He turned to leave and Georgina forced herself to watch him walk away. She frowned as she noticed she wasn't the only one. So was every other female in the room it would seem. The young and old were not

averse to Max's sex appeal. It appeared she wasn't the only one to notice that perfectly sculpted ass filling out his jeans. Or the sinewy muscles of his forearms. Several of the female co-workers, including the trio Raymond had yelled at earlier, leaned over the counter, ogling Max as he left. Georgina scowled, fairly certain that Aunt Val would not approve of this type of behavior from the employees. *That's all I'm concerned about*; she tried to tell herself unconvincingly.

Max watched Georgina's reflection in the glass doors as he left. In her facial expression, he saw all the frustration and pent-up desire he, too, was feeling. He waited until he was out the door to allow himself a smile of triumph. Max hadn't gotten to where he was in life by sitting around waiting for shit to happen. Georgina was throwing up unnecessary roadblocks and preventing them from what they both wanted in this cock-block game of denial. He planned to bust through every one of them with the force of an army tank, and he almost felt sorry that she didn't get the memo that Max Hayes didn't just play to win; he played for keeps.

Her childhood home looked just the same as she remembered. Still hanging from the thickest branch of the big maple tree in the front yard was the swing Uncle Nate had installed for her. Georgina knew for a fact that on nice days, he still pushed Aunt Val on that swing just as patiently as he had done for her when she was little.

The two-story bungalow had a fresh coat of light gray paint. The shutters were painted white. The steps leading up the porch were navy and lined with chartreuse colored ceramic pots filled with large, gorgeous jade succulents. The front door was painted a bright mint green. The porch had a small bistro-style table with two chairs on one end. There was also a small settee next to it and a tiny end table that had a small radio at the other end surrounded by rose bush trellises. When she was little, Georgina would sit and watch her aunt and uncle dance on the porch. Uncle Nate would always save the last dance for her and let her stand on his feet. It was one of her first real memories of what real love looked like. Not that she would ever have anything like that. Georgina had decided long ago to keep her heart under lock, stock and barrel. Love just wasn't worth all the pain and drama that accompanied it.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the emotions of being back and her encounters with Max; Georgina felt exhausted. She sat down on the steps and looked out at the neighborhood. There were kids of all ages walking home from school. An elderly group of ladies were speed walking in garish pink jackets. She searched the groups of laughing, smiling faces but couldn't find one that was miserable and eager to be anywhere but right where they were in Baymoor. The load of guilt that she was carrying grew bigger.

Suddenly the air was filled with the lyrics to Run DMC's "Tricky", causing the activity on the street to stop as everyone noticed her sitting there. Quickly she rummaged in her bag to silence her phone. Suspicious glares from the elderly and the curious faces of the kids made her want to crawl into the bushes as they slowly walked towards her. Georgina finally located her phone and answered it, her eyes surveying the crowd that had now gathered by the bottom step.

"Hi, Graham; now's not a good time. Call you later," she said quickly before disconnecting her brother who'd barely had

time to return her greeting. Georgina smiled politely at the group as she stood up. They did not smile back. *Hmmm*, definitely not a good sign. Suddenly an elderly lady who greatly resembled Mrs. Claus with her hair braided on top of her head in a white bun and full, round cheeks stepped forward. Her rainbow fanny pack clashing with her pink jacket. She smiled kindly while rummaging in the fanny pack and Georgina thought that perhaps this wouldn't be so bad. All of a sudden her hand came out and Georgina found herself staring down at a small lethal-looking compact Taser, pointed directly at her.

“Who the hell are you? Ida, call the sheriff and let him know we have an intruder skulking about the Bankses residence,” barked the grandmotherly figure. The one named Ida she presumed, whipped out an iPhone and gave Georgina a glare while she complied with the dragon lady's command.

“I'm going to take her picture also so we can let the rest of the Neighborhood Watch know we have a suspicious figure skulking about,” Ida added and snapped a picture of Georgina's outraged face before dutifully making the call.

“Cool! Mrs. Laurent is going to Taser the dangerous stranger!” a redheaded boy with freckles said enthusiastically.

“Ms. Ida, can you please take a picture of her face when she falls and send it to my mom's email?” a small girl with afro-puffs asked politely. “I want to have her print it for my show and tell tomorrow.” The other kid's murmured in agreement.

“I am so posting to Facebook,” a tall punk rock-looking teen with a platinum mohawk said, whipping out his phone to update his status. “No, wait...Snapchat first.”

“Could you start the tasing at a low level then slowly crank it up?” another teen wearing a beret inquired, as he pulled out a notebook and colored pencils. “I’m an artist and would like to capture her expressions.”

“Ten, nine, eight, and seven...” Ms. Laurent counted down. Georgina had had enough.

“Would you crazy people just calm down?!” she shouted. “My name is Georgina Carlton, and I am the niece of Nate and Valerie Banks! Please call the sheriff. I would love to tell him how you came on private property and threatened me with a deadly weapon, which I am pretty sure is illegal for someone like you to have.” Her chest was heaving as she glared at the old bat.

Silently they all looked at her with varying shades of doubt before glancing at their fearless leader who said, “I don’t believe you.”

Georgina gritted her teeth in frustration. Damn nosy, gossipy busybodies. *This* was one of the reasons she didn’t like small towns. Ida turned to murmur something into her phone before hanging up. “Sheriff Holloway is on his way to a meeting but is sending Max Hayes over.

Great. The last thing Georgina needed was another encounter with the sexy farmer. Her nerves wouldn’t be able to take it.

“Would a stranger have a key to this house with a picture of Nate and Valerie on her keychain?” she growled, holding up her keys.

Suddenly a beat-up looking Toyota pulled up along the sidewalk and screeched to a halt. The driver's side opened and Max Hayes stepped out. Their eyes met and her stomach clenched before dropping to her feet. He surveyed the scene of her being trapped on the front porch by the mixed mob of elderly and youth. A slow smile spread across his face as he took his time strolling up to join the group. As pissed as she was, Georgina could still find time to appreciate the fluid ease with which he moved. When he finally reached them, he gave the kids high-fives and tipped his hat at the group of ladies. Immediately they went from hostile to simpering marshmallows as he flashed his gorgeous grin at them, and Georgina rolled her eyes.

“What seems to be the problem here?” he asked smoothly addressing Mrs. Laurent while keeping his eyes on Georgina. He took in her flushed cheeks, narrowed eyes, and heaving chest. Her clenched hands at her sides gave him the feeling she wanted to pop Mrs. Laurent or him or maybe both of them.

“Max dear, always a pleasure to see you! Our group, The Spring Chickens, was out doing our daily walk and monitoring the neighborhoods for anything or anyone that looked suspicious,” she stopped to cut her eyes at Georgina. “All of a sudden we heard loud, violent rap music blaring from the porch and saw this stranger attempting to case the house. Now, she is claiming to be a relative of Nathaniel and Valerie's, but *I've* never seen or heard of her. Has anyone else?” she addressed the group, and they collectively shook their heads no in disapproval.

Max looked at Georgina with one eyebrow raised. It was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. She'd had enough for one day— Uncle Nate in the hospital, the thought of Aunt Valerie being alone and scared, the disapproval of the townspeople and their precious Max it was just... *too much*. She could feel the sting of tears at the back of her eyes but

would be damned if she cried in front of these lunatics. She raised her chin and looked at Max as she pointed her finger at the group, refusing to address them directly.

“I will let you deal with this. It’s been a challenging day so far, and I just want to get settled in. If they are not gone in the next five minutes I will either A: call the sheriff, state police, *and* CNN news to let everyone know how idealistic, quaint, picturesque, Baymoor with their FINE, UPSTANDING, CITIZENS treat people who come to visit their town. Or B: get my gun and bust caps into old, wrinkled asses,” she finished, smiling sweetly at him. Max’s broad shoulders shook with silent laughter as the elderly women gasped in outrage and the children’s mouths fell open in shock. “I would prefer option A; but trust and believe, I’m totally fine with option B.”

And without a backward glance, she then turned, walked over to the door, unlocked it, entered, and slammed it as hard as she could.

Chapter Six

Once inside Georgina immediately felt calmer as she took in the familiarity of her childhood home. Throughout the years, Valerie had sent her emails with colors, furniture, and fabrics, asking her opinion. In addition to being co-owner of *The Comfort Table*, she was also an interior designer who freelanced when she wasn’t working at the cafe. Their home was decorated beautifully in modern styles designed for comfort with jewel toned accents like sapphire, amethyst, and

peridot throughout. Family pictures were framed and placed in every room.

Georgina took her time looking at them. There were so many she'd never seen before— her mother and uncle when they were younger, the grandparents that she'd never met. Her eyes lingered on the ones of Ingrid looking so innocent and Graham and Eliza looking carefree and happy, the way children should look. Aunt Valerie was adamant of having only good vibes in their space and the pictures represented the happy times in their family. To remind them that everything had not been a nightmare. There were none of her father, Russell Carlton Shocker. The pictures brought tears to Georgina's eyes, and she wiped them away before going upstairs to her old room.

It was as if time stood still. Everything was exactly the same except for the big silver picture frame that now sat on her old desk. She picked it up and smiled. It was the note she had left for them right before she hugged them and drove out of Baymoor for good, or so she had thought.

Dear Uncle Nate & Aunt Val,

I just wanted to say thank you for loving me.

You will never know how much it meant to me that you took me in.

Thank you for always believing in me and supporting me.

I love you beyond infinity X's infinity. Georgie

Georgina glanced around the room, remembering how eager Valerie had been to design and decorate it with her. She also remembered it as the turning point on her road to recovery.

Past...

She came to live with her Uncle Nate and Aunt Valerie in the summer of 1994. Valerie, unable to have children of her own and aware of her husband's newly orphaned nieces' and nephew's situation, had embraced her wholeheartedly. Her patience was unending as she endured the child's suspicious looks and defiant silence. She knew that this child was special, and it broke Valerie's heart to see her in such a fragile state. They gave her a big room with huge windows and polished wooden floors. The twin bed was all hers and the most comfortable thing Georgina had ever slept in. She treasured it.

When she woke up in the morning, Aunt Valerie would have pancakes and bacon ready. As the girl with the big brown eyes stared at her from the oak kitchen table, she would hum a song while doing the dishes and then ironing their clothes, so they could get ready to join Uncle Nate at their new café, The Comfort Table.

Valerie would wait patiently for her niece to get dressed, never once yelling at her to hurry up or smacking her to make her move faster. Sometimes Georgina would take a whole hour of hiding in the bathroom just to see what her aunt would say. It was always quiet. Pure golden silence. No one to hit her with a ruler on her face or drag her by the hair for taking too long.

When they got to the café, Uncle Nate would be there and his eyes would light up every time they walked into the room. Then he would walk over to give his wife a kiss and twirl Georgina in the air. It was the only time Georgina would make a sound. Her giggle was so infectious that Valerie and Nate would both laugh as they looked into each other's eyes and fought back tears. After the ritual, Uncle Nate would take them over to his big desk and show them all the plans for the café. A cook named Raymond would come in with lunch and a special dessert for the quiet little girl.

After lunch, they would tell Uncle Nate goodbye and head to the fabric store. There they would walk up and down the aisles as Aunt Valerie selected various fabrics for the café's décor. Silently Georgina would eye the girly fabrics with fun patterns. She longed to reach out and touch them but was afraid of the consequences of being caught.

After shopping, it was time to go home to make dinner. Valerie would sit Georgina down at the table with a small bowl of fruit while she made dinner. She would say out loud what she was making and outline the process every step of the way just to see if maybe the little girl wanted something different to eat. Her chatter was always met with silence. Georgina even chewed silently, and it infuriated Valerie.

Kids were supposed to be loud and enthusiastic, talking at the speed of light about their day and what they would do the next day. They were supposed to run and find adventures to get into. Damn Ingrid Carlton to hell and back. She had wrung her daughter's spirit from her.

So they created rituals for the little girl, who before coming to live with them, had only known chaos in her young life. Nate would come home while dinner was still cooking and take Georgina to the park to let her play. It broke his heart whenever another child would run up to his niece to play and she would stare at the child, unaware of how to act. She would just turn and run back and grab his hand as she motioned that she wanted to leave now. He would scoop her in his arms and carry her back to the car. The whole time he would silently pray for God to help his baby.

After dinner, while Nate did the dishes, Valerie and Georgina would go upstairs for a bubble bath. Story time was next. While Valerie read, Nate would act out the story. After giving

her big hugs and whispering their love, they would walk quietly from the room arm in arm. Georgina never said a word.

In their own room, they would talk quietly about their day, and unable to hold it in any longer Valerie would fall into Nate's arms and unleash her tears for the silent little girl. Nate would whisper words of reassurance even as he fought to keep his own tears at bay. Then when words failed, they would comfort each other with their bodies. For two months, every day was like this. Then finally a breakthrough.

Fabrications had just gotten in a new order of paisley fabrics. Valerie, who had a degree in interior design, was in charge of decorating the café and wanted to buy some before it was all gone. On the way into the store, something bright in the window caught Georgina's eye. It was the most beautiful fabric she had ever seen. She wanted it so badly, it hurt. It was light pink fabric with rainbows all over. At the ends of each rainbow were white clouds that had a faint shimmer to it. Unicorns weaved in and out of the rainbows. The display hanging above the fabric was a large cardboard version of the rainbow with a shimmery unicorn running through.

Valerie was so used to Georgina's silence that she didn't even notice when the little girl fell back and stayed by the window display closest to the doors. Georgina was enchanted by the rainbows because they made her so happy. If only they could be hers. She reached her hand out to touch the display and lost her footing. Georgina fell against the board of fabric and the board knocked the display down with a loud crash.

Although unhurt, the little girl started to cry at the punishment that she knew would be forthcoming. She hoped it would be Aunt Valerie. Uncle Nate's hands were very large and Georgina knew they would definitely pack more punch.

“Are you okay, little lady?” It was Ms. Ramsey, the store manager who helped the terrified little girl to her feet. Georgina nodded slowly.

“Georgina!!!” She flinched at the sound of her name being screamed. Aunt Valerie was running full speed towards her, and she braced her body and quickly shut her eyes so she wouldn’t see the hit coming. Instead, she felt arms wrapping around her, and she was pulled tightly to a soft bosom.

“Oh baby, I thought I lost you. Then I heard that awful crash and almost died seeing you in that mess! What were you doing, baby girl?” Valerie asked her softly.

Georgina looked at her tear-stained face. Why was Aunt Valerie crying? Was it a trick to make her feel bad, and then she would be caught by surprise when the hit came? She decided to tell her the truth because it wouldn’t make a difference anyway.

“I wanted to touch the pretty fabric,” she whispered. Aunt Valerie looked at her for a long moment before looking at the fabric.

“Do you like this fabric?” she asked Georgina, who vigorously nodded her head yes. “What would you do with it?”

“I would decorate my room with it. I would make my room so pretty that I’d never leave it!” Georgina declared loud and clear, before lowering her eyes, “I’ve never had a room or a bed of my own before. Ingrid said I would just have to share.” Georgina shuddered as she thought of the awful noises

emanating from Ingrid's bed whenever a new man came into the picture.

Ms. Ramsey cursed quietly behind Valerie who was mentally doing the same. She then said "The fabric won't be in until Wednesday of next week. Would you like me to give you a call?"

"Yes please; we are going to need enough for a comforter, two standard shams, curtains, and nightstand cover. I'm also going to need some of the silver brocade fabric for one neck roll and two eighteen-inch square pillow covers," Valerie said, watching as Georgina's eyes got wider and wider with each item she listed. She then held out her hand to her niece who took it and held on for dear life. Hand in hand they walked out of the store. Valerie couldn't wait to tell Nate what had happened. They drove straight to The Comfort Table, and after getting Georgina settled at the desk with ice cream, she whispered in her husband's ear what happened. Nate leaned back in his chair and looked at his beautiful wife. He still couldn't believe she picked him out of all the men in this town chasing after her, and that she loved his sister's child almost as much as he did.

He cleared his throat loudly, and Georgina turned to look at him. Nate's breath caught as he looked at his adorable niece. She looked so much like Ingrid did at that age. He remembered as kids how she would follow him around. Ingrid would do and play anything he wanted as long as she could stay with her big brother Nate.

As a teenager, she had been beautiful, smart, and funny with plenty of friends, never lacking for male attention either. She was the apple of everyone's eye, and he as well as their parents spoiled her rotten. Nate and Ingrid were best friends despite their four-year age difference.

After high school, Nate went to Oregon State College. He was extremely popular and had a busy social life on top of being a great athlete. Despite all he had going on, he always made time to call his baby sister and go home for the holidays. It was his junior year of college that he convinced his parents to let Ingrid pay him a visit during her week of spring break. At first, they were nervous to let their baby go cross country all by herself, but Nate made a promise that he would keep her safe and out of trouble.

When he picked her up from the airport, Ingrid's eyes were shining bright, curls peeking out from underneath her beret. Nate was excited to see his best friend again. And when Ingrid spotted her big brother waiting for her, looking so tall and handsome in his varsity jacket, she launched herself into Nate's arms and shrieked with joy.

He took her back to campus and gave her a tour, proudly introducing her to all his friends and teachers along the way. While in the cafeteria, they bumped into some of his football teammates. One of them was a tall, brown-skinned youth named Russell Carlton. Nate had never liked the other boy. They competed for the starting running back position and Nate won. Russell was a poor sport about it. He talked about Nate behind his back every chance he got. When Nate confronted him about it, he quickly shut his mouth. Another reason Nate did not care for Russell was because he treated women badly. He charmed them with pretty words and then took what he wanted from them. Sophomore year, he put a girl in the hospital with broken pelvic bones and bite marks all over her body. A girl on campus had filed restraining order against him, but soon left school for good afterward.

As Nate stood there talking to one of his teammates, he saw Russell talking to Ingrid, who seemed to be hanging on to his every word. Nate quickly cut off his conversation to head their

way. Suddenly Russell looked right at him and smiled. Nate thought of his promise to his parents and felt a cold chill run down his spine.

“Uncle Nate?” Georgina’s soft voice broke him out of his reverie. Valerie was looking at him with concern.

“Yes, honey, I’m here. I was just thinking about something I had to do later,” he smiled at his niece, who surprised him by smiling back.

“Georgie, I was wondering if you could make some time to go with me and your Aunt Valerie next Wednesday if you are not too busy?” he asked her gallantly. Shyly she nodded her head yes. The small family spent the next couple of days painting Georgina’s room and furniture.

Wednesday was finally here and Georgina rushed through breakfast and put her clothes on all by herself. Valerie and Nate tried to hide their delight over their niece’s obvious excitement. As they pulled into the parking lot of Fabrications, Georgina could hardly contain her excitement. She walked between her aunt and uncle, skipping as a normal child would do, chatting a mile a minute. Valerie and Nate exchanged smiles over their niece’s head. They had patiently waited and good things were coming. Between the breakthrough with Georgina and the completion of their restaurant, they felt that everything was finally coming together...

Georgina set the picture frame down and grabbed her bag to unpack. She was going to take a shower, eat, and then get some sleep. Tomorrow she planned on going back down to the hospital to take care of her family the way they had always taken care of her. But first, she had to call Graham back so he didn’t worry.

The phone rang once before he answered. “Georgie? What’s wrong?”

She immediately felt bad for making him worry and hastened to reassure him. “Hi, G. Nothing’s wrong. I was just getting to the house and was met by Baymoor’s unofficial welcoming committee. What’s up?”

There was a moment of silence as he debated whether she was telling the truth or not. She pictured her big brother. He was well over six feet, tattooed, and ripped. Graham was also fiercely protective of his sisters. Ever since the night, their lives were forever changed...

Finally, he spoke. “So I talked to Uncle Nate and his prognosis is good. They’re both happy to have you there. How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine, now that I’ve seen them. I’m going to start unpacking and then work on some plans for the business. I met their good friend Max today and visited the café.” She prayed he didn’t ask her about Max. But luck was not on her side.

“Oh yeah, what’s he like?” Georgina knew that Graham would be making note of her answers and running a background check on the farmer. It was something he was privileged to do with his government background. She wondered with amusement what he would think of her honest opinion. *Tall, mouth-wateringly gorgeous, a straight up beast between the sheets...*

“He’s alright,” she said nonchalantly. *Has a kickass tattoo on his tight abs...*

“I see...he’s just...alright?” Graham seemed to be gauging her response.

“Well, it’s not like I know him or anything! I mean, what do you want me to say? He’s infuriatingly nice, doesn’t look like any farmer I’ve ever seen, and all the women are gaga for him?” Georgina responded waspishly, and then closed her eyes. *Uh-oh...*

“Oh shit! You like him!” Graham started laughing. “He must be something special if he’s got *you* paying attention to him. You *never* look. Think I might have to take me a trip down to Baymoor and meet this farm boy that’s got my little sister’s nose wide open.”

“Don’t you dare do it!” Georgina warned. “Nothing’s going on here. I came for a visit and despite the happiness I’m feeling for getting to spend time with the parentals, I cannot wait to head home.”

But Graham wasn’t buying what she was selling. “Georgie likes Maaaax! Georgie likes Maaaax!”

“Shouldn’t you be off somewhere confusing some poor woman with mixed signals?” she asked haughtily.

“Nope,” Graham responded immediately. “I’ve waited too long for you to display an interest in *anyone* to let this go. It’s not normal for someone like yourself to live the way you do, Georgie.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?! I’m normal!” she replied indignantly.

“Ish. You’re normal-ish,” Graham bluntly replied. “As in you function in society but only to a certain degree. You have a career that you are obsessed with, pay taxes, have friends that you occasionally socialize with, but that’s *it*. You do the bare minimum.”

Georgina saw red as she sucked her teeth harder than a Hoover vacuum cleaner. “Hold up! I know you didn’t just try to call me a basic bitch, Graham Lewis Carlton?! I’m about to fuc-”

“No, no, no,” Graham said hastily as he tried to diffuse his little sister’s temper. He knew what she was capable of if mad enough. Hell, he’d *taught* it to her. “That is not what I said at all, dammit! Don’t go putting words in my mouth, Little Bit. Look, no brother wants to ever say or think this about his sister, but you’re a beautiful, sexy woman who should be having a good time dating or at *least* getting laid occasionally. You show no interest in the opposite sex or even your own sex! You’re only thirty years old, Georgie. Don’t you want to experience just a little more to life?”

She started to reply with a smart-ass comment when a long ago memory flashed through her mind.

“Sorry, Georgina. I really like you, but Mama says I can’t invite you to my birthday party on account of how your mama turned out. She said the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, you know?” Darlene Myers’ normally pale face was apple red with embarrassment and her brown eyes filled with tears as she apologetically explained to Georgina why she was the only girl in class that hadn’t received an invitation. “I would if I could, though, because I really, really like you. I swear!”

She willed herself not to cry and held her head high, aware that the other kids at the lunch room table were absorbing Darlene's words like sponges. It seemed that she would never be able to escape Ingrid and her well-deserved reputation. That afternoon Georgina went home and repeated to her aunt with a stoic face what Darlene had said. After giving her niece an afternoon snack, Valerie went to the phone and called Eugenia Myers. She coolly informed her that The Comfort Table would not be utilizing Meyers Dry Cleaning and Alterations to clean their linens. The next day, a happy Darlene tried to give Georgina an invitation to her party, but the damage had been done and the other kids were whispering about her.

Wearily Georgina said, "Thanks for your concern, Graham, but you don't have to worry about me; I'll be just fine. Look, I'm going to take a shower now and I'll give you a call in a couple of days. Bye."

She leaned back on the plush chenille sofa and stared up at the ceiling. Was this what her life had come to? That even her own overprotective brother was lecturing and encouraging her to get laid??? He was also the fourth person today to tell her about having fun. Surely she wasn't that bad? *Was she?*

Max entered his home through the front door and tossed the truck keys on the foyer console. He walked into the kitchen and found his longtime cook Betty pulling wrapped dishes out of the refrigerator. "Hey, Betty, need any help?"

Betty Stratton turned to smile at her tall, handsome employer. “No, sir, I’m just putting the last of the side dishes out, before taking off.”

“What? I thought you and Hank were staying to eat?” Max asked with raised brows.

Betty shook her head with a grin, “Well Hank called me to say that the Soulful Steps was having a stepping party, and you know how Hank and I love a good stepping. Got to do it while I still have these legs, you know.”

Max smiled at that. Betty and her husband were both sixty-eight and loved to dance. Their specialty was step line dancing, and she could often be found dancing around the kitchen as she completed her tasks. “Let Hank know I’ve got some moves I could show him if he’s interested.”

“Boy, please! My Hank could teach you a thang or two!” She gave him a cunning smile. “But you might want to think carefully about asking him. The last time I asked him to show me, I wound up married with four kids. You start dancing like my Hank, and you’ll have the town wenches following you like the Pied Piper!”

Betty cackled at Max’s shudder and handed him a beer. “Now you’re all set. You go enjoy your evening, and I’ll see you tomorrow at nine.”

Max gave her an eyebrow. “Your shift starts at eight, young lady.”

“Now didn’t I just tell you about Hank and his dancing?! Once he gets to showing his moves I can’t even *control* myself-”

“Take the day off. Bye.” Max hightailed it out of the kitchen with a quickness, hoping to leave the image that Betty had planted in his brain behind as she cackled again.

Cringing, he followed the savory aroma of grilling meat and walked out of the backdoor to join his company on the porch. He was greeted with hellos and Tavish’s words of, “How in the hell do you invite us to dinner and you’re the last one here?”

Max glanced at him as he flipped the links and then at Wade standing next to him. The sheriff had exchanged his police uniform for a white t-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops as he sipped a beer. “A better question would be: How the hell did our good sheriff here beat me here. Thought you had a meeting to go to?”

Wade shook his shaggy shoulder-length blonde hair and laughed. “I did have a meeting, but it didn’t take long. Besides, don’t act like as soon as Ida said “very pretty lady with big brown eyes” you weren’t out of your chair and volunteering to go.” He tipped his head back and took a swig of beer. “So the Bankses have a very pretty niece, huh? What’s she like?”

‘Aye, now that I would like to know as well. Describe her please,” Tavish requested with interest in his eyes. Max barely resisted the urge to smash the easygoing Scott’s face in, and the way Wade was giving the same look, he could get some too.

Donna, who was sitting at the table quietly chatting with the Martin Allen, the editor of the *Baymoor Gazette*, stopped talking to look at Max with interest, and Max groaned because

nothing got past Donna's eagle eyes. "I too would like to know, Max."

Georgina had him fucked up for sure, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it because he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything. He leveled his stare at the two men, that between them had had more women than their years of age. "I can describe her in one word. *Unavailable*. That's what she's like. Stay away from her."

The look in his eyes let the two other men know he meant business as they snickered at his expense and clinked their beer bottles together; staring at him in speculation.

"Think we're going to need the governor to declare a state of emergency and call in the National Guard," Wade stated with relish. "I don't have the manpower to protect his picky ass from the women in Baymoor when they find out what he's gone and done."

Chapter Seven

Friday morning Georgina went back to the hospital for a longer visit. She brought more clothes for Valerie, as well as magazines, books, coffee, and an enormous card that Raymond had placed at the café counter for everyone to sign and write their well wishes. He had given it to her when she stopped in to say hello. Despite her protests, he made her a plate of blueberry pancakes and sausage and gave her a message to deliver: "Now you tell that hard-headed cuss Nate

not to push his recovery. Everything is under control here, cherie.”

Val and Nate were touched by all the well-wishes, and they informed her that the doctor was releasing Nate Sunday. After they were done reading the card, Georgina with a mischievous smile, pulled a pack of Uno cards out of her purse. “I believe a rematch is in order. Last time you guys came to town; I was sick so my game wasn’t solid.” They all laughed as she dealt the cards out. Four intense games later, she had reclaimed her Uno championship title, and the nurse came in to say it was time for Nate to rest. Val turned to Georgina. “Max is coming to take me to lunch at a new crab shack in Berlin. Why don’t you come with us? He should be here in twenty minutes.”

The thought of seeing him again made Georgina’s stomach flutter with butterflies and she tried not to show much he unnerved her. “Oh no, you go ahead. I’d like to, but I was actually going to the mall to pick up a few things and then head back to the house to work on my launch party ideas. But I think the fresh air would definitely do you some good.”

“Okay, but just so you know, he invited us to dinner at *Cinnamon Farms* this Sunday so please don’t make plans with any of your friends for that day,” Valerie requested and Georgina didn’t have the heart to tell her aunt that she’d yet to seek anyone out. Especially after the way she’d cut everyone off.

After giving hugs and kisses she quickly left, not willing to have another run-in with Max if it could be prevented. Georgina drove to Wellington Mall and stopped in Victoria’s Secret. She examined every underwear style they had and tried on every bra and lingerie item as well, testing them for durability and flexibility in comparison to her own designs. To

throw the suspicious salesgirl off, she purchased a bottle of body lotion.

Next, she headed to Nordstrom where she did some serious damage in the denim department. There was a candle store that hadn't been there the last time she was home so she stopped in and bought some fig- and sandalwood-scented candles. Georgina planned on taking a long, relaxing bubble bath tonight, and she loved to light candles while unwinding.

As Georgina was coming out of the shop, she ran into a man's muscled chest and her packages dropped out of her hands. "I'm so sorry-", she started, only to be interrupted by a deep voice.

"No, it was my fault." As he stood up from retrieving her packages, Georgina found herself face-to-face with Davis Fowler, her secret high school crush.

Two years ahead of her, Davis was always nice to Georgina, but nothing more. At thirty-two, he was still good-looking with his butterscotch complexion and hazel eyes. His wavy black hair was gone, replaced with a smooth bald head, and he now sported a goatee. He was also appraising her with a puzzled look as if he couldn't quite place her. She decided to clue him in.

"Hi Davis, it's Georgina Carlton from high school. How've you been?" His eyes widened in surprise, and then admiration set in as he looked her up and down, and finally he reached in to hug her. Georgina noted to herself that he took care of himself by the feel of his firm body, but he wasn't insanely in shape from doing manual farm labor. And his scent was pleasant and...clean, nothing cloaked in heady mystery that made her want to inhale him, the way she did "Max the Ass". Why couldn't she get him out of her mind??

“Georgina! It’s great to see you again. I heard about your uncle. How’s he doing?” Davis’s expression turned to concern. “Pops was just saying he wanted to stop by the hospital to say hello.”

“That’s sweet of him. Uncle Nate’s doing a lot better and will be coming home soon.” Georgina said as she surveyed him and liked what she saw. Although she found Davis attractive, she was relieved to find he did not send her into a tailspin the way Maxwell Jason Hayes did. His level of hotness to her was jalapeno, compared to Max who was a pain-searing, mind-numbing *bhut jolokia* ghost pepper. Maybe he was just what she needed to regain control. Georgina smiled at him even more invitingly, and he returned it eagerly.

“Well, I was just about to have an early dinner with my parents at DaVinci’s. Would you care to join us? I’m sure they’d love to see you. We could catch up since it’s been so long,” Davis suggested, just as his parents walked up.

Georgina gave a friendly smile as Brenton Fowler, in his booming voice declared, “I know this isn’t young Georgina Carlton all grown up now! Girl, get over here and gimme a hug!”

Although a little surprised at his enthusiastic greeting, she complied and the older man embraced her warmly. “It’s good to see you, honey! Staying awhile? I was just telling Davis that I wanted to stop by, but Edith suggested we let him rest and just see him at the party.”

“That sounds like a better idea. The doctors are adamant about him resting and definitely not overdoing it when he gets home, sir.” Georgina turned to Edith Fowler, who looked like she just

ate a bowl of lemons and greeted her politely, “Mrs. Fowler, it’s very nice to see you again.”

“Hello, dear. How long are you staying in town?” she asked coolly. Edith Fowler was still as impeccable as ever. Never a hair or article of clothing out of place. She was the ultimate ice queen, and if Davis wasn’t standing and breathing next to her, Georgina would never have believed the woman mussed herself up enough to have sex. It’s a wonder Fowler hadn’t frozen to death in his bed.

“This is actually a short visit. I’m just-”

Her cell phone began to ring. She looked down and noticed her sister’s number. “Excuse me one moment, please. Hi, Eliza. What’s wrong? Oh no! Let me call you back.” After hanging up, she smiled apologetically at the Fowlers. “It was great seeing you guys. That was my sister calling. My niece had a small accident. I’d better go so I can find out all the details.”

The elder Fowlers murmured condolences, and Davis smiled. “Perhaps another time then, Georgina. It was really, really good to see you.” She waved goodbye to them and then turned away, quickly dialing Eliza’s number. “Eliza! What happened? Start from the beginning.”

When she got home, Georgina spoke to her aunt and uncle and let them know that Camille was suffering from severe motion sickness so Eliza had cut their cruise short. They were now vacationing in Key West for the next month. Then Georgina made herself a grilled cheese sandwich and a green salad. Taking the bottle of wine to the living room, she decided to watch some television. Lifetime was running a Grey’s Anatomy marathon. Perfect.

The pounding at the door woke Georgina up Saturday morning. She opened one eye and looked at the pink and white striped ceiling. Why did her head feel like it was going to explode? Groaning, she slowly sat up and swung her legs out of bed, causing her to knock an empty wine bottle over. A glance at her nightstand clock confirmed it was too fucking early for her to be up. Who the hell was up at 8:15 bothering decent folks? The pounding at the door increased.

“Dammit, stop pounding on the door!” she yelled, wincing when the yelling made her head hurt even more. The pounding stopped. As Georgina went to open the door, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror and groaned. Last night after her shower, she’d been too tired to tend to her wet hair. She looked like she had a miniature poodle sitting atop her head, and her eyes were puffy. Oh well, the insensitive jerk on the other side of the door didn’t deserve her best foot forward. She swung the door open and covered her face as she was hit by cold air and bright sunlight. “Aaargh!”

Squinting, she hoped she was scary-looking enough to make whoever it was turn tail and run. Georgina was only able to make out a man’s tall form and could only hope it wasn’t who she thought it was. Unfortunately, it was.

“Good morning to you too,” Max replied in amusement. And Georgina had to refrain from clutching her stomach to stop the crazy flips it was doing in response to his hypnotic voice.

“Hahaha”, she muttered. She stepped back to let him in so she could quickly shut the door. Now her eyes hurt also. As he stood there staring at her, Georgina quickly became aware of her morning appearance and tried to smooth her hair down. Boiiiiing. The short curls sprang back into place, refusing to be tamed. She licked her lips and stared at him. He was slowly taking in her appearance. They traveled from the top of her bed head to her bare feet. Everywhere his eyes touched seemed to warm her body. His hot eyes rose to meet hers and suddenly Georgina felt too warm like she needed to walk out into the brisk morning wind to cool down. She resisted the urge to cover herself.

She noticed the basket in his right hand and a delicious aroma emanating from it. Her stomach growled loudly, filling the silence between them and soon followed by the sound of his deep laughter. She was beyond horrified. “Was there something that you needed at the butt crack of dawn this morning, Hayes?”

“I brought a peace offering this morning, and I was a little worried that it wouldn’t be accepted, but I feel like my chances are looking better by the minute,” Max replied smugly. “I’m sorry to stop by so early; but after Thursday’s fiasco, I was a little bit concerned about you. Why don’t you go freshen up and I’ll get breakfast together?” He turned and headed towards the kitchen, obviously knowing his way around the house.

Georgina just stared after him. Why did he have to be so good looking first thing in the morning? The man seriously looked like he’d been photoshopped with his flawless complexion and sparkling eyes. She felt like road kill standing next to him with her bed head hair and shiny face. Shaking her head, she went upstairs to try to make herself look a little less scary. *Not that she cared in the least what he thought of her...*

As Max heard her go upstairs, he walked over to the sink and ran the cold water. He then put his palms in the freezing water and splashed some on his face. Twice. He couldn't believe she hadn't noticed his massive hard-on. It had damn near poked her in the eye! When she opened the door in nothing but a tank top and fitted biker-type shorts, he had been startled but quickly regained his composure. As he walked past her, he turned to make another smart comment but quickly forgot what he was going to say as he read the words "bite me" on her backside. Images of him nibbling on her gorgeous booty again played in his mind. He could feel himself stirring. She wasn't wearing a bra, and her generous twin mounds could be seen through her skimpy tank. Her nipples were hard from the cold, he assumed. Then she came to stand across from him, and she was even prettier than he remembered with her glowing skin, and her eyes looking all sleepy and she was delightfully ruffled. Her short hair was a mass of uncontrolled curls. He wanted to do was drag her back upstairs and make love to her, to be surrounded by her scent of gardenias and orange blossoms again.

All thoughts of being neighborly this morning were now gone from his mind. He felt really bad about the way everyone behaved the other day and could tell she had been pretty upset. He'd wanted to make it up to her this morning by bringing her breakfast and maybe starting fresh. But right now all he could think of was her in the shower soaping up her sexy body. Did she touch herself? Her hands perhaps sliding between her legs occasionally? He was fairly certain she would freak if he joined her.

He heard the water stop and quickly went back to setting the table. Last night he'd called to check on Nate and let him know that he would be stopping by to check on their precious Georgie. He wanted to make it clear to the older man, as he did yesterday at lunch with Val, that he was very interested in their niece. It was strange to hear them talk about her as if she

was still a child when Max had firsthand knowledge that she was a grown-ass woman with grown woman needs.

A movement outside caught his eye. Two squirrels were chasing each other up and down a maple tree. The one running away was sending the other on a wild chase as it went up and down the tree. Max had a strong hunch that squirrel was a girl and immediately felt a kinship with the other squirrel, that had to be a boy. Why else would he look so frustrated? So lost in his thoughts, he didn't hear Georgina until she spoke.

“Do you need any help?” she asked. Max turned to look at her and felt like he couldn't breathe. She'd straightened her hair and it fell across her forehead in sexy, casual disarray. Minimum makeup touched her face and she had exchanged her skimpy clothing for a wraparound dress in a vibrant pink, coral, green, and black floral pattern, with black stilettos. She looked gorgeous, sleek, and unobtainable. Translation: she'd put her wall firmly back in place.

“Cappuccinos are just about done.” Max felt his face heat up to be caught gawking like a schoolboy. Damn, she was seriously under his skin. He'd been around the world and lived the fast life, with tons of money and beautiful women, but this one tiny woman had him tied in knots. Max surveyed the lemon meringue waffles with strawberry syrup and spinach, bacon, and artichoke quiches he'd paid Mario, Raymond's sous chef, three hundred dollars to make this morning and felt even more foolish. He really hoped that she didn't think that he expected her to put out. Silently he filled her cup and then pulled her chair out, waiting for her to sit before seating himself. She made their plates and they said grace before eating. At first, they didn't speak and just enjoyed the food. Finally, Georgina broke the silence.

“Everything is delicious, Max. Thank you,” she said sincerely, feeling immensely flattered and thankful that he’d gone to all of this trouble just for her. When she lived with her mother, she had been constantly put on the backburner as Ingrid gave her all to whatever man she was with, never investing in her children with the same unbridled interest. Graham and Eliza, who were eight and ten years older respectively, had done their best to be parents to her, but they worked constantly to support the family. Graham, enraged at the abuse his mother endured in her relationships, turned to boxing at the local YMCA as an outlet for his anger, and then became a janitor of sorts for them. Eliza, who despite the odds stacked against her earned a 4.0 GPA, should have been in school but dropped out to take care of Georgina. One of her friends was able to get her a fake ID, and she worked as a cocktail waitress while fending off advances at the club and from her mother’s boyfriends at home. Ingrid was jealous and insecure of Eliza’s beauty and often accused her daughter of trying to seduce her men. Eliza endured it all with quiet dignity.

When Eliza and Graham worked, they had Mrs. Archer, their downstairs neighbor, babysit Georgie, and then Graham would pick her up on his way home from work. Graham and Eliza knew their childhoods were long gone but tried their best to give Georgina one. It was Eliza who attended all her school meetings and events. Graham taught her sports. They thought they had everything covered up, until the night it exploded in their faces. Shaking away those memories, she looked at Max and found him observing her again.

“No problem. It’s the least I could do after you got the suspicious end of the welcoming committee. I asked the ladies to please keep this incident to themselves, seeing as how they are, as you put it ‘fine, upstanding, citizens’,” he said with a wink, watching as she cut into her waffles. “The kids promised Mrs. Laurent they wouldn’t talk about it at school.”

“These are delicious; I should smack you for coming over here and tempting me like this,” Georgina said with a happy sigh as the creamy, tart citrus and sweet berry flavors danced along her tongue. She then narrowed her eyes at Max’s look of interest. “Never mind; judging from your expression, you’d probably like it.”

Max gave her a roguish wink. “I might have put being spanked by a beautiful woman somewhere on my bucket list; but just so we’re clear, I’m not going to call you mama while you’re doing it.”

“You’re like the perfect curly fry— visually pleasing, but severely twisted,” she murmured before changing the subject. “Now why would she care that they do or don’t bring it up at school?” Georgina asked curiously. She watched as he took a sip of his cappuccino. The delicate cup should have looked out of place in his large hand, but instead, he molded his fingers around it and became its protector.

“She’s their principal. Now don’t look like that. Mrs. Laurent isn’t that bad...once you get to know her,” he said chuckling at her horrified expression.

“What you’re really saying is she’s a complete and utter bitch, but I’ll get used to it,” she corrected him. “So you’re telling me that dragon in pink velvet is in charge of shaping the young minds of this town?!” Georgina couldn’t believe it. The old harpy had threatened to tase her while innocent children looked on. Not that those rug rats had seemed *that* innocent, which proved her point about Mrs. Laurent.

“Yep, and Ms. Ida is the librarian, Mrs. Taylor is the school nurse, and Mrs. Downing is the leader of D.A.R.E.”

“If Las Vegas had them instead of Metro police the crime rate would be nonexistent,” Georgina said, still in disbelief. “I don’t remember any of those ladies except I thought Mrs. Taylor looked familiar....”

“Mrs. Taylor was married to Mark Higgins the butcher. Remember him? Well, he passed away, and Widow Higgins was suddenly a hot commodity on the senior circuit. Deputy Jonas Taylor was the lucky winner,” Max stated in a gossipy tone, wiggling his eyebrows.

She laughed and the warm sensuous sound wrapped itself around Max’s dick and stroked it hard as granite. “That’s what I mean about small towns. You can’t go anywhere with anyone without someone speculating about your business. Is small-town-living everything you thought it would be? Aunt Valerie told me about your career in international law, and I still can’t believe you left it for Baymoor.”

“I left it for my family’s legacy,” Max amended. “I loved practicing law, but I love what I do now a million times more. My mother and Uncle Walt were twins but as different as night and day. Mom couldn’t wait to leave this town and never looked back. As a matter of fact, she didn’t start visiting the farm until I made it my home. She was on a plane back to California two hours after her brother’s funeral where she and my father own a successful law firm.”

His statement held a tinge of bitterness and hit a little too close to home for Georgina who shifted uneasily in her chair. “Well is that really a bad thing? Not everyone is cut out for small town life. Seems like it worked out just fine for them. Walter got a successful farmstead, and your parents have the firm.”

“If you want to look at it that way. My grandparents died in a car crash when mom and Uncle Walter were nineteen. They

left the farm to them. Mom wanted to sell the farm and let it pay for school for the both of them. She had dreams to be a lawyer and my uncle wanted to be a pediatrician,” Max paused, looking a little sad. Georgina had to fight the urge *not* to reach out and touch him. “To make a long story short, the farm has been in the family for a hundred years. There aren’t that many black-owned farms in Maryland. Uncle Walt just couldn’t sell it. So he stayed and sent Mom a check each month. When I moved here, Uncle Walt was grooming me to take over the business. He’d started taking online classes for college when he got sick. And then he was gone.”

She couldn’t help herself; Georgina reached out and clasped his hand in hers. “Your uncle was a really good man, Max. He had a way of making everyone around him feel good...like they mattered. I’ll never forget how he used to make his employees buy my fresh lemonade, drink it in front of me, and tell me how good it was.” She grimaced. “Did I mention that I didn’t know you had to *add* sugar to sweeten until I was eleven?”

Max’s laughter was contagious and she joined in. It was a nice moment for two people who’d gotten to know each other by first taking off their clothes. *He was as kind as he was attractive*, Georgina mused, loving the way his dark denim shirt complimented his rich sienna skin and the starkness of his white teeth against his black beard. Those humor-filled, slumberous bedroom eyes weren’t even trying to seduce, but they were certainly doing a number on her. She glanced down at their hands still intertwined. His much larger one had calluses, but the long fingers had clean, trimmed fingernails. His thumb brushed against the inside of her wrist, making her pulse skitter.

“Tell me about yourself, Georgina.” Max’s voice was husky, and she pulled her hand back reluctantly, immediately feeling the loss of his touch.

Clearing her throat, she asked, “What do you want to know? You already know that I own *Feminine Intuition*. Ummm, let’s see...for the last ten years, I was part of an acrobatic dance troupe called El Sol & Le Moon, and I graduated from UNLV.

I’m thirty years old, own my own house, have no kids, and my main focus is making my company number one in its market. I don’t like animals, cheaters, or people who don’t stay in their own lane. I’m a Capricorn that doesn’t like to cook or be told no. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

She was a dancer. So that’s why she was so damn flexible. No, that information didn’t satisfy his curiosity by a long shot. Max wanted to know things like how she got that small scar on her inner right thigh. Or had the tiny tattoo on her left shoulder that he’d licked, hurt when she got it done? “For now.”

“So which female in town are you currently seeing? I’m sure word will get back to her that your truck was seen outside of this house at an ungodly hour in the morning. Way too early for a polite social call, right?” she said half-teasingly. Only half because she really hoped he said no one. He smiled at her and dropped his gaze to his coffee cup, tracing circles around the rim with a long, elegant finger. Georgina watched and remembered him drawing lazy circles around her belly button before his hand slid lower and lower between her legs to touch-

“I don’t date the women in town. Not because I don’t find them attractive, but because like you, I come from a big city and value my privacy. If I was interested in a woman, I would be very discreet about it. Not wanting her to be hurt by small town speculation or malicious gossip. I would just want to enjoy what we have with no interference from the outside

world. You know...let things take their natural course,” Max stated, raising his eyes to stare at her intently.

Georgina got the feeling he was telling her that she had nothing to worry about if she just gave in to temptation. *Temptation*. Damn, she hated that word! It implied that you were weak and lacking in self-control if you succumbed. She quickly got to her feet and started clearing the table, and Max’s deep voice followed her. “What about you, Georgina? Are you seeing anyone?” Suddenly he was behind her, enveloping her in his body heat and that mouthwatering fragrance that had her wanting to *devour* him. Now she understood and vowed never to mock that Twilight vampire again.

She had just finished washing dishes and turned to get a washcloth when he went to place a bowl in the sink. Their bodies brushed and she froze at the contact. He was all muscle to her curves. Slowly he placed the bowl in the sink behind her but didn’t move away. The heat rising between their bodies was nuclear hot. What was the saying? If you can’t stand the heat?

“No, I’m not seeing anyone. I don’t have time for a relationship. They’re too time-consuming and I don’t have any free time to spare,” she declared firmly. Avoiding his gaze, she put the dishes in the large farmhouse-style sink as he started putting food away. The sexual tension was thick enough that Georgina felt like she was suffocating.

“I’ve never met a woman who said they had no time for a relationship,” Max remarked in a mocking tone. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Actually, it works out very well. I find most men want someone to baby and care for them, and since I’m not the least

bit interested in having children, it's a no-brainer for me," Georgina responded smartly.

Max felt like a stalker as he stared down at her pretty face. Those big, expressive brown eyes that flickered with awareness, let him know that bullshit she was talking was just that. Bull. Shit. But he also saw her strength and determination and knew that he could bend her body into a thousand positions, but if she made up her mind on something, her will would not bend. He heard the words her full pink lips were saying, but he wasn't listening. Eleven. That was the number of freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks. Georgina's brown skin was clear and glowing, and the cap of tousled hair suited her gamine features perfectly. Her fresh-faced natural beauty wasn't his normal type. Usually, the woman he went for were ultra-glam and never left the house without a full face of makeup and hair so perfectly styled it could withstand a hurricane. After spending time with Georgina, he wondered why he ever bothered with the others.

"Max? Are you listening?"

He wasn't. He was too busy reading her body language and what it revealed. Her throat convulsing as she swallowed several times, teeth worrying her bottom lip, and those nipples... even the busy pattern of her dress couldn't hide the rigid peaks that were begging for his attention as her body slightly swayed toward his before she held herself still. She wanted him but didn't want to want him. Well, that was okay with Max for the time being because he wanted *this* enough for the both of them. He lowered his head, giving her time to change her mind.

Georgina saw the dark, stormy desire escalating in Max's eyes, and for all her talk, was helpless to resist as she closed her eyes and rose on tiptoe to reach his mouth. Her arms circled

his neck and his arms came around her and crushed her to him. And when their lips met, it was game over as they drank thirstily from each other.

His tongue traced her lips and she quivered, goose bumps spreading all over her body as she opened her mouth to invite him in. He accepted and explored the silky cavern of her mouth, stroking her tongue and gently sucking on it. He tasted like heaven and she couldn't get enough of him. He sucked on her bottom lip, gently biting it and Georgina returned the favor as moisture pooled between her legs.

Her hands lowered to slide underneath his shirt to feel his rock-hard body and she broke the kiss to yank his shirt off, exposing his sculpted chest. Max groaned as she bit his nipple and lazily encircled it with her tongue. Then she kissed his chest before bringing her lips back up to meet his. "You want me to fuck you as bad as I want to. Don't you, Georgina?"

The words raggedly whispered against her lips caused a deep throbbing to slowly spread through her as she bit his lips and clasped him tightly to her. He lifted her by the waist and she wrapped her legs around him. Frantically she ground her center against his. His tongue plundered her mouth, and she drew on it hungrily, mumbling feverishly "*I do... God... yes, I do!*"

Every step he took caused her pussy and breasts to rub against him erotically, and Georgina felt like she was so far gone that she would cum before they reached their destination. They reached the end of the dining room table, and Max shoved the end chair out of the way to bend her over it. She lay panting heavily as he followed, pinning her gently to the table. He turned her head and fed her deep kisses as his other hand lifted her dress and slid past her underwear into the slick folds of her pussy. Max rubbed his hard on against her ass and plunged

two fingers into her while his thumb caressed her swollen clit. The room was filled with their harsh breathing and the sound of his fingers swimming in her embarrassing wetness.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Georgina thought she'd gotten rid of the aching pressure building and building inside of her other night. But one night didn't make up for years of self-imposed sexual exile. She couldn't draw the breath to scream as she exploded under Max's skilled onslaught, and her release ran down her shaking legs in rivulets. Max was kissing her so deeply, and his fingers were fucking magic as they stroked and teased her beyond her control. She was a quivering hot ass mess, but still she needed *more. Oh so much more from him.*

"You know we're just getting started, don't you, baby?" Max murmured as he withdrew his fingers and lifted her. He gently turned her over and placed her on the table before divesting himself of the rest of his clothing. A primal surge of satisfaction coursed through him as he took in the beauty lying before him, flushed from his loving. Her eyes glittered feverishly as she admired his body. Georgina's gaze lingered on his dick and she licked her lips before raising her gaze back up to his. Max smirked knowingly, "Don't worry, love, we'll get to that. But for now, undo your dress and spread your legs."

Georgina grinned wickedly and braced herself on her elbows and untied her dress to reveal a persimmon and black striped satin bra with black polka dot lace trim that cupped her breasts beautifully. Nestled in the center was a black satin bow. She spread her legs wider and the rest of her dress opened, revealing matching boy-cut panties. The fabric covering her pelvic bones were cut out and replaced with the same lace as the bra. The lingerie clung to her magnificent curves, and it was almost too much for Max as he stroked himself. "Oh fuuuuck, baby. You're trying to give me a heart attack."

Max got between her legs and cupped the back of her neck to tilt her head and claim her mouth once more. Georgina drew on his tongue, savoring the taste of him. He lowered his mouth and his teeth gently scraped the column of her throat as he kissed and licked her weak spots while his beard rubbed deliciously against her over-sensitized skin. His hands palmed her aching breasts and teased her swollen nipples through the fabric of her bra.

Max shifted and bent his head to capture a nipple in his mouth through the fabric, suckling hard. His warm breath and wet tongue through the silk drove her crazy. Georgina's head fell back against the table with a bang and she grasped his head closer urging him to take more of her into his mouth. He bit the brown nub and she groaned long and loud. The feeling was exquisite, bordering between pleasure and pain. One hand reached up between her breasts to unhook the bra clasp hidden underneath the black bow in the center and the cups fell away. Max feasted his eyes on her lush, perfectly formed breasts topped with swollen chocolate nipples. He cupped the firm globes in his hands and alternated between rolling and squeezing her nipples.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he said hoarsely, staring deeply into her eyes. The intensity of his gaze while he continued to fondle her just about set Georgina off again. Grasping his head, she pulled him back down to her breasts, dying to feel his mouth on her again. He squeezed both of her breasts as close as he could and took his time alternating between licking her nipples in slow circles and inhaling them. Georgina arched her back, writhing at the pleasure coursing through her body, “*God damn!*”

Max lifted his head, captured her loud moans in another devastating kiss, and swallowed her sounds of pleasure as he roughly fondled her breasts, stopping only to place a small

foiled package in her hand. Staring into her eyes, he ordered, "Suit me up."

Eagerly she reached down and gripped him, but it was no easy thing to do. Max was big and one hand couldn't fully encircle him, but she was determined to pleasure him as she stroked him firmly, using his precum to coat his shaft. He groaned into her ear, sucking her earlobe and causing her pussy to clench tightly as he pushed his swollen, heavy shaft deeper into her palms. Georgina opened the foil with her teeth and took out the latex and expertly rolled it over Max's nine inches.

"Please, Max, now! I can't wait anymore!"

"Yes you can, baby. You were made to take anything I dish out. Now give them to me," he commanded and Georgina eagerly cupped her breasts, offering them up to his greedy mouth as his hands palmed her generous booty, caressing and squeezing before peeling her drenched panties off and tossing them to the side. Georgina wrapped her legs around his waist and the action brought her pussy into direct contact with his dick. Max slid his left arm under her to bring her closer to him as he slowly ground himself against her hotspot and claimed her lips again. His other hand slid down between them, and he inserted two thick fingers into her wetness once more. He moved them in sync with his tongue as his thumb teased her swollen clit and it was too much for Georgina, who clung to him desperately aching to find release.

Max flicked her button with his thumb and *kaboom* she went, detonating into flames. Wrenching her mouth from his, she screamed as waves of pleasure shook her body while she rode his fingers, gripping him for dear life. He held onto her tightly and switched his mouth to her exposed neck, licking and biting along the sensitive nerves again as his fingers continued to work their incredible magic on her. The second climax was even more devastating than the first and prolonged by the shoving of her right leg over his shoulder, and Max finally

plunging his big dick into her. Georgina wailed aloud as he rubbed against her g-spot and triggered a third orgasm. “*Yes, yes, yessss! Don’t stop!*”

Max pinned her in place by her neck and hip and commenced to fuck her so hard that the heavy wooden table that had taken four men to bring into the house started to rattle and move under his powerful thrusts. “*Baby, baby,*” he crooned as he watched her mouth open and close in silence, eyes hooded with desire. With every stroke in, she got wetter and wetter. Max never wanted this ride to end as he buried his face in her neck and surged into her tightness over and over again. With every breath he took, he inhaled gardenias, orange blossoms, and the aroma of *them*. He wanted to stay lost in this moment forever. “*Georgina...damn...your pussy is...everything. That’s it, baby, take this dick. C’mon, love; you know how we get down...shiiiiit.*”

They were drenched with sweat and Georgina’s body was drowning in so much sensation, she feared she would faint. Stuffed full of his cock that dragged along every nerve ending in her pussy and his beard brushing tantalizingly against her skin with every plunge, she drifted her eyes shut as the tingles started in her toes once more. But Max wasn’t having that as he felt the tightening in his balls. Pulling back, he gently pressed kisses to her lips. “No, Georgina! You open your eyes and tell me who’s fucking you this good.”

The tingles were turning into trembles that smoothly transitioned into quakes that spun her inside out, and she couldn’t catch her breath as she came, “*Oh-oh-oh-gaaawwwddd!*”

As Georgina’s pussy locked down on him, his orgasm shot through him like a torpedo, causing Max to cum so hard he damn near blinded himself. He threw his head back as he

emptied himself into her tight heat and groaned, “Same difference.”

Chest heaving, Georgina opened her mouth to give him a smart-ass reply and froze as they heard footsteps on the front porch. Then the doorbell rang.

Chapter Eight

Max growled to himself in frustration. If it hadn't been for the interruption, he would have moved her from the table to the sofa for round two. Instead, the shrill ring of the doorbell from the unwelcome guest had broken the mood, and Georgina had scrambled to unwrap her legs from his. Her legs seemed shaky at first and he went to steady her, but she had quickly moved away from him to grab the sides of her wrinkled dress and wrap it around her body. While avoiding his gaze, she smoothed her disheveled hair and tried to compose herself before going to answer the door.

In the ten minutes, she was gone, Max put his clothes back on and poured a glass of water which he quickly downed. Then a second followed suit, and he filled it up a third time. He felt exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. Making love to Georgina put him at the same level of exhaustion as a day's work on the farm, but the *feeling* was ...*maan*, he didn't even have words for it. He heard the front door close and she came back into the room. Max took one look at her irritated expression and handed her the glass. She looked at it as if she wished it were something stronger than water, then sighed and drank the entire contents of the glass before speaking.

“That was Mr. Crenshaw across the street. He just wanted to make sure that everything was okay over here,” she murmured. “He informed me that although my aunt and uncle weren’t home, he was certainly keeping an eye on things around here. He also assured me that he would be speaking to them about my wild house parties.”

Max tried to contain his laughter but his eyes were filled with mirth as he solemnly asked, “Would you like me to go over there and reassure him that everything is on the up and up?”

Georgina affected an expression of affront, “Because I didn’t? I tried to let him know, but he said that if I wanted a chance with you, I was going to have to stand in line, or at least put my money in the town betting pool.”

Humor gone and thinking about Wade’s words, Max replied with a frown, “Don’t pay him any mind.”

Now it was Georgina’s turn to laugh, “Oh no, I want to know exactly how much it’s going for. Hell, I need capital for my business, so I think I’ll go down to city hall and read the last town meeting’s minutes. That is still where you can find such nonsense correct? Besides, I’m from Las Vegas which automatically means I’ve got better odds with gambling.”

Max assessed her with a long look, before bending down to pick up her panties. He ignored her outraged gasp as he put them in his back pocket. “How much capital do you need for your business?”

“I’ll thank you to return my panties, please,” Georgina replied, haughtily ignoring his question. Face flaming, she held out her hand for the requested garment.

“I like what your selling, Georgina. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that your business is going to explode. Just opening your dress and seeing you in those sexy pieces, I damn near lost my mind.” Max shook his head with admiration, and Georgina blushed at his compliment. “You wear your products extremely well.”

“Well thank you very much, Max,” Georgina gave him a brilliant smile, and Max felt something stirring, not in his pants this time, but his chest as he watched her pretty eyes sparkle in response to his words. Yup, he’d suspected that this was where things were headed and waited for the wave of panic to hit him. Nope, nothing.

“There is one thing I’d like to know,” Georgina purred as she walked over to him, hypnotizing him with the sway of her hips. She reached him and gave a seductive look from beneath the thick sweep of her lashes, and Max was fascinated. Angry Georgina was amusing and intimidating. Guarded Georgina was infuriating, but seductive Georgina was an extremely tempting sight.

Interest piqued, Max watched as she bit her lip and peeked up at him, placing a hand on his shoulder as she angled her face up towards his. He lowered his head until their lips were barely touching. “What’s that, sweetheart?”

“How did you know where to unclasp the bra?” she fired at him, staring deep into his eyes, all signs of seduction gone. “That’s one of our signature features to always guarantee a smooth back finish. The clasp is deliberately placed for discretion, and only someone who was familiar with our products would know that, Max. So you tell me, how much experience have you had with *Feminine Intuition*?”

Damn she was good, he thought dazedly. The fire in her eyes quickly cleared his head, and he knew he had to say something to diffuse her. “Enough to want to invest in your business.”

Stunned Georgina quickly stepped back, ignoring the vicious green-eyed monster clawing to get out. “What did you just say?”

“I said I want to invest in your business. And I’m not one to discuss my personal business so much, but I already have in a roundabout way,” Max said uneasily. “I’ve given money to a friend of mine to purchase items from *Feminine Intuition* because I liked them so much. That’s how I know you’ve got a good product, and I’m serious about investing. So what do you say?”

“*No. My. God.* You fucked some girl in lingerie *I* designed and knowing that, you fucked me also?!” Georgina shrieked as Max shook his head impatiently.

“I didn’t know shit about you when we met, so don’t even make it try to sound so cold,” Max stated shortly, but she was off and running, with her hands on her hips and her squinty flat-lined emoji face on.

“And what about today, huh? When you were fucking me down all over the table?? I can’t believe you did that! That’s where my family eats!” she fumed, trying to quell the jealousy of Max being intimate with some other woman. Georgina tried to tell herself it was before her time, but then she thought about the way he’d almost screwed her into a coma and got pissed off all over again. *This* was why she didn’t do relationships! She was spinning out of control over some *dick*... and what was between his legs as well. “I think you should go now. I’ve got a lot to do today and I’m done wasting my time.”

Max stepped into her space, caging her in against the fridge. Despite the anger pulsing through her, Georgina felt her breath catch because where her anger was fire, Max's was ice cold. "Correction; *we* did that. You were wetter than Niagara Falls, and if it hadn't been for Mr. Crenshaw, I would have fucked you again six more ways from Sunday; and judging from your recent orgasms, you would've loved it," he said bluntly, watching as her mouth dropped open before she recovered and shut it. Georgina stared at him defiantly as he continued harshly.

"I'm not going to apologize for wanting you. Nor am I going to let you sit there and act like I did something wrong. Yes, I did have relations with someone else; but please believe me that until I met you, I was never inspired enough to perform at the level that I have since doing so, and I won't apologize or be made to feel guilty about it," Max shook his head in frustration. "I believe in your business and your determination to make it work. I have the money and connections to make it happen, which it seems you are in need of. I normally do not make offers like this, so I need you to understand that I'm not trying to get you to swallow my dick, Georgina— just your goddamn pride long enough to listen to what I'm saying."

She chewed on her bottom lip while thinking about what he said. He got hard just watching her. Her responses earlier had been so passionate. Now she was so reserved. Georgina Carlton was a contradiction addiction he didn't want a cure from. Finally, she spoke. "I'm sorry for being like this. It's just that we've known each other less than a short time, and we've fucked more times than there are days in a week So please forgive me for just trying to regroup myself," she said, still trying to collect her thoughts regarding their intimacy. "So you're telling me there are no strings attached to your monetary offer?"

“Yes, there are strings,” Max answered, and her face contorted with anger. He held his hand up. “I want to see your business plans and financial records before I draw up a contract and hand over any money. You have to remain in Baymoor for a month and immerse yourself in small town life. You will work with me when needed on the farm and accompany me to any events I need to attend. And last but not least, you will not hold back from me. If you want to touch or kiss me, then do it. I’ve never had to force myself on a woman, and I’ll be damned if I start now. But I do want you to tell me what you have against anything between us. We’re both consenting adults. What’s so wrong about what happened between us? I don’t regret what I did, and I sure as hell hope you don’t either. At least be woman enough to admit to yourself that you have needs and they need to be addressed.”

Georgina let his words sink in. Max was everything she could want in a lover and she craved him like no other. Before him, she’d never even orgasmed during intercourse. With Max, it was so recklessly wild and liberating. He made her so wet and she ached for his touch, to take him in her mouth and swallow every last drop that came gushing out. She wanted him to fuck her whichever way he wanted to; just because she just knew it would be sooooo good. Georgina contemplated his offer. She would get to spend more time with her family, receive investment money, and be... Max’s *lover*. Thanks to him, Georgina would be getting everything she wanted. It was an extremely tempting offer, but she’d be damned if she let him know it.

Georgina thought about her mother and her need for men. It had almost destroyed Ingrid in the end and it had forever altered her children’s lives. Georgina was adamant that history would not repeat itself with her by falling for a pretty face with skills in bed.

Maybe it wasn’t for the best. She did want the money, but not if it meant she had to open herself up to the uncontrollable feelings between them. What if she never recovered?

“I do want you, Max. More than you’ll ever know. But this madness of having sex all willy-nilly isn’t *me*. Ask anyone who knows me, and they would be surprised to find out I had it in the last *decade!* My God, my own brother was just informing me that I should get laid more two days ago. So I’ll own the mixed signals I’m sending you, and I’m sorry for that, but I just can’t be that person who gets caught up in relationships; they’re not for me. I’m only here for a short while longer anyways.” His stance was rigid and his face looked as though it was carved from stone. “So, maybe it’s best not to get involved you know?” Georgina took a deep breath. “It would be nice if we could be...friends?”

“I have lots of *friends*, but I’m not interested in going down on any of them. I’m not trying to marry you, Georgina,” he clarified harshly. “I’m trying to fuck you. Four weeks is good to me. I promise you won’t regret it. Are you in?”

Max was angry at her and himself. Since meeting her, he had been fascinated with her and tried to take things slowly, but being with her made him lose control. In the past, he’d had a lot of women and was always honest and upfront about not wanting to change his status to plus one. The truth was always appreciated; a fact he’d found out the hard way. The only thing was, this time, he wasn’t being honest. With Georgina or himself.

Ever since moving to Baymoor, Max had curbed his playboy ways. He liked living a simpler life. The woman in D.C. expected nothing from him except to deliver in bed. But lately, he’d started thinking about marriage and babies. He just needed to find the right woman. Max had a feeling he’d found her, but here she was giving him the same spiel he’d perfected. Slowly he cupped Georgina’s face in his palms. Her eyes were wide and her breathing heavy. He gently pulled her closer to him until their lips were barely touching. He kissed each

corner of her mouth, his tongue running along the seam of her lips teasingly. Her eyes drifted shut, and she leaned further towards him, hungry for more. His lips covered hers and his tongue explored her mouth lazily with none of the intensity from earlier. The kiss was slow and languid as he drank from her.

“Say yes and tell me what you like, Georgina,” he whispered against her lips. “I want to make this experience count for you because it seems you have a lot to make up for.”

Georgina felt like she'd been drugged as she slowly opened her heavy eyes and stared up at him. “I like...this. Your kisses and the way you touch me...Just an FYI: I'm not a butt girl,” she added quickly. Max smiled devilishly and Georgina had the apprehensive feeling he could turn her into one if he wanted.

“What do you like?” she asked shyly. He took his time answering her. Finally, he said, “I like passion. I like a woman who can let go of her reservations and have a great time in bed. It's cool if you're not a butt girl, but is that area off limits for foreplay?”

Georgina hesitated. “I'm willing to experiment with gentle foreplay in that area, but stop is *stop*, got it?” He nodded his head, watching her closely. “You're very experienced aren't you?”

Again Max nodded. “If I do anything to displease you, you'll let me know?”

“Wait! There is something else. I have a photo shoot in Las Vegas next week,” Georgina said excitedly, still unable to

believe she was going to take this huge leap in her life. “I want you to be my model.”

“You want me to model for your lingerie ad?” Max asked slowly and Georgina nodded her head eagerly, already in business mode. With his gorgeous looks and sex appeal, she knew that he alone would be eye-catching on the cover. Add her designs, and she could feel in her bones that the article would be an eye-catching winner.

“Yes, that’s the deal. You invest in my business, and I make you richer. I get you as a model, and you get an assistant. Plus, there’s the bonus of being lovers for four weeks and then we walk away friends. Deal?” Georgina asked in her crisp business voice as she held out her hand.

Max grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, lowering his head to seal their deal with a searing kiss. Georgina clung to him and he scooped her up without breaking the kiss and walked back to the table. He set her on the edge and sat down in the seat in front of her with a raised eyebrow and expectant look. Heavily aroused, she threw her legs over his shoulders, causing her dress to fall open and reveal her naked, glistening pussy. Gripping her hips, Max leaned forward and delved his tongue into her sweet, hot wetness as Georgina ran her fingers through his curls, moaning and writhing under his skillful ministrations.

Max smiled as he delved even deeper, confident he would get the outcome he wanted. Four weeks was enough time to change her mind. He’d won cases for millions in less time.

Chapter Nine

It felt good to be with Uncle Nate and Aunt Valerie again. Before picking them up from the hospital, Georgina cleaned the house from top to bottom, *especially* the table.

On the way to the farm, they chatted about the changes the spring season would bring to Baymoor and the annual festivities which included the Easter egg hunt that would take place at the farm and the spring carnival. With every season change, the town celebrated with a carnival, and the spring one was the most popular. As they started the drive down the long road with white wooden fencing in the green pastures on either side leading to the big farmhouse, Georgina took in the changes that had been made in her absence.

The road was now paved, and the big cherry-red barn had doubled in size. Next to it was a small black building with a parking lot. She had a moment of nostalgia as the house came into view. It was still the same— a big, white, sprawling two-story with three chimneys and steps leading up to the wraparound porch lined with Adirondack chairs and two porch swings. Georgina remembered that after mealtime was over, everyone would come out to relax and stretch on the porch. She remembered sitting on the steps numerous times waiting for Farmer Jennings and Uncle Nate to come home from being out in the fields.

Now another man, with two beautiful Australian shepherds by his feet, stood on the porch waiting for them. Her heart leaped at the sight of Max so tall and handsome in his gentleman's attire. He'd put the cowboy away for the night. His eyes were shielded by a cognac-colored Newsboy cap that matched his belt and brogues, but she could feel them on her. He was wearing a two-pocket olive work shirt with rolled up sleeves

and dark denim distressed jeans. As they got out of the car and approached the porch, Georgina struggled to compose herself. Good Lord, the man hadn't even said hi to her yet and already she wanted to get naked for him. He came down the steps to meet them, the dogs running ahead, tails wagging to greet Nate and Valerie. Max shook Nate's hand, kissed Valerie's cheek, and greeted Georgina politely.

“Hi, Georgina; welcome to my home. Let me take that from you. Sherlock and Watson, down!” he commanded of the dogs as he took the box containing German chocolate brownies and chamomile and caramelized honey macarons that she'd bought from Sugar Rush bakery. Max turned and started back up the stairs, chatting with Nate and Val. Georgina frowned and bent to pet the dogs. She felt stupid for taking so much time to select her knee-length black, form-fitting dress and nude heels with her leather biker jacket.

Max held the door open with one hand and allowed them to pass through. Georgina was the last to walk by, and he stopped her to cup her delicate chin and press an all too brief kiss to her lips. He winked at her, and she lowered her gaze to his lips, needing more than a damn peck. Her stomach dipped when she thought of this gorgeous man, who played her body expertly, being her lover for the next few weeks and couldn't control the elation and arousal that shot through her starving body.

“Stop looking at me like that, love, or I'll make an excuse to show you the barn. You look amazing by the way,” Max said in his panty-dropping voice, and then nodded his head towards the door, indicating that she should go in. As Georgina passed, he closed his eyes and inhaled her scent, before shaking his head and letting his breath out with a whoosh as he watched her swaying backside. It was going to be a long night.

Dinner was delicious; Max was a superb cook. For appetizers, he'd made a charcuterie board of pecorino cheese, Vermont white cheddar, and brie accompanied by prosciutto and smoked cashews. There were small, thin slices of French bread and strawberry chipotle preserves and hot honey bourbon butter. The main course was lemon orzo with sautéed prawns and asparagus.

During dinner, the group shared their traveling adventures and discovered they had a lot in common. They all loved Europe and spoke French. Max was also fluent in Italian and Spanish. Nate and Valerie entertained them with stories about living in London and Paris. When Valerie was attending university in England, Nate visited several times on spring and summer breaks from Oregon State. After they graduated college, he was accepted at Le Cordon Bleu so they married in Paris before school started, and Val worked at a well-known fashion house. During their spare time, they traveled throughout Europe before coming home for good. Watching them, you could tell they truly loved each other and were best friends. It was evident in every touch and glance, and Georgina couldn't stop looking at them. Occasionally she would feel Max's eyes on her, but she couldn't even look at him as she was too afraid he would see in her eyes the longing for what her aunt and uncle had; that underneath her prickly demeanor, she was just a big old softie.

“Do you have plans to go back to Italy, Georgina?” Max asked casually. He had been trying not to stare at her all night, but he enjoyed the deep v of her dress and the way the fabric clung to the lush curves of her breasts.

Before she could answer, Uncle Nate jumped in huffily, “She better not! Last time she was there, she started dating this smooth-talking, gigolo-looking fellow. He was so full of crap with his slicked back hair and all his “ciao bellissimas”. He came to every show they had in Italy!”

He was talking about Franco, an avid fan of El Sol & Le Moon. He’d been a real sweetheart, but he had actually been in love with Hugo, a brawny Croatian member of their dance troupe. Every night swearing her to secrecy, Franco would profess his love for Hugo until Georgina’s ears just about fell off. She didn’t have the heart to tell him it would never happen because Hugo was in a committed relationship with Yuri, their Austrian star tumbler.

“Is that right?” Max asked tightly, jealous of some little shit named Franco. He wanted to book a flight to Italy, find and ram his foot up the ass of some man that he had never met, all because of Georgina. Had she moaned for him over and over as well? He took a sip of his wine and coolly surveyed her bland expression.

“Uncle Nate is exaggerating. It’s a big drama-filled story that is hardly worth the time or energy to tell it.” She went back to eating her food, acutely aware of his gaze on her. Neither one of them caught the look of amusement Valerie and Nate exchanged. Before Georgina arrived at the hospital, they’d discussed Max’s interest in their precious niece. They agreed that the pair made a great couple and would test the waters at dinner. Judging from Max’s jealousy, it seemed they were on the right track. Nate mouthed to his wife, ‘*you’re next*’, and she nodded with a smile.

From there, any conversation between the two younger people went downhill. After dinner, everyone moved into the family room for coffee and dessert while Sherlock and Watson

lounge in front of the fireplace. Georgina noted the changes to the house. The furniture was now decorated in a more modern industrial design rather than the heavy brown furniture Walter had preferred. She touched a console table in admiration. At first, it appeared to have only two drawers, but as Georgina peered closely, she saw there was a pull-out top drawer on the surface of the table that blended in. “This is an amazing piece of work. Look at the intricate detailing on the door handles. Were they all hand-carved?”

“Isn’t it exquisite? Max introduced us to a company called *Americana Traditions*. I loved their work so much that your uncle and I commissioned the picnic tables at the cafe as well as the candle holders. Oh, and they also did our new dining room table! Did you notice it?” Valerie was so enthusiastic, she didn’t notice Georgina’s ill expression, but Max did and couldn’t resist teasing her.

“Yeah, Georgina, you didn’t notice that gorgeous piece of work in the dining room? It’s so sturdy and durable,” he said innocently, and she glared at him as Valerie agreed.

“I can’t wait to spread a feast out on the table when your brother and sister come,” she said to her niece, and Max chuckled knowingly.

“Only the best meals should be served on a table as fine as that one,” Max co-signed.

Nate chimed in with, “That table was expensive but a good investment. So strong and solid. Why I bet it could withstand a-”

“Good rocking?” Max suggested helpfully and shrugged when Valerie and Nate looked at him in confusion.

“Any macarons left?” Georgina asked in a strangled voice as she gave Max a murderous look.

Max was finally cooling down from his earlier jealousy as he teased Georgina. He enjoyed the way she could be baited so easily. Her face was alive with the color and fire snapped in her warm brown eyes. Again they didn't notice when Nate nudged Valerie, and the two co-conspirators exchanged mischievous smiles.

“Max, what about that lovely girl you brought to the hunt last year? She was really nice; do you still keep in touch?” Now it was his turn to shift uncomfortably under Georgina's narrow-eyed, judgmental stare. She raised her eyebrows as if to say “*really?*”.

“We were just friends, Valerie. And she actually wasn't here for a personal visit but to purchase a horse for her nephew,” Max replied tersely, wondering why she was referring to another woman when he'd already expressed an interest in her niece to her.

Georgina began gathering the empty plates and coffee mugs without saying a word. When she walked out, Max jumped up to turn on a soul station on the small stereo. Immediately Nate and Val cuddled up with each other and sang along with the music. Max scooped up the rest of the dirty plates and told them to relax. He found Georgina at the sink washing dishes. Max grabbed a dish towel and started drying next to her. He looked out the window at the full moon lighting up the yard, and then back at her. Her lips were pursed, and she wore a slight frown that he wanted to kiss away.

“I guess neither one of us was prepared to hear about the other’s involvement or possible involvement with someone?” The thought of him being with someone and doing the things he had done to her made Georgina feel violently ill. She was jealous that someone else had touched him. The raging jealous fights between her mother and her men flashed through her mind, and she quickly blinked them away.

“Carmen is the lady we discussed the other day. We have a casual sexual relationship with no strings attached. I haven’t seen her in five months,” he explained sincerely. “Our agreement was for the time that you are here. And during that time frame, I will not cheat on you nor abuse your trust, Georgina. I promise. Are we ok?”

No, she wasn’t ok. How could she say that she wanted to change the rules before they even started? Her mind flashed back to a couple of days ago in the hospital when one week had seemed like forever; now even with the additional time, it didn’t seem like enough. Her jealousy was stupid and petty. She would take what the next month brought and walk away when they were done. “Everyone is entitled to a past, Max.”

“Tomorrow let’s go over your business plan and go horseback riding?” Max suggested, exhaling hard. He hadn’t even realized he was holding his breath as he waited for her answer, and smiling shyly, Georgina nodded her head in agreement.

He returned her smile, and later when he walked them to the car, he held her hand in front of Nate and Valerie who beamed their approval. Max barely managed to restrain himself from begging her to stay with him when he claimed her lips in a possessive kiss that she returned sweetly. Internally he groaned, because he knew that tonight just like every night since he’d met her, he’d be stroking off in the shower before going to bed alone.

On the drive home, Nate turned to Valerie and suggested they go back to Paris. As she looked at him in surprise, he pleaded his case.

“You know Paris in the spring is gorgeous! It’s been so long since we’ve had a long vacation. The doctor said that I should just relax for the next month. We could shut down the café for three weeks and be back in time for Easter preparation. Raymond could organize everything we need in the meantime. While I was lying in the hospital, all I could think of was how short life is and to truly appreciate it. Say yes, Val,” he urged.

“I would love to, Nate, but we can’t put people out of work for three weeks. They have bills to pay,” she said reasonably, but Georgina could hear the longing in her voice.

Nate smiled at her but couldn’t hide his frustration. “You’re right. I guess I was just being selfish, wanting you all to myself and taking a break, sorry.”

Georgina sat in the backseat listening to them. They had taken her in and provided her with a home, no questions asked. When she left without looking back, she still had their support. They were her biggest cheerleaders, and their confidence in her was unwavering. *They’d never asked anything of her.* Georgina cleared her throat. “I have an idea...”

Georgina and her aunt arrived at *The Comfort Table* bright and early. When she offered to watch the café so they could go to Paris, they had stared at her in disbelief. Almost offended, she reminded them that she was a business major with a minor in culinary arts. They were overjoyed and couldn't thank her enough. But she waved it off because it was the least she could do for them. This morning Valerie was going to show her how to do payroll, banking, and supply ordering while they were in Paris, as well as hold a staff meeting to formally introduce her to the staff. After further discussion last night, they decided to promote Chandra to a part-time manager position. She was an excellent employee with a great work ethic and people personality. She was also the perfect counterpart to Raymond's crusty personality and would ensure he didn't offend or scare customers off. The promotion would also enable Georgina to take Fridays and Saturdays off. Val also confided that Raymond and Chandra had been a couple for five years, but kept it absolutely professional at work. As in, don't ever refer to them as a couple within the walls of the cafe.

Tomorrow she and Max would be going to Las Vegas. Due to Georgina's spontaneous decision to stay longer, the photo shoot was being moved up after texting Max, who said he was fine with it. Tonight she would be spending the night at his house, and they would head to the airport for their two-day trip to Las Vegas from there. Despite the time difference, she and Renee had a phone conference late last night on what needed to be done in order to make the shoot go smoothly. Then after that, Georgina was so excited about the prospect of expanding the business, she was inspired to create a small loungewear capsule collection, as well as a signature candle, that would be available in time for the holidays. She'd stayed up until four-thirty this morning; and although she was tired, it was nice to spend time with Aunt Val for some one-on-one girl time.

Valerie told the best stories and was a great listener. The last couple of hours had flown by as she regaled Georgina with interior designer stories, and now they were waiting for Nate

and Raymond to join them. Nate was at City Hall speaking with the mayor regarding postponing the party until he and Valerie returned from Paris.

“I still can’t believe you cut your hair this short, but it suits you, baby,” Valerie said, fluffing Georgina’s layers. “It has such a sixties vibe and I *love it*, with your big eyes.”

“Thank you. It’s really easy to do and one less hassle for me,” she murmured, avoiding Valerie’s assessing gaze.

“And it has nothing to do with the fact that if you hadn’t cut and straightened it, you’d be your mother’s identical twin?” Valerie inquired bluntly, watching as Georgina’s face went deliberately blank. And because she knew that look meant her niece wouldn’t be forthcoming with any more information, Valerie changed the subject.

“So, Georgie, I have to ask; what’s going on with you and Max? You have to know that we’re concerned since you don’t have much of a social life. I know your uncle was giving you a hard time about your friend the other night, but he just wants you to be happy,” Valerie explained.

“I know, but Uncle Nate has to realize that he’s spoiled me for other men. When it comes to dating, I have pretty high standards. I want a love like yours, and I’m willing to wait. So to answer your question, Max and I are just hanging out,” she replied truthfully. It was sort of the truth. There just really wasn’t a way to say that she would be frequently getting naked with him whenever and however they could manage.

“Well, I can only imagine what your siblings will say when they hear about you hanging out with a gorgeous, kind, funny, and brilliant lawyer turned successful farmer,” Valerie teased,

enjoying the dreamy smile Georgina was unaware that she was wearing. “I can’t wait to see them for Easter! Goodness, it’s been way too long since we all got together.”

Although Eliza and Graham weren’t as close to their aunt and uncle as she was, it wasn’t for lack of trying on everyone’s part. After Georgina came to Baymoor, Eliza and Graham had to figure their own shit out. It had been six months before she heard from them, and they had come to visit her every year for a week. She had received postcards galore from Graham who had been forced to enter the service and traveled the world.

Eliza married David and moved to Boston, where she attended UMass. Neither Graham nor Eliza had ever gone back to Las Vegas, needing to leave the bad memories behind; but Georgina had, and they understood. She wanted to see if maybe she could find their mother and show her how well she turned out. Her first year there, if she wasn’t at school or working, she was casing Freemont Street with old photos of Ingrid to see if anyone remembered her. She volunteered at homeless shelters during the holidays to see if she would turn up. After doing this for two years, there had finally been a break. She shuddered at the memory and pushed it to the back of her mind.

“They’re fine and excited for the holiday. I can’t wait to see how much Camille has grown this time,” Georgina enthused and Valerie smiled excitedly.

“This year’s holiday is going to be so special; I can’t wait for all of you to be here with us. We just feel incredibly blessed to have all of you in our lives,” she paused and then said softly, “Your uncle is a rare find, and every day that we’ve been together is truly a blessing. We were really lucky to find each other. I’ve only known a couple of men like him. My father, Walter, and...Max.”

Valerie looked directly at Georgina with a raised eyebrow. There was a teasing glint in her eye as she looked at her niece's flushed face.

“Oh chile, please! You guys think you invented chemistry or something?” Valerie scoffed. “I’ve got eyes, and I see the way he looks at you. You just better understand that he’s a good man. And the women around here recognize it, even if you’re a little slow, honey.” Valerie gave her a serious look. “The same way we ladies don’t like our emotions to be played with, neither do honorable men. So step aside if you’re not serious about him and move to the back of that long ass line of females clamoring for his attention, baby.”

Georgina gave her aunt a woman-to-woman look. “Those women can continue to wait. I’m not going anywhere.”

Valerie high-fived her, before adding, “I heard that! Did Max mention that he’d been engaged?”

“No, we’re still in the process of exchanging dental records,” Georgina quipped and changed the subject. “So how will employees get paid? Via direct deposit or paychecks?”

“For now, we use...”

Valerie was talking but, Georgina’s mind was elsewhere. So Max had been engaged. She wondered if he would tell her. Perhaps in time or maybe it still hurt him to talk about it. Again that jealous feeling started to rise in her, but she resisted giving in to it. In all their conversations, he’d been very honest. She knew the woman in D.C. wasn’t an issue now, but what about four weeks from now? Georgina knew that the

time frame of their affair wouldn't be enough for her. That those hot kisses would haunt her when she was long gone and someone else was in his bed.

There was a brief knock at the office door before it quickly opened. Raymond entered first with a tray of steaming bowls of red beans and rice; Nate had a plate of cornbread; and Max carried a tray filled with honey, apple jelly, whipped butter, salt, pepper, and hot sauce in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other.

“Look who I ran into in the parking lot! Max was just telling me that he planned on taking Georgie horseback riding when we finished up here,” he said, staring at Val. The glance had a question which received an answer in her look. The power of married couples. Max grinned and winked at Georgina as his simmering gaze perused her from head to toe, taking in her conservative navy and white polka dot shift dress and navy pumps. The red-framed square glasses just begged for him to steam them up.

She smiled back at him and stood up to help lay out the food. When that was done, they all clasped hands and bowed their heads for grace. Uncle Nate’s voice was deep and resonating as he repeated the prayer Georgina had come to know as a child. She was settled in between Max and Aunt Val with Raymond and her uncle across from them. The first few minutes were spent eating in silence. The red beans and rice was another childhood favorite, but Raymond had put a new twist on it. Instead of spicy andouille sausage, he used smoked duck sausage. It was savory, rich, and hearty over the fluffy white rice. There was also a small bowl of chopped green onion because Raymond knew she liked to heap this particular dish with the garnish. And Georgina was tempted to, but then she glanced at Max and those perfect lips she’d be kissing later and decided against it.

The cornbread was sweet with a kick of cayenne pepper. Georgina added apple jelly and butter to hers. God, to think she had denied herself this kind of food for so long because of work and their custom-tailored outfits. But while she was here, Georgina planned to take full advantage of home-cooked meals and the virile man beside her. After they finished eating, Max pulled mason jars of condiments out of the brown paper bag and passed them around for the group to look at. “These are the new condiments we’re creating at the farm. I know that you guys are in the process of changing your menu for spring,

so I thought you might want to try these. Take a look and have a taste. See if you could use anything on your menu.”

The group eagerly dug into the jars, and soon sighs of appreciation filled the air.

Raymond put his spoon down and started to make notes as Nate and Valerie made suggestions.

“The peach and red onion chutney would go great with the pork tenderloin,” Valerie suggested and Nate readily agreed.

“I like the way you’re thinking, baby! We could do the sandwich on a rustic type of bread and garnish with cornichons,” Nate said enthusiastically and leaned over to give his wife a kiss. “Say, Raymond, what if we took this ramp pesto and turned it into a vegetable dip?”

“Oooo-wee! And paired it with some air-popped vegetables?” Raymond bobbed his head in agreement. “Now we’re cooking! That honey bourbon butter should pair well with tempura fried shrimp and chicken. I want to give it a try this afternoon.”

“Can the strawberry balsamic chipotle preserves be done over angel food cake or perhaps a panna cotta?” Georgina inquired excitedly, as the feeling of nostalgia swept over her once more. Too many times to count, the four of them had sat at this very table and brainstormed menus. “It needs to be over something light and sweet...or even turn it into an ice cream!”

“Little Bit, don’t you dare stay away so long next time,” Valerie scolded with a gentle smile and ruffled Georgina’s hair. “This is just like old times!”

Max smiled to himself as Georgina blushed with pleasure. While they talked, he gathered the used dishes and brought them back to the kitchen where he ran into one of the servers, Farah Laurent.

“Hi, Max! Wow, two visits in less than a week? Guess you see something on the menu that you just can’t resist huh?” she said in a suggestive tone that he found to be irritating as hell. Thanks to Wade, Max had firsthand knowledge of who was in on the town wager regarding his love life, and he made it a point to avoid those ladies at all costs. Ms. Farah had made it more than obvious she considered herself a contender for his affections.

“Hey, Farah. How’s your grandmother doing?” Max asked tersely, putting distance between them and not wanting to encourage the woman in any way shape or form.

“Oh, she’s good. Just wondering when you’ll finally get around to having Sunday dinner with us,” Farah cooed and stepped closer, placing her hand on his arm. “She’s always trying to encourage me to bring a nice guy home, so I’m just waiting for you to accept the invite.”

Max could admit to himself that she was a good-looking lady, but she did nothing for him. And even if his thoughts weren’t consumed by a quick-witted luscious brown-skinned angel, he wouldn’t have been interested. Max gave her a look that had made even the hardest of witnesses crack on the stand, and she stepped back reluctantly. He saw the flash of anger in her eyes and knew he had bruised her ego.

“Sorry, but my calendar’s booked indefinitely. Please tell your grandmother I said hello and have a nice day,” he said politely and walked back to the office.

After the meeting, there was a quick introduction of Georgina to the staff. Everyone seemed welcoming and friendly. One employee, in particular, seemed extra friendly to Max, Georgina observed, recognizing her as April's sidekick who had ogled him behind the other day. Not that she could blame her. Her name was Farah, and she was very popular amongst the staff. She was in her early twenties, with long black curls and a curvy body; her clothes were very tight-fitting, and she seemed to flirt a lot. She was nice enough to Georgina, but she really turned it on for Max, smiling at him and touching his arm. To his credit, he smiled courteously at her and conversed with the staff as a whole, not singling anyone out. Finally, he broke away from them to approach her and Uncle Nate. Georgina noticed Farah's eyes narrow on her when Max reached them.

"Are you ready?" he asked politely, but the sinful look in his eyes let her know what was on his mind, and her heart started to race with anticipation. Before Georgina could answer, Nate stepped in and looked from one to the other and gave Max a warning stare.

"Now Max, I'm sure I don't have to tell you how much Georgie means to me. Don't go breaking her heart, or good friend and preferred vendor be damned, I will break both of your arms and legs," Nate said seriously. Although she wanted to die of mortification, Georgina couldn't help feeling touched by her uncle's protective nature.

“No, sir, I won’t,” Max assured him and wondered why no one thought she wouldn’t break his.

Chapter Ten

The drive to the farm was a peaceful one, and Georgina asked Max if they could ride with all the windows down so she could appreciate the fresh air. He’d picked her up in a silver Chevy Tahoe, and as they cruised along with Chaka Kahn’s *Epiphany* album playing in the background, Georgina kept looking around and taking in the beautiful scenery. Max kept laughing at her wide-eyed look of wonderment when she pushed her reading glasses back onto her hair.

“City girl looks a little awestruck at some country scenery,” he teased and she wrinkled her nose at him.

“It’s just so different from Las Vegas. After a while, all the dessert landscape starts to blend together. In my neighborhood, all the houses are cookie cutter and look alike. I’ve even mistakenly pulled into the wrong driveway about three times. I guess I just never realized how much I missed all of this,” she said wistfully then added, “But then I think about how I can get a great meal at two-thirty in the morning and I’m all good.”

“Well that’s good to hear that you kind of missed it, because I’ve got you involved in activities here on the farm and in town,” Max informed her. Ever since she’d agreed to their arrangement, he’d planned to show her more than just a good

time in bed. Maybe if she immersed herself in more than her family duty, she would remember all the things she liked about Baymoor and think about staying a little longer. As in forever. With him.

“Bring it on, farm boy,” she challenged. “I had a lot of fun participating in activities as a kid, once I overcame my shyness,” she said with a laugh. “So whatever you want to throw my way should be a walk in the park.”

“Why were you so shy?” he asked curiously. He knew nothing about her home life, except something might have happened in her past to make her closed off and skittish enough to not have forged any intimate relationships with the opposite sex.

She hesitated but finally said, “Before coming to live here...I grew up in an extremely dysfunctional environment. There was a lot of ... chaos. It made me extremely leery of...social interaction. But I overcame it and now everything’s alright.”

Georgina didn’t elaborate further and now Max wanted to know more about her than ever. It did explain her reserve, though, and he made himself promise to go gently with her. Well...as gently as he could in the four-week time frame he had to work with.

“So tell me more about you, Max,” Georgina said. “If we’re going to be partners of sorts-”

“And lovers,” Max he reminded her in a deep voice that promised her unlimited, intimate adventures with him. “Don’t forget lovers.”

“Of course I didn’t forget that!” Georgina retorted, flustered as he smirked and his hands expertly shifted the gears on the truck. Soon those skilled fingers would be bringing her more enjoyment than she’d experienced in her little, sheltered life. Just the thought of getting naked with him caused a heady rush of exhilaration similar to when she’d first flown through the air on a trapeze, but even better. There was nothing like being pressed against his big, muscular body and allowing her hands to explore to her heart’s content...

“You still with me, baby?” Max asked, taking his eyes off the road to glance at Georgina. From the fevered look in her eyes and the way she bit her lips, he had an idea as to where mind had just taken a turn to, and his manhood swelled up to answer as if on roll call. “Damn woman, you better stop looking at me like that, or I’ll be pulling this truck over and giving you what you’re silently asking for.”

Georgina felt her panties dampen and her breasts swelled in response to his words. She took a deep breath and shuddered, “Can you just focus on what I was saying, please?”

“You’re right, we should talk now. Because when I get you all alone later, I’ll be too busy to talk,” he agreed readily and Georgina scowled at him.

“A little cocky aren’t we? Keep it up and all we’ll be doing is talking, funny guy,” she replied haughtily and gasped when Max quickly pulled the Tahoe over to the side of the road.

He quickly unbuckled Georgina’s seatbelt and tugged her to him, where her soft lips met his in a dizzying kiss that left them both breathless when they broke apart. Their breaths intermingled as they stared deep into each other’s eyes, and finally, Max chuckled in disbelief. “Hmmm...I’ve never heard the words little and my cock mentioned in the same sentence.”

“Uh-uh,” Georgina whimpered, trying to kiss him. “Give me more kisses, please.”

Instead of fulfilling her request, Max pulled back to look at her seriously. “You know I plan on fucking the uptightness out of you, right? When I’m done with you, you’ll be as stiff as a boiled noodle.”

“Promises, promises,” Georgina taunted, and Max grinned so deviously that she didn’t know whether to feel apprehensive or excited as he pulled the Tahoe back onto the road.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know on the horse ride,” he promised as he made the right turn down the long road heading toward the house. He shared information with Georgina as he pointed out some chicken coops that were laid out by the front of the barn.

“The chicken coops are mobile. We rotate them around the farm which allows them to roam, feeding on a wide diet including pests that may be harmful to garden plantings. They also help to ventilate the windrowed compost piles which aid in decomposition of organic material used throughout the farm,” Max informed her.

“What kind of chickens do you have here?” she asked, taking in their assorted colors of full plumage and red face accents.

“We have Plymouth Rock, Sussex, and Delaware.” Georgina could hear the pride in his voice. “In the last couple of years, business has expanded quite a bit. Not only are we still doing specialty stores with the cheeses, charcuterie, preserves, and fruits, but lately I’ve been thinking about expanding into

juicing. A lot of the food that the schools use for their meals are grown right here on this land. We believe in the farm to table concept and have helped to create a lot of jobs, not just here, but also in the next two towns over. If we expanded, it would certainly help the economy.”

Georgina couldn't help smiling as a vision from the Lion King popped into her head. *Look Simba, everything the light touches...*

She laughed and Max grinned at her unabashedly, as he stored the enchanting sound to his memory. They pulled up to the house, Georgina grabbed her backpack, and they walked up the porch steps. “Sorry, I just get so excited talking about the farm because I feel truly blessed to have this experience and want to share it. Well, we're here. Why don't you go in and change? I'll wait right here on the porch and finish up on some correspondence.”

Max watched her enter the house, hypnotized by the sway of her hips and smooth brown legs. Georgina was an enigma for sure, and he loved it. She was prickly, but kind, a lady in the streets, but between them sheets...; yeah he loved all of her contradictions. During the meeting at the café, he had seen her business side, and there had been no shyness there, only enthusiasm. She had very insightful ideas for increasing business and different ways that they could improve the menu. He liked how everyone at the table let her speak, including “Templeton”. It seemed as if everyone was under her spell, and it was obvious to him, if not her that they adored her and were content to listen to her all day.

Every now and then, Max felt Nate's eyes on him. They had always been friends, but now he was dealing with the father figure of the woman he was interested in. Even Raymond had pulled him aside to warn him about how to treat *his* cherie.

Georgina emerged from the house with Sherlock and Watson trailing behind her, wearing a long-sleeved gray t-shirt, black leggings, and knee-high black boots. Her hair was held back with a headband. Although covered up, everything clung to her curves. He swallowed hard; every time he looked at her was like seeing her for the first time.

“Ready? Where’s your jacket?” Max asked because a cover up for those curves would be a great idea, but Georgina shook her head.

“I don’t need one right now. Besides, all my stuff is in Las Vegas. Remind me before we leave to grab some things and bring them back with us.”

Us. He grabbed her left hand; it fit into his right one perfectly, and she gave a slight squeeze. The dogs ran next to them as they walked to the stable, just enjoying the scenery. Standing outside the office next to the barn and locking up for the day were two older women. He introduced them as Donna the office manager and Linda the payroll manager. They ran the operations side of *Cinnamon Farms*. They seemed like nice people and asked Georgina how she enjoyed being back home.

“So far so good,” she replied, smiling up at Max. He returned her smile, and the ladies exchanged knowing looks. Max ignored Donna’s blatant curiosity and knew that she’d be grilling him tomorrow via email. They waved goodbye and the walk to the stable continued. At the entrance, they were met by a big, brawny man with a shock of red hair and eyes the color of the sky. In the late afternoon sun, it seemed like his head was on fire, and his smooth, tanned skin appeared as though it were lightly dusted with freckles. He shook Max’s hand and was introduced to Georgina as Tavish McBain, the farm’s manager.

“Good to have you home, lass,” he said charmingly with a big, rakish grin. His Scottish accent was very thick and his grin was contagious. She couldn’t help but grin back at him, easily imagining him in the *Outlander* series, wearing a kilt and carrying a claymore, with all that glorious red hair blowing behind him.

“So are you here for a tour of the farm?” Tavish asked innocently. “It just so happens, I’ve a bit of free time to spare-”

“See you tomorrow, McBain,” Max said coolly, interrupting him and after wagging his brows at Georgina. Tavish murmured his goodbyes and beat a hasty retreat.

“I take it his tours are pretty popular?” Georgina asked with amusement. Max frowned and pulled her close to him.

“Maybe, but you’ll never know. I’ll be the only showing you any and everything *Cinnamon Farms* has to offer,” he said possessively.

Georgina felt warm from the look in his eyes, and then her attention was caught by two horses being led toward them by a small blonde woman. One was a big stallion with a gleaming black coat. He was a fine animal with a diamond-shaped white spot in the center his forehead. The other horse was a white palomino with brown spots on her hind quarters and the softest brown eyes Georgina had ever seen. The woman Max introduced as Laura Stickler was in charge of the horse breeding. Again Georgina was welcomed, and she couldn’t help but notice how kind these people were and that they obviously respected Max. Her attention was drawn again to the horses.

“This beautiful gal is Lady. She’s four years old and extremely calm and gentle,” Laura said as she adjusted the palomino’s saddle.

“What a gorgeous animal!” Georgina declared as she rubbed Lady’s mane. “Hello, girl. You are the prettiest baby I’ve seen in a very long time,” she crooned as the horse nuzzled into her palm. Laughing she turned to Max, “I can’t wait to ride; it’s been so long, and your horses are gorgeous!”

“Well I aim to please, ma’am,” Max said, tipping his cowboy hat, before placing his big hands on her waist and lifting her onto the saddle. After checking to make sure her feet were in the stirrups, he walked over to his own ride, Apache, and swung onto the large animal with ease; and they were off. Max led the way as they trotted around to the back of the barn where Georgina could see the stable. It had been expanded since she’d last been there. There was a smaller white barn that Max called the larder and rows of sheep and pig pens. The smell of the animals was to be expected, and Georgina gamely plodded on, smiling and nodding her head to people in charge of maintaining the animals. They finally moved past the animals, and she could breathe easier as they moved on to the orchards as Max led them to the wide open pastures.

“C’mon, city girl, show me what you’re made off,” he said with a grin and took off. Laughing, Georgina followed behind. It felt so good to be out in the fresh air instead of a smoky casino. The wind whipped in her face as she rode faster and faster. Sherlock and Watson ran alongside of them. Max glanced back every now and then to make sure she was okay. Finally, they reached the edge of the old swimming hole, and Max halted Apache and quickly dismounted as the stallion bent his head for a drink. Then he approached Lady and patted her nose gently, before helping Georgina down, whirling her around. Laughing, she held on tightly to him, and then Max stopped; they were breathing hard as they gazed into each

other's eyes. She dropped her eyes to his mouth and leaned in to press a gentle kiss to his lips as he stood still not wanting to pounce on her. Slowly Max lowered her to the ground and pressed a kiss to her forehead before grabbing her hand and leading her to a wooden swing similar to the one attached to the willow tree back home.

“No way! This swing is *still* here?!” Georgina shrieked and Max laughed. “You are really taking me back today!”

“Yep, come sit on my lap, baby,” he said and motioned for her to sit. Instead, Georgina flipped it over to show him the bottom. Names and dates of everyone who'd sat there were written on it. Max saw Nate and Val with a date, and then he saw *Nate, Val & Georgina*, and *Georgina and Uncle Walter*. So many memories and now one more would be added. Max reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a black sharpie that he uncapped and wrote in bold letters *Max & Georgie* with today's date. Then he flipped it back over, sat down and pulled her into his lap.

“Alright, pretty girl, what do you want to know about me?” he asked huskily as he drew in a deep breath of her scent. Georgina wiggled in his lap, and with a groan, he buried his face in the side of her neck. She stilled as she felt his hard-on press into her bottom.

Everything. I want to know everything about what you'd look for in a dream woman and why you're no longer engaged. Who broke it off and do you still love her ...

Instead, she said noncommittally, “Whatever you want to tell me.”

“Well, I’m thirty-six years old and the only child of two lawyers. I still have all my teeth and am a former lawyer. Up until eight and a half years ago, being a lawyer was all I ever wanted to be. So much so, that I attended my father’s alma mater of Yale, much to my mother’s dismay, as she was a Berkley girl,” Max said as he rocked them at a slow pace with his arms wrapped around her. “I did corporate litigation abroad. I’d only met Uncle Walter a handful of times, and it was only during his visits to California. Until I turned twenty-six, I’d never set foot on this property but was always curious about it.”

He was quiet for a moment, and Georgina waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, she turned her head to look at him, and he had a far off look in his eyes. “Hey, are you okay? We don’t need to do this, Max.”

He blinked and tightened his arms around her. “Naw, it’s cool. So anyways, back then I was grinding pretty hard and trying to be the youngest junior partner in my firm’s history. I refused to let anything get in my way. Then I met a woman named Danielle Witherspoon. She was a new lawyer at the firm, and we were instantly attracted to each other.”

Georgina’s breath caught sharply at the sharp pain in her chest, and she willed her body to stay still, but her reaction to his words was too visceral for her not to react as she started to rub her right thumb and index finger together.

Max caressed her thighs and pressed a kiss to her nape. “It was a long time ago, baby.”

“Continue,” she grumbled, mollified by the endearment but giving him side-eye even as she allowed him better access to her neck. *Why did he have to call her baby?* She was willing

to bet it was because he knew it turned her insides to silly putty.

“We started dating, and it grew into a relationship. At first, it was good but soon turned toxic. She became really competitive with me. Danielle was a good lawyer, but I was better,” Max said expressionlessly. “Her insecurities started to interfere with her work, and she began to...mishandle cases, which of course is unacceptable in our line of work. There was talk of dismissing her, and Danielle wanted me to intercede on her behalf. I refused and we had a terrible argument. I wanted to break up, but she confessed to being hormonal and sidetracked due to her being pregnant.”

What did he just say?! This time, Georgina turned around to fully face him, and he gave her a wry smile. “*Say what?*”

“You can relax, Georgie,” he said, using her nickname for the first time and went on to elaborate. “There never was a baby. Danielle decided that if you can’t beat them, join them. So instead of being a part of the prestigious firm we worked for, she would be the wife of the next junior partner at that firm and reap the rewards of my position instead. So she made up a baby, knowing I’d do the honorable thing and propose. I did, and she, of course, accepted my proposal, quitting the firm immediately to plan our wedding. But something told me to hold off on setting a date, despite her insistence that she would not be a showing bride. My parents disapproved of the relationship from the get-go, and my mama insisted she was up to no good.”

“What a fucking cunt,” Georgina whispered, furious on his behalf. *She would have Graham find this bitch and fuck her up for daring to hurt this wonderful man.* “How did you know she wasn’t pregnant?”

“Her roommate Mariel told me when she heard about our engagement. She said Danielle knew I was on the verge of breaking up with her and paid her for the use of her urine.” At Georgina’s confused look, Max explained, “Mariel had just found out she was pregnant but was unsure of what she wanted to do. She’d just broken up with the father and was thinking of moving back home with her parents. She said Danielle paid her three hundred dollars to pee on a pregnancy stick when I came over. They shared an adjoining bathroom so when I insisted she take a pregnancy test while we waited in the bedroom, Mariel switched the test with one she took. That’s how it turned out positive.”

“So what made her confide in you if she took the money?” Georgina asked furiously, rubbing her thumb and index finger together. Max picked up her hand and pressed a kiss to it, immediately soothing her agitation. *How did he know to do that?!* He winked at her and continued on with his story.

“Apparently Mariel grew a conscience when she decided to keep the baby. She came to the office and admitted her part in the scheme. Said she was on her way out of town and gave me an envelope with the cash in it to give back to Danielle. Well, Danielle showed up before Mariel left to have lunch with me and became hysterical,” Max shook his head, eyes going tight with frustration. “At the time, I was just so relieved that I wouldn’t be tied to her that I broke up with her on the spot and insisted she keep the ring. Pawn it or do whatever the fuck she wanted with it; just leave me alone.” Max exhaled harshly, and Georgina pressed a kiss to his cheek and rubbed his back as she started the swing moving again.

“She wouldn’t go quietly, so I called security to remove her from the building.

Everyone from the firm was either in the office or crowded into the hallway, and Danielle was playing to her audience dramatically and giving a Viola Davis “How To Get Away

With Murder” worthy performance. She insisted that I was breaking up with her because I’d cheated on her with Mariel, who was now having my baby. Then she ran to the windows, opened them and jumped. She died instantly,” Max finished heavily.

“*What. The. Fuck?*” Georgina couldn’t believe what she’d just heard. “Max, she was obviously a disturbed individual. Surely you’re not blaming yourself for her illness.”

“I...it just really fucked with my head you know? I prided myself on being able to read other people. I should have seen that she wasn’t well, but I couldn’t see past her beauty and charm. Couldn’t see because while all this was going on, I was still trying to do *ME*. I didn’t have time to fuck around with her shit. I was a selfish bastard motivated only by my goals. In my mind, Danielle was okay because other people still admired her; she continued to dress herself beautifully, carry on articulate conversations, and *function*. In my mind, I’m ashamed to say that back then, I thought that mentally unstable people were slobbering, disarrayed people you could see coming a mile away. That’s why I couldn’t see that she was so...so-”

“So what? Damaged?” Georgina suggested sardonically as she looked away, thinking about that smile he’d given her at the café the day after they’d slept together. “Unfortunately, we’re all a little damaged; some peoples’ mirrors just show more cracks than others.” She could feel Max’s eyes on her, assessing her to see what her level of damaged was, but this wasn’t about her right now. “So what happened after that?”

“I took a leave of absence at the firm’s insistence to clear my head. They sent me to a firm-owned property in Morocco, but I left after one day. I could have gone anywhere at their expense, but I showed up here, and Uncle Walter just smiled

and offered me a room. We were practically strangers, but according to him, family is family. For two weeks we worked this land from dawn to dusk, and he never asked why I was here, just showed me the ropes. The work was hard and grueling, but the most rewarding I'd ever done in my life, and eight years later I still feel that way. At the end of my leave, I left and went back to work as soon as my plane touched down, but it wasn't the same. *I wasn't the same,*" Max corrected himself with a smile.

His voice was full of pride as he continued on, "Before the day was over, I was called in to speak with the firm's partners, and they offered me the junior partnership I'd highly coveted, but I said no thank you. I pulled my resignation letter out and placed it on the desk, graciously thanked them for the honor of working there, and left. There were rumors of me having a nervous breakdown, but I'd never felt more stable and sure in my life.

I rented out my condo, packed up, and headed back to the states. My parents were very disappointed in my decision, but let me know that I would be welcomed at their firm. I declined that offer as well. They were livid when I told them I was going to move here, and my mother called her brother up to give him a piece of her mind I'm sure, but Uncle Walter wasn't having it. I don't know what he told her, but when I walked to baggage claim to retrieve my bags, he was waiting there for me. He said my room was still waiting for me. My parents never bothered me again about my decision, and they even visited twice a year. I obtained my Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Business online. Uncle Walter was so proud of me, and that's when he started talking about going back to school."

Max's voice softened as he finished his story, "Not long after that he passed, and I still miss him every single day."

Georgina grabbed his hand and pressed a tender kiss to his lips. “It was an honor to know your uncle; he was such a good man and you, Maxwell Jason Hayes are obviously cut from the same cloth.”

Max could feel the heat creeping up his cheeks as she stared at him like he was her ten-foot tall hero that had discovered cures for the deadliest of diseases. Humbly he said, “That’s a helluva compliment, baby. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for telling the truth, Max. Seriously, this world could use more men like you, both of our uncles, and my brother,” Georgina said, closing her eyes and lifting her face to absorb some of the afternoon sunshine. “So...can I ask you a question?”

Max glanced down at her; to the untrained eye she seemed at peace, being one with nature, but he could see the tension lines by her mouth and eyes and the way her thumb and index finger were slowly starting to rub together with increasing speed.

“Soon, baby, you’re going to tell me your story, and when you’re done, my opinion will still be the same as it is right now or even higher. So in regards to your *unasked* question, Georgie, no...I don’t think you’re damaged,” he whispered into her ear and watching her fingers still. “I think you’re fucking *perfect*, smart mouth and all.”

Georgina opened her wide doe eyes to look at him, and Max felt the area around his heart expand as the muscle grew and she slipped right in. Their gazes held steady for a long moment and in each other’s eyes, they saw underneath the layers of mutual like and lust, that third “L” word that neither was ready to put into words just yet.

“Ditto,” Georgina whispered back.

Chapter Eleven

It felt so good to be held in Max's strong arms as they laughed and shared their memories of Farmer Jennings, and she told him a little about Graham and Eliza and her life in Las Vegas, Georgina mused. They stayed for another hour as Max told her about growing up with stuffy, overprotective parents that monitored his every waking move. To her, it sounded like heaven. She would have loved for her mother to be conscious half of the time, and she could barely remember her father. Thank God for Nate and Valerie Banks. As the sun started to set, she could feel the chill in the air. Georgina shivered and snuggled deeper into his arms.

“Cold?” When she nodded, Max gently stood her up, and they walked back to the horses. When he reached Apache, he unzipped one of the compartments on the saddle reached in and pulled out a large plaid blanket. Turning to her, he said, “You can wrap this around you if you want to sit in front of me.” Shivering and already missing his warmth, Georgina stepped forward, and he wrapped the blanket around her and set her on Apache's back. After making sure that Lady would follow them, he leaped on, handed her the reins, and they started a gentle gait back to the farm. She leaned back against his broad chest and inhaled his cologne as he placed one hand under the blanket onto her right thigh and the other hand against her stomach. Max controlled the horse with his powerful thighs.

Tingles shot down her spine when his lips brushed her ear.
“Are you hungry yet?”

Georgina loved being this close to him and the achy feeling he stirred inside of her. All afternoon they’d managed to keep their desire at bay as they learned things about each other. But she could no longer control the yearning building inside of her. She wanted to touch him in ways that would probably get her arrested if they weren’t on private property. She tilted her head back and up to look at him.

“Yes, but not for food,” she said huskily, lifting her mouth for a kiss.

Max readily complied and lowered his lips to capture hers. This time, she was the aggressor as she slid one arm behind his neck to keep him in place. Her tongue tangled with his as she savored his taste. Georgina drew his lower lip in and sucked gently on it as Max slid his hand between the apex of her thighs where moisture was already pooling. He massaged her swollen mound through the thin fabric of her leggings and panties. She spread her thighs wider and moved in rhythm to his fingers. Every mewl Georgina uttered was swallowed by Max as he pressed his thick rigid length against her behind.

Max groaned as he felt her fingernails caress his scalp and her moisture underneath his fingers. *Goddamn, she was so fucking wet.* His other hand yanked her shirt up and pulled down her bra cups so her delectable breasts were exposed to the cool air. Georgina whimpered as she backed her ass up even more and kissed him voraciously. He roughly plucked at her swollen peaks, and she gave a hoarse cry, as he whispered harshly into her ear. “Don’t let go of the reigns, baby. You can feel what you do to me? All I have to do is be near you and I want to fucking touch, lick, suck, and eat you. Mmmm, those juicy

nipples of yours are begging for my tongue aren't they? Don't bother trying to deny it, because my fingers are soaked in the evidence of my statement. Tell me what you want! And don't sugar coat shit for me!"

Never in a million years did Georgina dream she'd ever be riding in the countryside, with her breasts exposed, and a man's hand between her legs bringing her to the brink of orgasm as he fed her heavenly kisses like a shameless hussy, where anyone with twenty-twenty vision or a pair of binoculars could see them. But that's exactly what she was doing, and it felt fucking fantastic to be so out of control with this man who made her body shout, holler and sing when she was so sure it could barely carry a tune. But he wasn't just any man, he was *Max*. The one who made her sex weep if she even thought about him. The one who inspired her to create a line of gingham-patterned lingerie that she could wear with his cowboy hat and nothing else, for him. The man that had her humming Anita Baker's "Body and Soul" under her breath on repeat.

On a sob of unbearable pleasure, she confessed, "You... *Maaaax*, I want you! I want you to kiss me like you'll never stop. Eat me like it's the best meal on a five star Michelin menu and fuck me in ways I can't even imagine. I want to taste you at the back of my throat and wear my back pains and elbow and knee scrapes like badges of honor from... *YOU!*"

Pure masculine satisfaction surged through Max's body as his painfully swollen cock threatened to burst through his jeans at her breathless declaration. He simultaneously pinched her nipple and bit her earlobe, and Georgina shuddered, so weak she would have slid right off the horse if he hadn't held her in place as he demanded, "Just me, right? No one else is going to give you what you need?"

She was teetering right at the *edge* as she frantically nodded her head in agreement. “Only and always for *YOU!*”

Max strummed her clit, once. Twice. And Georgina fell off the cliff headfirst into orgasmic bliss as it came rushing up to greet her like a long lost friend. She tried to scream her release, but Max was there, hungrily absorbing her wails as she bucked against his hand with wild abandonment. His tongue dominated hers as he nudged Apache into a smooth gallop, and every movement the stallion made prolonged Georgina’s pleasure.

By the time they reached the stable, she was spent and Max helped her down from Apache, before tossing the reins to a stable hand who smiled at Georgina curiously. In a hurry, Max pulled her along, not bothering to introduce her. He knew it was rude, and she smacked his shoulder to let him know and gave his employee a tired smile, but he just wanted to get her back to the farmhouse. Georgina smirked, as Max hadn’t spoken a word yet. His face was a harsh mask of concentration. The walk back was a lot quicker, and this time, he didn’t stop to point anything out to her.

Don’t go all Donkey Kong on her, Max was instructing himself sternly. Do not lose control and scare her. She has issues that you’ve yet to discover. Be a kind, caring, and considerate lover...

They reached the steps of the house, and he looked down at her with a questioning look, silently asking if she was ready. Georgina placed her hand in his and led the way into the house. Behind her, he swallowed hard and took a deep breath before following her in. As they walked by the kitchen, she noticed that the table had been set for two, complete with

candles and wine glasses. She turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised inquisitively.

“Turkey tetrazzini, but it’s going to have to wait, baby. I’m hungry for something other than food now too,” Max growled and wrapped his arms around her back and held her tightly to him where muscles met curves in perfect harmony. The kiss turned gentle as he made love to her mouth with slow, languid kisses that fed her soul, and Georgina felt the barriers around her heart cracking. *Lawd have mercy; it was just so fucking good with this man!*

Max scooped Georgina into his arms as he carried her down the hallway to the family room and placed her on one of the huge brown leather sofas. Sitting down with her in his lap, he started to take off one of her boots. Her hands moved to unbutton his shirt. One boot dropped. She removed his shirt, exposing his broad chest. He started on the other boot. She unbuckled his belt. The other boot dropped. Kicking them aside, she stood in front of him between his legs. He leaned back against the sofa to look up at her, desire heavy in his beautiful dark eyes. She leaned down to unbutton his jeans, and he lifted his hips, allowing her to pull them off of him. His huge penis was straining against his black boxer briefs. She knelt between his legs and placed a hand on each of his muscular thighs and slid them up and down, running her fingernails along his flesh. His muscles turned to stone under her touch. He sat up and pulled her face to his for another kiss, one that was deeper and more demanding. She pressed kisses against his bearded jawline as her hands slid up the sides of his thighs and around to his butt. She squeezed and ran her fingernails over his firm backside. Her tongue trailed down to lick his neck, followed by her cool breath as she blew on his moist skin.

Max groaned and clutched Georgina’s thick ass tightly in his palms. Her fingers trailed to the front of his briefs, pulling the

band gently and freeing him. He sprang huge and hot into her small hand, and she bit her lips in pleasure at the work of art she was handling. It was so smooth and dark, she could see the veins faintly running underneath and the large head glistened with precum. He really was quite big, and the thought of him inside of her made her even wetter. Georgina gripped him in one hand and slid her fingers up and down his length while cupping his balls with her other. Bending forward, she skillfully teased his nipples with her tongue. Over and over she pleased him in this way while fondling his dick. Max cursed softly as his fingers delved between the full globes of her ass and he thrust into her hand. The broad head of his shaft was coated in pre-cum that she was using as lube. Gently she pushed him back, breaking their kiss, but they maintained eye contact as her hand started to move faster along his length, and soon Max's eyes drifted closed.

“Open your eyes, Max. I want you to see how much I enjoy tasting and touching you.” When he opened them, she lowered her head to lick the glistening, broad head of his penis.

Georgina moaned as she swallowed his excitement. He tasted salty and all man. Delicious. She swirled her tongue around the large mushroomed head, licking up all of the sticky liquid and sucking the top into her mouth. She ran her tongue along the sensitive underside while moving her left hand from his balls to wrap around the base. Max muttered, *“Oh shiiittt baby! That's it, take more of me. Goddamn, your mouth feels too good.”*

He groaned deeply and moved his hands to her head while flexing his hips urging her to take more of him into her hot, silken mouth. She obliged, her full lips forming an O and sliding up and down his long shaft. She worked her tongue, swirling it round and round, up and down. He was all the way at the back of her throat. Just imagining him inside of her tight pussy caused her juices to flow, and she moaned, the

vibrations surrounding his cock. His hands were in her hair, caressing her face and gently holding her place. Max cursed a blue streak and continued to flex his hips upward. Her hot mouth felt so fucking good. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he struggled not lose it. He didn't want the first time he came to be in her mouth. She could feel the tension in his body, and the thought of him losing control made her more wonton. She pulled back to only suck the head, wiggling her tongue on the underside while using her hands to fist him. She could feel more liquid oozing out, and she lapped it up before continuing to suck him.

Max couldn't take it. Gently, but firmly, he pulled her head back and helped her stand before him. He was eye level with her womanhood and eager for a taste. He pulled her leggings and panties off and pulled her close to bury his face in her damp curls. Breathing deeply, he helped Georgina to place her right leg on the sofa. Slowly he licked and nibbled his way up the inside of her thigh until he reached her core. He touched his tongue to her clit, moving in slow circles, tasting her creaminess. Georgina's head fell back in bliss, and she gripped his dark curls tightly, pressing her center closer to his face and encouraging him to take more. His hands slid to her bottom to hold her in place while his tongue slid back and forth between her sopping folds before plunging in and eating her sweet honey eagerly.

Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and her legs started to shake as she felt her orgasm building. She tried to pull back, but he tightened his grip on her booty, alternating between nibbling her clit and plunging his tongue deep into her pussy as his fingers caressed her booty and tipped between her plump cheeks to tease her forbidden hole. Georgina howled like a banshee and exploded as waves crashed over her like a massive current drowning her and sweeping her away. Max's tongue was swimming in her orgasm as he lapped up her juices. Even after she thought she was done, he continued to tease aftershocks from her. Georgina's legs were weak as he

set her facing him in his lap, her knees on either side of him. His arousal, huge and heavy, rubbed against her soaked pussy. He pulled her shirt off and licked the sensitive spot on her neck and collar bone. *“Mmmmm you taste so good, baby.”*

“Wha-what the fuck was that?!” Georgina mumbled dazedly against his neck as she arched her ass back to where Max’s finger was still teasing her star. It felt as divinely sinful as it did foreign as the long thick digit went deeper. With his other hand Max unclasped the front hook of her bra and buried his face between her breasts, Georgina assisted by cupping them and pushing them as close together as possible for his sucking, licking, and biting pleasure. “Your breasts are perfect.”

Georgina was panting loudly at the exquisite feelings he was creating within her as he slowly added another finger in her ass. Max had her sexually turned, and if his brand of loving was wrong, she refused to be right. She eagerly grasped his dick, caressing it up and down. Groaning, he brought his lips to hers. She could taste herself on him and couldn’t get enough, exploring his mouth with her tongue. Up and down she stroked his shaft as more precum oozed out, and his fingers dipped deeper and deeper into her ass. She couldn’t stand it any longer and had to have him inside of her.

“Where’s your condom?” her voice husky and needy. She had brought a box just in case. He withdrew his fingers and continued to trail kisses along her jawline while pinching and rubbing her turgid nipples.

“In my jean pocket. But not just yet,” Max said as he shifted from underneath her to reach into his pants. She lay back on the sofa as she heard the foil packet rip open. He turned back so that he was braced over her. Glancing down at his shaft again she thought of how huge and thick it was with just a tad bit of apprehension. Max distracted her with more kisses as he

slowly stroked his dick against her folds and smacked her clit with his other hand. Georgina bucked hard against his cock. “Max, please! I can’t wait!!”

Against her swollen lips, Max ordered, “Then don’t baby. Fly for me.” He stroked her over and over while pinching her clit, and Georgina was a goner. Her body jerked and shook. “*Aaaaaaaah God, don’t stop Max!! More!!!*”

Max licked her lips as he continued to stroke her, enjoying the way her beautiful face contorted with pleasure, and her luscious breasts heaved as she threw her hands over her head and twisted her hips, seeking more pleasure from him. He almost came just watching her

When Georgina finally stopped convulsing, Max was right there to take her back to La La Land, pressing his hot shaft against her. Georgina spread her legs wider, eager to feel all of him as he settled between her thighs. Max guided himself to her entryway and slowly pushed in, sucking his breath. *Fuuuccckk*. He felt like he should be kneeling and worshipping at the sacred temple that was her body before entering. He pressed further and further into her wet heat until he was buried to the hilt in her tightness. Georgina moaned, feeling a little discomfort despite how aroused she was, as she adjusted to his size. Max threw his head back, gasping for air as her muscles gripped him and her juices drenched him. He started to move, withdrawing until just the broad head was in, and then thrusting all the way back in. He set a punishing pace as his shaft stroked her g-spot over and over again.

Georgina wrapped her legs around his waist, and her breasts bounced up and down as she moved with him, dipping her hips in time to each powerful thrust into her body. Max lowered his head and his tongue caressed her nipples until she could stand it no more and pulled his face to hers, kissing him

hungrily. Their tongues moved in time to their bodies. Georgina clutched him to her ferociously as she felt another orgasm building, and Max growled deep in his throat as he too felt it in his balls.

“Fuck baby,” he whispered hoarsely as he hooked her legs over his shoulders, gripped her waist, and pounded into her. Georgina screamed again and again as she was launched into a supernova orgasm. The lockdown her pussy put on his dick was Max’s undoing, and he came, throbbing and pulsing into her soaked mons as his muscles turned to cement. Breathing harshly, he fell forward, his weight sinking her further into the sofa. Georgina wrapped her arms around him and kissed him gently.

Sleepily, Georgina stretched her overworked body, reveling in the delicious aches she felt. The clock on the fireplace mantle read 7:30 p.m. After that last bout of mind blowing sex, Max laid her back on the couch, wrapped in the plaid blanket. The fire was dying so he went, butt naked, to get some firewood from the porch. As he bent down to start the fire, she took in his fine form again. Max was walking sex with that face, beard, and *body*. Tall and muscular, there wasn’t an ounce of fat on his chocolate body, and you could bounce quarters off of that ass. Georgina admired those muscular arms with the matching fierce tribal tattoos before her gaze drifted lower to the tattoo that read ‘*vivere vehe et intrepidus*’ on his tight abdomen as he came back over to drop a quick kiss on her lips and grabbed his pants.

“I’ll be right back,” he murmured. “*Now* I’m hungry for food.”

She heard him moving around in the kitchen, and soon the aroma of turkey tetrazzini wafted through the house, and her tummy grumbled. When he came, back he was carrying a tray with two steaming plates and filled wine glasses.

Georgina sat up, and the blanket fell to her waist, exposing her breasts in the firelight glow. Max's hungry gaze fell to them, and her nipples puckered in response. He set the tray down, reached into his back pocket, and produced a new condom. Undoing his jeans, they dropped to his feet as he quickly sheathed his swollen cock. Her blanket quickly followed as he covered her body with his much larger one and paid homage to her nipples with his tongue.

Moaning softly into his ear, as she arched to offer more of herself to his mouth, Georgina asked, "What does your tattoo mean?"

Max raised his head and looked down at her. In the dim light, his eyes shone like black diamonds from underneath his heavy-lidded gaze, and he licked his lips sensually. His shaft nudged her wet entrance again, and Georgina curled her legs around him like a boa constrictor as he captured her wrists with one hand and raised her arms above her head. He slid his other hand down to lazily tease her clit.

"It means live passionately and fearlessly," Max explained thickly as he surged into her tightness once more and commenced to love her in the same way. It seemed dinner would have to wait again.

Chapter Twelve

As Georgina drove out of Las Vegas' McCarran Airport the next afternoon, with Max sitting beside her, she realized that she already missed Baymoor. It was eighty-eight degrees today, and she had already discarded the white linen blazer that she'd worn over her strapless olive jumpsuit with jogger cuffs. During the flight, Max kept staring at the swells of her breasts before finally leaning over and recommending that they induct themselves into the "Mile-High Club".

"You mean you're not already a member?" Georgina asked archly. "I would have bet money that you had platinum status."

Max laughed softly against her neck, and she squirmed at her over-eager body's reaction. "Nope, never even been tempted... until now."

Dammit, why did he have to be so addicting? Secretly pleased with his answer, Georgina dipped her head to kiss him.

"Haven't you had enough, baby?" she purred against his lips.

Max pulled back to look at her as if she'd lost her damn mind. "Not nearly enough, love. We're just getting started, Georgie, regardless of any disagreements, *WE* are still proceeding."

Last night he'd introduced her to his master bath, and Georgina didn't know which she was falling in love with faster: him or his master bath. His Jacuzzi tub could easily fit four people, and the shower had a wide bench with jet streams all around. Georgina could easily picture him sitting on the bench after a hard day, letting the water fall over his perfect

body. Max insisted she relax while he went to heat up the food. Georgina needed no further urging and quickly stepped into the shower. It was pure heaven feeling the water spraying her aching body from every angle, and her mind was full of naughty images of the things they could do in there.

When she came out in his robe, Max was in the sitting area of the large bedroom, and he had their meal laid out on the coffee table and her business plans in his hands. They dug into the tetrazzini, and it was full of flavor with the smoked turkey and fresh vegetables. Georgina showered him with praise as she moaned about how good the food was.

“Keep on making those sounds, and you might wind up on your back again,” he promised with a wink. “Or hell, I could wind up on mine.”

“Well, you won’t get any protests out of me. Just let me know how you want it, baby,” Georgina sassed, hiding her grin behind a sip of chardonnay as his eyes heated up and he slid a hand down to adjust himself. She gestured to the plan. “So tell me your thoughts.”

Max held up the plan in his hand and coolly assessed her. “You have collections planned two years in advance? How do you know what will be strong sellers that far out? And how will you justify the cost if they don’t do as well as you’re anticipating?”

“Although we’re a new company, we already have key pieces that are best sellers. We refer to them as classics, which will enable us to bring them back every season in different colors, fabrics, and prints. We’re pretty persistent in our surveys with our clients to find out what works best with their body shapes,” Georgina replied firmly. “Our most popular sellers are the collections that are designed just to be removed from

the body. Like the corsets, anything with strategically placed lace or cutouts-”

“Like the pieces you wore the other day on the table?” Max asked with interest. “Those styles have to be on the bestseller list.”

“You tell me,” she retorted sharply. “Didn’t you know how to unhook them?”

Max raised the plan to cover his face and cleared his throat, “Let’s talk about how you plan on driving your business. Where on this spreadsheet is your advertising budget?”

On and on it went. Max was relentless in questioning every aspect of Feminine Intuition, and he was proud of her for not breaking or throwing anything at him. She answered all of his questions and asked her own. The only thing they disagreed about was his insistence on background checks of her people.

“I’m not asking them to sign that this late in the game,” Georgina stated adamantly. “They’ve signed non-disclosures and confidentiality agreements, the two main things that are really important to me.”

“And as an investor who’s putting a great deal of money into your operation, I strongly disagree with you,” Max said with narrowed eyes. “To be blunt, I don’t know your people or their spending habits and vices. If you refuse to agree, then I have to wonder about you as well and what you’re hiding.”

“Screw you, Max!” Georgina hissed, glaring at him defiantly. “I don’t have any secrets when it comes to my business. You can wonder all you want, or you’ll do what most rich people

do in this case, which is start your own investigation. Those people are my family!”

“Which is why you can’t see the bigger picture,” Max pointed out irritably. “You’re too close to the situation. I’m your damn investor, and you’re treating me like a leper instead of a person that will help you to achieve your goal!” He shook her business plan in her livid face. “We don’t have a deal if you can’t do what I need to assure my money doesn’t walk.”

Georgina was so furious, she was shaking. She knew Max was right, and his request wasn’t so unreasonable. She was too close to the situation, but there was a lot of money at stake, and if something happened it, her ass would be the one he would sue, whether he was fucking it or not. Bottom line was she didn’t like being told what to do. If she did, she’d be working for someone else. Calmly she conceded, “Fine, we’ll do the background checks. I’ll have Renee draft up revised new hire paperwork, and we’ll get everyone squared away before we head back to Baymoor. I’m assuming you know a guy to expedite the process?”

“Indeed, I do,” Max assured her. “Now as far as the expenses for mannequins...”

They were on their way to the office of El Sol & Le Moon at City Center. Due to the numerous conventions in town, the strip was packed, so Georgina took the backstreet of Frank Sinatra Dr. and had them at the glamorous Avant hotel located in the heart of City Center within minutes. Georgina valeted the rental car and hand in hand, they strolled into the luxurious casino to the elevators. The office, for employees only, was located on the twelfth floor. Max escorted her to the elevators and pressed the *Up* button.

“Think I’ll try my luck on the roulette table, baby,” Max announced, sliding his arm around her waist and pulling her close to give her a lingering kiss. “Handle your business. I’ll be waiting for you.”

He left her staring after him, oblivious to the admiring glances he received as he walked by. Again he’d put the cowboy away and was wearing a charcoal grey Brixton Wesley wide brim fedora hat, a matching charcoal V-neck t-shirt and dark denim jeans with his brogues. Max was certainly eye-catching but appeared oblivious to the reaction his presence stirred, as he solely focused on her. *Sigh*. She couldn’t wait to get back to him.

By the time Georgina made it to the office, her throat was itchy from the smoke in the casino and again found herself missing the clean fresh air in Baymoor. Upon entering she found Alexis Stoyevna one of owners filing his nails, against the receptionist’s desk. The big blond Russian with cornrows was flamboyantly dressed in an emerald paisley printed silk shirt and gold-colored slacks. He jumped up in his excitement to see her and the numerous gold chains around his neck jangled loudly. Georgina bit back a smile, as she was reminded not for the first time, of the character Goldmember from the Austen Powers movies. In his incredibly thick accent, he crowed, “Dahling! So happy to see you! Your shoes are so fierce.” They exchanged air cheek kisses and hugs. “I wasn’t expecting you for a while. How are things with uncle? You are ready to talk about the new position, yes?”

“Yes Alexis, that’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. But first is Lavon around?”

Max cashed out, with several hundred dollars, after two spins on the roulette table.

He walked over to the group of megabucks slot machines and picked the one with the best view of the elevators in order to keep an eye out for his woman. Yeah, whether Georgina knew it or not, she was his woman, and he would do anything to protect her. Last night when they were defending their positions on background checks, he was so mad about her lack of reasoning, that he'd wanted to snatch her up, pull her across his knees, and paddle that sexy ass. Of course, he would have enjoyed kissing it better afterward, but didn't she realize that protection for him was protection for her as well?

"Sir, this drink is for you. Compliments of the lady in white at the bar," a sultry voice said close to Max's ear. He glanced up and looked into the blue eyes of a scantily clad cocktail waitress who was presenting him with a tray that held one tumbler of malt scotch. She smiled invitingly and continued, "She said that a man's man like yourself wouldn't drink anything less than this. I've never seen you in her before. First time in town?"

"I've been to Vegas before, just not this hotel," Max replied as he glanced behind her at the bar and spied the woman whose generous curves were poured into a skimpy white dress. She was sitting with two other women, and they were all focused on him with a laser-like intensity, making him feel like a piece of meat. Max nodded his head in acknowledgment, and they waved. He turned back to the waitress and reached into his pocket and pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet and placed it on the tray. "Tell her thanks, but no thanks. That I'm sorry she wasted her time, and their next round of drinks is on me."

“Well, in that case then, *this* is for you,” Blue-eyes cooed and handed him a napkin with the name Carina and a phone number on it.

Max frowned, “Like I said, I’m not interested, please make it clear to her.”

The cocktail waitress winked sexily at him. “I know, handsome. That’s from *me*. I get off in two hours. How about you let me give you a proper welcome to Sin City?”

Before Max could reject her as well, he heard a very familiar pissed-off voice say from behind him, “I *knew* I should have prayed for bail money instead of patience today.”

Chapter Thirteen

Georgina could feel Max trying to gauge her mood as she perused the dessert menu. After running Carina off with a growled “*Sweetie, my crazy has more levels than Candy Crush. I suggest you run, not walk away*” warning, she’d grabbed his hand and lead him to Buena Comida, a Mexican restaurant in the hotel.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she ordered without looking at him. She was uncomfortable with the reaction Carina’s actions had brought out in her. Just the thought of that wench smiling up in her man’s...*Max’s* face caused an instinctive reaction for her to defend what was hers. The need to go for broke and scratch Carina’s eyes out was strong as she heard the beautiful symphony of whoop ass cans phzzzz-ing in the air.

Although Max hadn't said anything, she could feel the smugness radiating off of him.

"Like what?" he now asked innocently, and she raised exasperation-filled eyes to him, causing him to grin.

"Shut it," Georgina said simply and took a sip of her hibiscus iced tea. She'd left him alone for forty-five minutes and had come back to him being propositioned by a waitress shoving her boobs in his face and being eye-fucked by the women at the bar. Yeah, he didn't know she knew about that shit, but honestly, who could fucking blame them?? It was *Max*: the panty-wetting owner of heart-stopping smiles and a kind nature.

"I didn't say anything," he said with a big smile, and seeing it, she gritted her teeth, thinking of her knuckleheaded brother.

"Georgie likes Maaaax! Georgie likes Maaaax!"

"Talk to me, baby. Tell me why your pretty mouth is all poked out like that," Max teased. He could tell that she was feeling out of her element after that splendid display of jealousy, but Max had enjoyed every minute of it. He wanted to get under her skin and affect her as much as she did him. Maybe then she'd know how sprung he was on her, but he doubted it. When it came to business, she was as sharp as a tack, but when it came to love, she was a complete novice. She liked what she could control, and unfortunately, love didn't fall into that category. Max was thankful that despite the walls she had in place, Georgina never tried to deny herself their intimacy. She yearned for his touch as much as he did hers and bloomed like a flower under his ministrations. Max wondered how much she'd freak out if she knew that she curled into him when she

slept. For his safety, he would keep that information to himself. For now.

“My mouth is just fine, thank you very much,” Georgina responded tartly. “I was just wondering when our food was arriving.”

“Uh-huh, sure. So what did your former employers have to say?” Max asked curiously. “That is if you don’t mind me asking.”

She grinned, “Not at all. They offered me the job to recruit talent for the company— traveling with the troupe, all expenses paid with a very lucrative salary.”

“Damn, Georgie! Congratulations!” Max offered sincerely, watching as her happy expression turned pensive. He knew she was thinking of her own company, *Feminine Intuition*. “So what did you tell them?”

“I told them that I would think about it. Initially, they had four prospects, but decided I would be the best as I’d brought in the last four employees hired five years ago,” she smiled at the server who brought a sizzling plate of skirt steak fajita’s for Max and chicken enchiladas de mole poblano for her to their table.

“How did you wind up dancing?” Max asked, and Georgina smiled shyly.

“I’ve always loved dancing and gymnastics. Aunt Val put me in every available class that Baymoor offered growing up, and when I moved out here, I continued to take dance classes when I wasn’t working at Victoria’s Secret or at school. One day

while I was working, I met a plain Jane woman named Simone who was an accountant for El Sol & Le Moon. She said she was shopping for lingerie, to land herself a husband,” Georgina continued as Max whistled silently.

“Simone was pale and very frumpy looking, but extremely driven. So I assisted her, and we became associates of sorts. She came in the next week and told me she had a date with “Mr. Big” and needed my assistance in buying an outfit, and she paid me for my time. So on my day off, I took her shopping for an outfit and haircut, and her date was a success. She asked me to help her again, and I said I would, but only if she got me an audition with her company. Simone agreed, and I auditioned and got the job. I continued to help her, and she got the man,” Georgina said with an eye roll and a wry twist to her lips.

“What’s that look for?” Max asked. “And for the record, what kind of douche just marries someone based on looks?”

“The look is because months later, I went to the wedding, and her new husband was a man that I used to assist with lingerie for several women he was seeing before and after he started dating Simone. I was very uncomfortable about the whole thing, but Simone took me to lunch and explained that she was grateful that I helped her to accomplish her goal of landing a rich husband because that was her end game. She said she knew about her husband’s women, but wasn’t interested in his love, just the luxury he could offer her. Then she gave a word of advice: If her husband ever contacted me to help him, I should do so regardless of us being friends. He could open future doors for me,” Georgina took another sip of her tea. “So that’s what I did.”

Max chewed thoughtfully as he absorbed her story. “And now that you’ve retired from dancing, this is where your degree

comes into play?”

“Yes, after watching your uncle and my family be successful business owners, I knew I wanted that eventually for myself; I just wanted to dance while I could,” Georgina answered.

“And that’s why you chose Las Vegas? Because you knew you wanted to dance, had a great love for this company, and could go to UNLV?” Max asked trying to probe deeper.

Stiffening, Georgina asked, “What’s wrong with Las Vegas?”

“Nothing, except that it’s on the other side of the country away from your family,” Max said slowly, trying to see how far he could push her. “UNLV isn’t your family’s alma mater, so what made you pick that college? Was there a program there you really wanted to take?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I graduated with honors from the “Cut A fool, If He Gets Outta Line” program. Would you like to see my skills?” Georgina snapped. Max was trying to dig, but she wouldn’t let him. Hell, *she* didn’t even like to.

The deep laugh he gave caused several women in listening vicinity to give lustful sighs, including the one who was with him.

“Scoot over here. We’re sharing,” he dictated, and she frowned.

“You’re so damn bossy,” she muttered as she grabbed her silverware and unrolled it from the cloth. “I’m not scooting anywhere. I don’t take orders from you or anyone else. I *refuse*

to let people push me around,” Georgina mused thoughtfully, “Unless it’s in an adult-sized stroller with unlimited daiquiris topped with mini-umbrellas.”

“Keep on, and I’m gonna have to spank that ass for sure later,” Max threatened with a frown.

Georgina rolled her eyes, “How about you just kiss it instead? No, wait...then you’d fall in love with it, and I’d never get rid of you.”

“Like you’d want to. I’m fully aware that you don’t let people push you around or tell you what to do. Hell, I bet you go apeshit when someone tells you to have a nice day,” Max said solemnly, but Georgina heard the mischief in his voice and smiled sweetly at him.

“I just want you to know that I’ve stabbed you several times in my mind, Max,” she said and, he laughed again.

“Okay stay over there. I just want you to know I’m withholding sex on this trip if you don’t bring that ass over here,” Max said conversationally, smirking as Georgina gave an outraged gasp. *Damn she kept him on his toes.* Sadly, most of the women he knew were only interested in being as agreeable as possible to him, thinking they had a chance to be Mrs. Maxwell Hayes.

Eyes narrowed, she leaned in close, “For your information, Hayes, I don’t need you to have-”

Georgina stopped at the cold look spreading across Max’s face. His hands clasped his utensils tightly, and his face was a tight mask of fury. From beneath his hat, black fire raged in

his eyes as he leaned across the table to speak in a savage whisper. “It’s so important that you don’t finish that sentence, Georgina. Because I will take it as a challenge and lay you across this table and fuck you in front of everyone here, and you will enjoy every. Single. Minute. Of. It. Then I will take you home and fuck you where you’ve yet to experience anyone, and I will give it to you so good, you’ll be begging me to do it again and again. Because like you said: *it’s me and only me. No one else.* If I’m lying, now is the time to open your mouth and say so.”

Georgina refused to give him the satisfaction of letting him know how aroused his words made her as she crossed her arms around her chest and growled, “I was just going to say vibrator, jackass. I could always use my vibrator.”

His face relaxed, and without losing a beat, he replied seductively, “I didn’t know you liked it *that* kinky, but I will certainly do my part to fulfill your every fantasy.”

He had her hot. And bothered. And very, very wet. Georgina strived for nonchalance as she used her fork to cut into an enchilada and fork a piece as their eyes met. She watched as Max’s gaze shifted to a point over her shoulder, and she heard a high-pitched squeal that stopped all movement in the restaurant. It was the sound a small wounded animal would make. As she was familiar with the it, Georgina showed no reaction except to close her eyes and hope that her friend/assistant had taken an “act right” pill or *five* and didn’t say or do anything-

“Is he real?!?! Daayyyuumm, boss lady! I was just kidding about bringing me something back from your little country town!” Renee was off and running as she stood next to their booth, checking Max out like she would a new car. *“Mmmph!*

Damn that's what I like about you, Georgie-girl. You ain't a stingy gift-giver. I must say you definitely splurged with him!"

Max grinned at the charmingly over-the-top Amazonian woman with cocoa skin, a short, curly, bronze afro, and large green eyes. He sensed she was completely harmless and loyal to the woman staring daggers at him, which is why he encouraged her further. "I even have all my teeth and a full head of hair."

The flutter of eyelashes, loud gasp, exaggerated full-bodied shimmy, and hand press to the chest she gave were telenovela-worthy. *"Ooooooh, and a voice layered in bass and swag to boot?! Honey, God was working some serious overtime when he made you!"*

Georgina gave an exasperated sigh, "Maxwell Hayes, this is my friend and assistant Renee Barton. I'd like to say she has an off button, but it would only be wishful thinking on my part."

Max stood up and held his hand out to her, "It's nice to meet you, Renee. Please have a seat."

Renee took his hand and batted her eyelashes a few more times at Max. "Oh no, Mr. Hayes, the pleasure is all mine. I do declare I've never felt a handshake as strong as yours. You must work out quite a bit."

"Park it, Scarlett O' Hara!" Georgina barked, causing Renee to jump before hastening into the booth on her side. This caused Georgina to move into closer proximity to Max, who slid his arm around her and pulled her closer to him.

“Gotcha,” he murmured into her ear, and Georgina gave him a sharp elbow which made him nip her ear playfully as Renee watched them avidly. She knew that as soon as her friend got her alone, she would be questioned.

“Well, *this* is interesting. So tell me what is it that you do exactly, Max?” Renee asked as she grabbed a menu and quickly scanned it. She waved her hand for their server who quickly appeared.

“I’m a farmer,” Max said, and Renee’s eyes went huge in her pretty face. She turned to the waiting server.

“I’ll have the lobster quesadilla and a tropical pineapple margarita, thank you,” Renee purred and eyed his butt as he walked away, before turning back to face them.

Georgina cleared her throat and tried to move away from Max, but his arm tightened around her shoulders. Clearing her throat, she said, “Max is going to be the model for the shoot. Has the location been secured?”

Renee nodded her head in confirmation. “Yes, and someone from Bonnie Springs will bring the bunnies. And yes, I told them that it was very important that there were no vampire looking red-eyed bunnies. I picked up the requested wigs as well. Capex is a little annoyed for the severely short notice, but has agreed to everything and will have Max’s check ready when the shoot is done. He approved your verbiage for the article and will print after you’ve approved.”

Satisfied, Georgina smiled, “Excellent. I spoke to Lavon, and he said that he and his assistant will be on set by two this afternoon. Alexis said the props will be delivered by one-thirty. Did Lorena set aside the pieces we’ll be using?”

“Yes, they’re at the house, pressed and ready to go. We’re all set,” Renee said with a grin as she looked from Max to Georgina. “Now I understand the insistence upon the theme change.”

“What’s the theme?” Max asked curiously, glancing down at Georgina, who ignored him and took another bite of her enchilada as a slow flush crept up her cheeks.

“Why it’s Alice in Wonderland! You know the story about a girl who falls down a rabbit hole and goes on a wild and crazy adventure, doing things she never dreamed she’d do,” Renee said with glee as the server returned with her drink. She smiled her thanks and took the glass. Raising it to an embarrassed Georgina, she smiled proudly, “Cheers, girlfriend!”

Chapter Fourteen

“Okay, heffa, you drive a hard bargain, but this is my *final* offer. I will give you two pairs of Louboutin shoes, a Balmain jacket, and that Roberto Cavalli dress you were eyeballing at Caesar’s. *Take it or leave it,*” Lavon hissed in Georgina’s ear as he applied false eyelashes to her eyelids. “You owe me!”

“I don’t owe you shit, Lavon,” she said calmly and tried to repress a smile as she watched his expertly-made up eyes narrow on her. Lavon Murphy was a good friend that did hair and makeup for El Sol & Le Moon and a devoted Kat

Williams impressionist. He agreed to do today's makeup as a favor for Georgina introducing him to his boyfriend, Marquise Santiago, one of her former roommates. "Besides, I thought you were happy with Marquise."

"I am happy with Marquise, bish! It's just...*my gawd* look at him!!!" Lavon whined as he contoured Georgina's cheekbones. "His fine ass is a freak of nature! Like a hybrid of Boris, Idris, and Lance with a little bit of "Lawd have mercy" sprinkled on him!"

The reference to some of the finest black actors around gave Georgina pause. There wasn't a woman alive who wasn't aware of those supremely sexy and talented men, but in her opinion, they didn't even come close to Max. She glanced over to where he stood, dressed in a black English style suit that fit his tall, muscular frame perfectly, talking to Daniel and Simone Capex who'd stopped by to say hello. She watched as Daniel rubbed Simone's small baby bump lovingly and prayed that the couple's philandering ways were over for good. DJ Tiesto's mix tapes blared on the set. Max caught her eye and smiled, as comfortable here in her world as he was on the farm.

Georgina smiled back in appreciation. "I agree with you, Lavon. He *is* a very good-looking gentleman. Unfortunately, you're not his type, doll."

"*Hmmph*, well all I'm sayin' is, he don't know what he's missin' because when Lavon Murphy puts it down-

"Boy, stop! I think your weave is in a little too tight if you haven't figured out that our little Miss Prim and Proper here and Farmer Max are an item," Renee informed Lavon as she interrupted them to hand out water bottles.

Lavon stopped applying foundation and looked at Georgina's mortified face in shock and disbelief. "*Bish! Get. Out.* I thought you kept your legs shut tighter than the Disney vault after a movie goes back in! Hell, it'd be easier to get into Fort Knox than your cooch-"

He stopped, and Renee whooped with laughter as Georgina graced them both with an evil look. "I feel like I don't get nearly enough credit for restraining myself from killing the both of you. The world would definitely be a saner place. Now can we *please* focus? I don't want to be out here too late."

There was a moment of silence before Lavon spoke again. "Okay, this is the last thing I'm going to say about it. Even if you want to be all stingy and not share details, I *know* how good the farm boy puts it down. Hell, if he's looking at animals fucking and gettin' *theirs* all day, it *must be* intense when he finally gets a little- "

"LAVON!" Georgina shouted, causing everyone on set to look at them, but even she couldn't resist them for long and succumbed to their gales of laughter as they high-fived each other.

"You really like him, don't you?" Renee deduced when they were finally able to catch their breath, watching as Georgina's eyes kept straying towards Max who was doing likewise.

With a sigh, Georgina finally admitted aloud what was in her heart. "I do. So very, very much. He's kind, funny, smart as hell, and wants me. That man who is literally a walking advertisement for sex wants *me*— 'dull, repressed, wouldn't know the meaning of fun if you tattooed it on my forehead'

Georgie.” She gave a derisive laugh, “Can you believe that? Sometimes I feel like it’s a prank someone is playing on me.”

“I hate when you do that,” Renee snapped, easy-going nature gone in the face of Georgina’s self-disparaging remarks. “I’m certainly not going to give you the “You is kind and enough” speech, because you know that. You’re fucking brilliant and have more talent in your pinky than most people I know. So what if you keep your softness buried deeper than the ocean. I hate it when you sell yourself short.” She turned to give Max a once over. “Alright, so he’s fine as fuck, but you’re not exactly the lovechild of Freddy Kruger and Quasimodo, so quit acting like it.

Lavon held Georgina’s face up to the light to examine his handiwork. Pleased with his work, he gave Georgina a smile, “I concur with Renee. Shake that devil off your back and have some fun with the farmer, babygirl. The most important thing to remember is that he’s a keeper— as long as he makes your panties wet instead of your eyes.”

Max couldn’t take his eyes of Georgina as he followed the photographer’s directives. His jaw about hit the floor when she opened her robe and revealed her body, clad in a baby blue corset that had a black and white striped satin bow nestled between the cups and the matching French panties, trimmed in the same striped satin. A sheer black peignoir and black hose with garters encased her legs, and she wore black and white French maid stilettos. It was tasteful, sexy, and driving him out of his fucking mind. He watched as she held the large white rabbit that was trussed up in a little coat and pocket watch. The

animal snuggled deeper into her arms, and she cooed at him with glossy red lips.

Her good friend Lavon had transformed her into a sexed-up version of Alice in Wonderland. She wore a long, reddish-blond wig, adorned with a black headband that was darker and warmer in color to complement her cinnamon skin. False eyelashes, smoky eyes, and painted lips completed the image. The men on set were just as affected as he was, but a hard look from him shut that shit down. She looked beautiful as always, but Max preferred her natural beauty and almost felt like he was cheating on her for even staring.

The photographer shouted, “Okay, people! This scene is a wrap. Next, we’ll do Georgie in the Queen of Hearts scene, so let’s move the dessert table out and insert the large gold throne. Max, you’re going to sit on the throne, and Georgie with her back to the camera, will place her heel between your crotch and hold onto her staff. I want to only see only your eyes, Max. Make it very intimate. Then we’ll wrap up with the Mad Hatter and Cheshire cat pic. Take twenty, people.”

As soon as Georgina handed the bunny back to its handler, Max palmed her elbow and gently steered her to the dressing trailer. Ignoring the knowing looks the crew was giving them, he guided her into the dressing room and as soon as the door closed behind him, Max yanked her into his arms and lowered his head to give her a searing kiss. He relished the taste of her sweetness as his tongue expertly teased hers. Max lifted her into his arms and turned so that she was pressed against the door and broke off the kiss, feeling a sense of relief that he’d kissed all the gloss off and her soft pink lips were now visible.

“I take it you like the outfit?” Georgina asked throatily as she pressed her body closer to his. Rotating her hips against his hard-on, she wrapped her arms tighter around his neck,

watching as his eyes dilated, and he pressed his swollen cock into her center, making her lick her lips in anticipation. Max framed her face.

“Georgie, I want to tell you two things: First, I want you to know that I am extremely proud of you and honored that you would include me in your moment. So thank you very much for that,” Max said fiercely. “The second is, I want you to know that when you’re between my legs and that sweet pussy is in my face, it will take everything in me *not* to shove your panties to the side and fuck you with my tongue. *Do you understand?* I don’t even know how I’ll be able to resist diving in and lapping up every drop of goodness you dish out,” Max rasped, taking her hand and lowering it to cover his cock. “*Feel* what you do to me, Georgie, because you need to know that when it’s a wrap, we are done here. You are leaving in costume, and it’ll be a miracle if we make it to the car without giving everyone a show.”

Breasts heaving and feverish from his words, Georgina pulled his head down and claimed his mouth, loving the velvet texture of his tongue playing with hers. The images his words evoked had her aroused enough to want to delay the next shoot by twenty more minutes while he gave her what they both *needed*. She squeezed his cock and moved her hand to tug at his belt. “I need you, Max. *Now*. I won’t be able to last until the end of the day.”

His bearded jaw brushed erotically against the swells of her breasts, causing her skin to tingle as he nibbled on her lips. “Soon, baby. *Soon*.”

Slowly he lowered her feet to the floor and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “I’m going to leave now, but I just wanted to say again how proud I am of you, Georgie, for making your dreams come true.”

It was five forty-five when the shoot wrapped. Max was walking to the dressing trailer to remove the borrowed suit when he passed Georgina giving an amused Lavon a blistering lecture on his choice of music. He winked at her and continued on his way, anxious to leave so he could spend the rest of the evening making love to his woman.

“So you’re saying you *didn’t* like it when I played Bruno Mars’s “Gorilla”? Was it too *animalistic* for you?” Lavon inquired innocently as he removed her wig, and Georgina smacked his arm, causing him to yelp in pain.

“Don’t try to play with me, Lavon Murphy. I should kick your ass!” she fumed as she returned his wink saucily.

Max had just reached the trailer when he heard a woman’s scream. Whirling around, he first checked Georgina to make sure she was okay, but she was looking around for the victim as well. The noise came from Maggie, and she was looking at her phone. She raised anguished tear-filled eyes, “Oh my goodness...Prince is...

*Dearly beloved
We are gathered here today
To get through this thing called life*

*Electric word life
It means forever and that's a mighty long time
But I'm here to tell you
There's something else
The after world*

*A world of never ending happiness
You can always see the sun, day or night*

*So when you call up that shrink in Beverly Hills
You know the one, Dr. Everything'll Be Alright
Instead of asking him how much of your time is left
Ask him how much of your mind, baby*

*'Cause in this life
Things are much harder than in the afterworld
In this life
You're on your own*

*And if the elevator tries to bring you down
Go crazy, punch a higher floor*

The lyrics to “Let’s Go Crazy” were projected on the ceiling and read by every partygoer present as they waved purple glow sticks in the air to kick off the party. Even though it was short notice, it seemed everyone working in the entertainment industry turned out that night for one of Lavon Murphy’s legendary parties after he blasted social media and used his contacts at radio stations. This one was held at the Avant ballroom to celebrate music legend Prince Roger Nelson’s iconic life. Everyone was encouraged to wear purple or do their best impression of the artist. Local bands were set to perform his music as well as dancers from Cirque du Soleil, Jabawokeez, and El Sol & Le Moon. Just looking around the huge ballroom at everyone’s style, one could see how heavily the icon impacted those with his style and music.

Georgina was going to perform “Baby I’m A Star” with her former co-workers, and she had given them some of her corsets to wear. As she waited in the wings, she watched Max conversing with Lavon, Renee, and Alexis. They appeared to

be having a good time as they chatted and laughed easily with each other as the deejay spun Prince classics.

Someone tapped her shoulder, and she turned around to see a medium height black man standing behind her in a navy suit. He smiled at her warmly, and she thought he was handsome with his smooth chocolate skin, pearly white teeth, and light brown eyes. “Excuse me miss, but aren’t you Georgina Carlton?”

“Yes, I am. Who are you?” she asked, curious as to why he was backstage with the dancers. He looked more like a “Suit”, which was how performers referred to upper management.

“My name is James Archer, and I work for Caesars Entertainment,” he introduced himself and held out his hand, which Georgina accepted and shook. Her heart started pounding as she watched him checking out her outfit. Tonight she was wearing a silver teddy trimmed in black, a black tuxedo jacket, and fishnet pantyhose with knee-high stiletto boots. Black, beaded, layered necklaces completed the look.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Archer,” she said politely, and he shook his head.

“No, please call me James. Is this one of your pieces?” James asked, gesturing to her corset.

“Yes it is, and so are those three over there,” Georgina replied and pointed to the other women performing with her tonight. James glanced over at the women as they worked on tonight’s routine. “Have you guys made a decision on who will be providing you with costumes?”

“Not quite, but we do appreciate your assistant’s persistence,” James said with a chuckle.

“Well, I’m sure you could benefit from your vendor being a local business, couldn’t you? We could easily make changes and adjustments if provided within a reasonable time frame of course, and the turnaround time would practically be non-existent,” Georgina offered with a smile, rejoicing inside at the thoughtful look that appeared on James’s face. “Why don’t you stick around for our performance; that way you can see the durability of *Feminine Intuition’s* product?”

“I think I’ll do just that. It was a pleasure meeting you, Georgina,” James said before giving her a slight bow. “I look forward to your performance.”

Georgina was filled with excitement as she watched him walk away and disappear into the crowd. She had a really good feeling about their meeting, and suddenly the future appeared blindingly bright to her. Good things were definitely coming her way.

Marquise walked by, and Georgina grabbed her longtime friend by the arm and hugged him tightly to her with a big smile. “I need a favor, old friend.”

Laughing, he hugged her back, “Anything for you, dear. What’s up?”

“You’re in charge of entertainment tonight, right? I need you to put my group on for one more song, and then I want to do a solo...”

Chapter Fifteen

Georgina screamed his name long and loud as she came. Her legs, draped over his broad shoulders, shook uncontrollably as Max made good on his promise with his tongue and greedily lapped up her release. Her hands were clenched deeply in his curls to support her body as she lifted her hips to receive every thrust, stroke, and lick his tongue spoiled her with. It was her third orgasm of the night, and apparently he was just getting started.

“Baby, I’m fairly certain your neighbors two blocks over now know my name,” Max teased as he nibbled the inside of her thigh.

“Mmmm, you gotta give credit where credit is due,” Georgina smiled dreamily as he blew cool air on her hotspot. “You’re insatiable tonight, sir.”

“Can you blame me? After watching you perform, don’t act like you didn’t know this was gonna happen. Besides, you started it,” Max growled, referencing their drive from the party to her house.

Georgina’s hands wouldn’t stay still as he drove. She fondled him through his jeans, feeling his length grow hard underneath her fingers, before unzipping him pulling his throbbing penis out. Georgina stroked the satin covered steel, slowly driving him insane, before she lowered her head and took him deeply inside of her mouth. His groans of pleasure filled the car, encouraging her to act even more wantonly. They had just

reached her driveway when he lost control and Georgina swallowed every single drop.

As he released his grip on her waist and pulled himself up to lay his big body between her thighs. Georgina eagerly clutched him to her and drew him down for a slow, sensuous kiss. “Taste your sweetness, love.”

“I want to taste something else again,” Georgina whispered seductively as her hand trailed down his rock hard abs until she found what she was looking for, enjoying the way his breath caught as she stroked his shaft.

Max rolled them over so he lay on his back and she on his chest, as he arched his brow. “Your wish is my command.”

Georgina kissed the firm lips she’d become addicted to in such a short time. “Then I command you to place your hands behind your head and enjoy yourself.”

Max groaned as she trailed kisses along his jaw and down his neck as her hand continued to stroke and slide over his cock. He willed his toes not to curl so hard, they cracked as she hit a sensitive patch on his neck. “Uh-uh, where you go my hands go, baby.”

He made good on his statement by sliding his hands down to grip her booty and caress it. Before either one of them could explore any further, Georgina’s cell phone started ringing, and they both froze. Max looked down at her with raised eyebrows. “Who’s calling you at two in the morning?”

“No one I know is that crazy, but hopefully everything is okay with the family,” Georgina said, biting her lip with worry as

she reached over him for the phone on the nightstand and looked down at the screen. It was local, but she didn't recognize it. Now she was annoyed because none of her friends were crazy enough to call this late. She answered it with irritation in her voice, "Hello?"

"Georgina?" the voice on the other end asked sweetly, and she froze in shock, hearing it. "Georgina, are you there?" this time more impatient. "Dammit girl, it's your mama. I got myself in a bit of trouble, and I need you to come help me."

Georgina felt Max shift on the bed beside her. "Where are you calling me from?"

There was an angry huff on the other end of the phone, and the real Ingrid Carlton came out. "A beach in the Bahamas! Where the fuck you think I'm calling from? I'm in motherfucking jail! The cops busted me and Ezra, but it was all a big misunderstanding. Them fucking pigs won't listen to me! Now get off your lazy ass and bail your mama out, little girl."

She ignored the look of concern on Max's face. "What did they get you for?"

"The usual drugs and prostitution," Ingrid muttered. "But like I said, it was all a misunderstanding and if you just come down here, it could all get straightened out!"

Georgina closed her eyes, in resignation. She still remembered the day Ingrid Carlton found her again after searching for her all those years ago...

Georgina decided to go back to Las Vegas when she started applying for college and received a full scholarship to UNLV.

The need to know what happened to her mother was a strong force within her. After settling in at the dorms, she started with prostitution rings and deliberately dated a cop to see if he could look Ingrid Carlton and her known associates up. She tracked them down after discovering the address for Ingrid was no longer valid. The associates told her that she no longer did tricks and was homeless. So Georgina changed course and volunteered at countless shelters in her spare time and during the holidays hoping to run into Ingrid instead of spending them with Nate and Valerie. It was three years before she finally ran into her mother. Ingrid was tired and rundown-looking, but still pretty in a faded kind of way. Heart pounding, Georgina served her a meal, and Ingrid looked her directly the eye and said nothing. When her shift was over, Georgina, filled with trepidation, approached Ingrid's table and sat down across from her. Ingrid watched her, saying nothing as she continued to eat. They stared at each other in silence for five minutes before Georgina finally spoke. "Do you know who I am?"

"I do," Ingrid mumbled around a mouthful of food. "You're my foolish, youngest one."

There was more silence as Ingrid finished her meal, and Georgina, unable to stand it any longer, offered to help her. "You don't have to live like this. I can help you if you let me."

Ingrid got very angry, and Georgina would never forget what Ingrid said next. She leaned over the table and said, "I had hoped you would be smart like your siblings or uncle, but I guess you're not. I was the worst thing to happen to you kids. Not a day goes by when I'm sober that I don't think about all of you and what I gave up. I did the best thing I could have ever done for you kids by walking away. That was my gift to you kids: a shot at a better life. I heard about a really pretty girl asking about me down here. It appears you're wasting your shot clinging to what will never be. I'm never going to be

clean, and I will never walk the straight and narrow. Don't come looking for me again."

Foolishly Georgina ignored her words and gave her mother her phone number in the hopes that she would use it to reach out and they could build a relationship of sorts and two hundred dollars. Ingrid greedily snatched the money and mumbled thanks. She promised to be in touch, leaving her daughter with the dangled promise of hope for what could be again as she vowed to help her mother.

"Georgina!" Ingrid's sharp voice brought her back to the present, and she opened her eyes to find Max still staring at her. Ingrid's voice changed to a whine. "Are you coming or not? You said you would always help me, but I can hear in your voice that you don't want to. It's cool, I thought I could depend on my daughter to help-"

"I'm on my way," she said abruptly and disconnected the call.

From across the room, Max watched Ingrid Carlton fidget and twitch uncontrollably, as she stood next to her daughter. Although it was obvious she was a junkie, she had the same wide brown eyes as Georgina, but hers were dull and sunken. Her cinnamon skin was pockmarked and sallow-looking. Where Georgina's hair was lustrous and sleek, her hair was thin and scraggly. The mini-dress she wore hung off of her small, scrawny frame. She hemmed and hawed as Georgina

stood like a stone statue with a neutral expression and listened to everything the detective was telling her. Instinctively Max knew that Ingrid was the reason Georgina kept herself tightly reigned in, why she refused to let her guard down and open herself to her emotions.

“Poor kid’s been coming here and doing this for years,” a gravelly voice said from behind him. Max turned and saw the desk sergeant, an older white man staring at Georgina and her mother. “Since she was nineteen, I believe.”

The sergeant turned to Max with an earnest expression, said, “You should do Georgie a favor and take her away from here. That mother of hers ain’t doing nothing but dragging her down. Smart girl like her should know better and cut her losses,” he shook his head grimly. “It’s like she’s got a spell on Georgie or something.”

Max turned back to watch Georgina shake the detective’s hand and walk away, Ingrid trailing behind her sullenly. As she approached him, he could see how tense she was.

She gave him a wan smile as she addressed the officer behind the desk, “Hi, Sergeant Amos, how have you been?”

“Can’t complain, kid,” Sergeant Amos said giving her a gruff smile, before cutting his eyes sharply at Ingrid. “Kid, you know I don’t mind seeing your pretty face; I just hate that it’s always under these circumstances.”

“Screw you, Amos! You’re just mad that you never got a piece of this sweet ass!” Ingrid shouted belligerently, and the cop snorted in disgust at her.

Max watched Georgina grab her mother's frail-looking arm and drag her away towards the exit. Ingrid jerked her arm back and stumbled but quickly regained her footing.

"Wait! What about Ezra?" she demanded, and Georgina whirled around to face her. Max could see the anger in her eyes, but clearly Ingrid couldn't or didn't care.

"What about Ezra?" she asked carefully trying to keep her voice neutral, and Ingrid crossed her arms as she stared at her daughter with a mutinous expression. It was a standoff between a parent and their child, only in this instance, Georgina was the parent.

"You just going to leave him in jail? Where I go, he goes, and I say you can't leave him, dammit!" Ingrid exclaimed indignantly. "Post his fucking bail!"

Max didn't condone violence towards women and children, but he'd never in his life been so tempted to smack some sense into or all of the bullshit out of a woman as he was in this instance.

"What a fucking piece of work," Sergeant Amos growled, and Max couldn't agree more. He watched Georgina get in her mother's face.

"I will do nothing of the sort. You're lucky that all you got was a warning this time. Let that grown man figure out his own problems. Now get your narrow ass outside and into my car, before I snatch you bald-headed, Ingrid!" Georgina seethed, and Ingrid slinked out the door without another word.

Max walked up to her, and she stiffened at his nearness. He knew she was still angry about his insistence in coming down here with her. "Give me the keys, I'll drive."

Reluctantly she handed them over, and he grabbed her hand tightly as they walked out of the precinct together.

The ride to the half-way house was filled with Ingrid's bitter diatribe of how she had to leave her man, and he was gonna leave her now that she hadn't proven herself to be a ride or die bitch. It was only when she changed subject and started in on what a terrible daughter Georgina was, calling her everything but a child of God, that Max could no longer hold his tongue. He quickly pulled into a gas station and asked Georgina to run in and grab him a fountain drink. At first, she looked like she would protest, but she must have seen something in his eyes that stopped her. As soon as she left the car, Ingrid started in on him.

"What's a big, strong fella like you doing with a stuck-up bitch like her? You need a real woman—"

Her words were cut off as Max turned in his seat and snatched her forward by her loose dress. This close he could smell her fetid breath and see every clogged pore on her haggard face. Her eyes widened in surprise as he twisted harder.

"*SHUT.UP.* Don't you ever disrespect her again. Now you're going to listen to me. When Georgina gets in the car, you're going stay quiet until we arrive at your new home. Now I

don't give a damn what you do, but she obviously does, so you'll stay put in that home and complete their programs until they approve of your leaving. If you leave before the program is over, I will find you and have you dry out my way. I've got a buddy that can arrange for you to go cold turkey in Antarctica and keep you there. Picture staring at nothing but white walls and snow as the shakes consume you day in and day out." Max paused to let the image sink in. "I promise you it will happen; *I* can make it happen. Either way, don't call Georgina ever again unless you are clean and sober. She is a wonderful woman, and I won't have her suffering at your hands out of some misguided guilt because you fucked your life up. Are we clear?"

Wordlessly Ingrid nodded, and Max slowly released her. They waited in silence for Georgina to return.

Chapter Sixteen

The steady rain falling against the window was calming. Georgina lay on her side, looking at it as she tried to catch her breath. She was naked and in Max's bed, his chest pressed to her back with the covers tangled around their legs. The room smelled of sex and citrus-fig candles. He pressed a kiss to her damp cheek.

“Don't go to sleep, baby. We've got a lot of catching up to do,” Max warned as his hands palmed her breasts from behind, slowly teasing the swollen buds as he kissed her neck and leaned over to watch the drowsy smile touch her lips.

“Yes, please,” she murmured, feeling relieved that Max hadn't run after being exposed to typhoon Ingrid. She'd been so furious about his insistence that he accompany her, but he'd been adamant. The entire time she stood chatting with Detective Collins about Ingrid's latest problem, she kept thinking, *Oh God, he's going to walk away. No, he's going to RUN and never look back.* Instead, Max had stayed and assisted her in getting Ingrid squared away. Georgina was surprised that for the remainder of their time together Ingrid had managed to behave herself until the end.

After saying goodbye, Georgina walked to the door; as she turned the door handle, Ingrid's soft words reached her, “You're just like me you know.”

She stiffened and turned around to face the woman that had done nothing but cause her angst her entire life. “Excuse me?”

Ingrid's face was distorted with bitterness, jealousy, and anger. "The only difference between you and me is that you dress all fancy and live in a big fancy house. But you STILL chose a man over your family. Just remember that, Georgina. You are no better than me."

"I'm not choosing Max over you, Ingrid. I'm choosing ME over you," Georgina said sadly and quickly left.

Max took her home, and she took a long shower, attempting to wash the foul stench of Ingrid's malice away. When she came out, she found he'd packed their bags and straightened up the house. They drove back to the airport, turned the car in and got on their flight back to Maryland. As Georgina watched the Las Vegas strip disappear from her window, she'd never felt more relieved in her life to be leaving it behind. Max pulled her close, allowing her to lean in and be supported by his strength. He kissed her cheek softly and ordered her to go to sleep.

She awoke when the plane landed, and at baggage claim, he grabbed a cart, loaded up their luggage, and pushed it with one arm. The other he kept wrapped around her while she slid her hand into his back pocket and squeezed his firm butt as they walked to his truck. The familiarity of their movements wasn't lost on either of them. The gestures felt like they'd done them together forever.

They drove in the rain, each lost in their own thoughts, letting Chrisette Michelle's singing fill the silence. It was only when they were about to drive by the farm, that Georgina spoke. "Stop here."

Max glanced over at her, and she allowed him see the turmoil in her eyes. “Make me forget for a little while, okay?”

After that, it was a race to get to the house. They ran, laughing through the rain and were soaking wet in each other’s arms, exchanging kisses when Sherlock and Watson came to greet them on the porch, before wisely retreating to their doggy beds in the family room. Clothes came off, leaving a trail up the stairs and into Max’s bedroom. Georgina lit the candles she had brought back with her as Max’s hot lips and hands caressed her from behind. Together they fell back on the king sized bed, and Max rolled over her and started from the bottom, sucking and nibbling on her toes as she grabbed at her breasts and slid a hand between her thighs, eager to put on a show for him. Eyes dark with desire, Max watched her as he licked the backs of her knees and caressed her calves. Gently he nipped and licked the inside of her thighs. When he reached her soaking mound, Max put a leg over each shoulder and watched Georgina with pure sin in his eyes as he went to work, giving her two shattering orgasms with his mouth and fingers as she begged for more and mercy at the same time.

Georgina was rag doll limp when Max rolled her onto her stomach, but she eagerly raised up on her elbows and knees, slick with anticipation for what was coming next. Max surprised her by burying his face in her pussy as he slowly stroked with his tongue from clit to rosette, which he teased mercilessly as he dipped his fingers into her overflowing honey to stroke her g-spot. Georgina shook and wailed as she thrust back for more and more of his decadent loving.
“Aaaggghhh, I can’t...oh my goodness!! Maaaaxxx!!!”

Max smiled as he drove her to the brink and left her hanging, to rise up and quickly sheath himself in a condom before slowly filling her to the brink with his girth. He caressed

Georgina's ass and gave it a sharp smack, and she whined with pleasure-pain at the sting. "Close your legs, love."

Readily she obeyed, and Max rolled his eyes with pleasure at the incredibly snug position she awarded him with. He flexed his hips once. Twice. For his efforts, he was rewarded with a fresh coat of her arousal drenching his cock. "Are you ready, G?"

"Gaaawwwd yeeess," she panted, and Max proceeded to fuck her as if his life depended on it. He tunneled in and out of her dripping pussy, hitting her sweet spot over and over again as he gripped her shoulder to keep her from falling face down under the force of his thrusts.

Georgina felt like she would come out of her skin as he fucked her oh so right; with every thrust, it felt like he was swelling even more when suddenly he yanked her back to press against him. Tilting her head back, his demanding lips found hers as he moved her up and down on his cock, knocking on her g-spot and his fingers finding her swollen clit.

She clenched her muscles tightly around him and moved to his smooth rhythm as her orgasm built inside of her with every powerful drill he gave her. Max whispered into her ear, "I could stay inside of you forever, baby. I don't even think you know what you do to me when I see your beautiful smile or your frown when you're giving me shit. But the best is when you come for me, and I can see you flying...like this."

Max pinched her clit, and Georgina fractured apart, her orgasm consuming her with the force of a hurricane as Max brought them back down on the bed and drove deeper and harder into her; his hoarse shout of satisfaction echoed through the house as he came also.

“What are you thinking about?” Max asked quietly. Georgina was silent as she decided on how to answer. She had been thinking about her responses to him, how in such a short time, she craved his touch. Some of the girls at work talked about their sex lives, and sometimes she had been envious of the fun they seemed to have in bed, but when it came to anal anything, she had balked at the idea of anything being pleasurable. Max only had to touch, her and she was down for whatever. When she was little, the sounds she had heard coming from her mother’s bed had sounded just awful to her, like an animal was attacking her or something. Now here she was years later making similar noises in the throes of passion. Without her men, Ingrid had been weak and lost. What if she was the same without Max? It was going to be damn hard to quit him when the time came.

“I was thinking about how hungry I am,” she lied, and he mock-growled and kissed the back of her neck.

“For food?” he teased, rolling away from her and off of the bed. Max handed her a t-shirt, and she slipped on her socks and panties. He only wore his bottoms, and she found herself distracted by all that muscle in her face. They decided to make omelets. Max opened a bottle of white wine while Georgina brought the candles down, and they sat at the kitchen table in candlelight eating and listening to the rain come down around them.

“Are you going to tell Nate what happened?” Max asked as he took in her glowing skin, soft eyes and swollen lips with satisfaction. She looked like a woman that had been well loved.

Georgina sighed, “Yeah, I’ll tell them when they return from Paris. I don’t want to drop this shit in their laps before they go

off on a romantic getaway. They worry enough about me as it is.”

“She’s the reason you stay in Las Vegas, isn’t it?” Max asked, and Georgina became still. His hand covered hers when he saw her index finger and thumb touch. “Aren’t you tired of facing everything alone, Georgie? Let me in...I’ve got you, baby.”

The candlelight flickering across Max’s face and the compassion blazing in his dark eyes was Georgina’s undoing. Swallowing past the huge lump of shame in her throat, she spoke, “We have an agreement of sorts...If I stay in Las Vegas, she won’t come here and disrupt the lives of everyone I love.

Max stared at her in shock. “She’s blackmailing you?”

Georgina looked away and at the rain hitting the windows. “Ingrid came here once before. I was nine, and she caused a big scandal. She showed up at the school drunk and high as a freaking kite, demanding to see her baby. She was asked to leave, and she assaulted the principal and secretary before the cops came and dragged her to jail. While in jail, she was coming off of her high and offering promiscuous favors to the sheriff and his deputies. Aunt Val was so upset, and I withdrew back into my shell. By the time Uncle Nate put her in a rehabilitation center, everyone in town knew about Ingrid, and that I was the daughter of a whore and...kids can be cruel... you know?”

Max tried to stop the rage pumping through his body, but it was like a locomotive on full speed. Ingrid Carlton was lucky he hadn’t been privy to this information before meeting her. “Yeah, they can be little bastards. So then what happened?”

Georgina gave a harsh laugh, “As a teenager I had grand illusions about finding my mother and she wouldn’t be as bad as my siblings said. So that’s why I picked UNLV. I had such high hopes of accomplishing this goal. I was going to find her and make her well. I searched for a couple of years before she eventually found *me*.” With a shake of her head, Georgina turned away from the window, and Max saw the unshed tears in her eyes. “She warned me, Max. But I was too stupid to listen, too fucking bleeding heart to take that warning for what it was. I gave her money and my phone number, and she disappeared, only calling if she needed to be bailed out and then demanding money. Once I tried to say no, and she showed up at my job and sat outside of Victoria’s Secret until I came out to talk to her. Ingrid said it was fine if I didn’t want to give her money, she would just hitchhike across the country and ask her brother and his wife or her other kids. So I stayed in Las Vegas, and every now and then, she pops up and I get her situated and we’re all good until the next time.”

“Come here,” Max gently tugged on Georgina’s hand, and she went willingly into his strong arms, to curl up in his lap and inhale his special scent. They sat like that for a long time just listening to the softly falling rain before Georgina finally spoke again.

“I couldn’t do that to Eliza or Graham. Staying to protect them was a small price to pay after all they’d sacrificed for me,” she whispered softly into Max’s neck. “You know what I mean?”

Max looked down into her eyes. Instead of her usual guarded veil, there was an exposed vulnerability that made him realize that he too would do anything to protect the one he loved. “I know exactly what you mean, Georgie.”

The rain stopped before they finally stirred.

“This is really nice,” she said shyly and caressed his bearded jaw.

Max chuckled quietly, “Yeah it is. Normally it’s just me and the dogs. I’m glad you’re here with me, Georgie.”

She was a little embarrassed about opening up to him on the level she had, but she was glad he still wasn’t running. “I should go. It’s getting late, and tomorrow is my first day at the café.”

“Let’s get you showered first,” he said slyly and stood up with her in his arms and carried her upstairs for more than a shower.

Two hours later they reached her house. Nate and Val were standing on the front porch. They quickly hugged Georgina, and Nate shook Max’s hand while Val hugged him. He set her luggage down in the hallway. Georgina turned to him with a fixed smile.

“Thank you for traveling with me, Max. I really appreciate it,” she said brightly with a fixed smile. All three of them stared at her with raised eyebrows. Was she really going to act like they just came from the airport with her too bright eyes, flushed face, and disheveled hair?

Amused Max snatched her around the waist to drop a quick kiss on her lips, relishing the surprised look on her face.
“You’re so nutty, baby. Good night.”

Nate walked him to his truck, and Max sensed the older man had something to get off of his chest.

“I don’t have to worry about you right, son?” Nate asked sternly.

“No, sir, you don’t,” Max said assuredly. “I would never do anything to hurt Georgie”.

“That’s good to know because she doesn’t ask for anything. *EVER*. She would rather die than show someone her pain. It’s her self-preservation mechanism. The ones who don’t ask for *ANYTHING* deserve *EVERYTHING*. You feel me?” Nate asked as he put a hand on Max’s shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. “Just give her some time. Those siblings guard their emotions heavily. Growing up, they were exposed to things no kids should ever have to see. It took Georgie a long time to open up to me and Val.”

Unfortunately, Max didn’t have a lot of time. He had less than four weeks.

Chapter Seventeen

Georgina's first day at the Comfort Table ran fairly smoothly. Nate and Val had stayed home at her insistence to relax and finish packing before leaving tonight. She had three team members working the floor with her in the morning. After briefing them on today's specials, she audited payroll hours and met with Raymond to discuss Easter treats that would accompany children's meals for the week of the upcoming Holiday. Breakfast was really busy, and she became reacquainted with old classmates during the rush. There was Tessa Jackson, now a nurse, who had married David Wells, a contractor, and the parents of twin girls. In elementary school, Tessa used to sneak up behind David and give him wedgies. Georgina could only hope that she now showed her affection in other ways to her husband.

Chelsea Reyes, her best friend from third grade until the end of high school, and Georgina's shrieks of joy could be heard down the block as they hugged each other. They had agreed to meet to up after tomorrow's spring football game. Although it was forever since they'd last seen each other, Georgina was surprised by Chelsea's appearance. She had cut her long, silky black hair into a shaggy layered cut that framed her face. The fresh-faced cheerleader was gone, and in her place was a Kat von D doppelganger with tattoos on her neck and full sleeves down both of her arms.

Then there was Davis Farlow. Georgina was bending by the register, doing a cash drop, when he stepped up to the counter. He gave his order in a deep voice, and she felt his eyes on her. When she stood up, she had met his gaze and smiled politely. His eyes had widened in recognition, and he seemed genuinely pleased to see her again. He'd been forced to step aside as the line behind him grew, but every now and then, she could feel his gaze on her. Even though he was very handsome, she was not interested. He had none of Max's swag.

“Georgina?” she turned to see Davis standing behind her. Watching her. She smiled pleasantly at him. “I just wanted to say that it was great seeing you again, and perhaps, we could maybe hang out and catch up on old times? I realize you’re busy at the moment, but I would really love to get together and soon.” He left his card with her. Georgina was confused as to what old times they should be catching up on. Her spying on him in the library? Or drawing his name with hers on the back of her notebook? She took the card and slipped it into her skirt pocket.

Lunch time was even busier than breakfast when the next shift came on. The five-member shift would stay until they closed at 6 p.m. It seemed every person in town lined up for Raymond’s chicken parmesan and chocolate bourbon pie. Her aunt and uncle called to check on her and they were happy to hear that everything was going great. Georgina was excited to report the day’s business and catching up with old friends. The rest of the day flew by, and closing operations went smoothly. She had just finished writing tomorrow’s specials on the menu boards when her phone buzzed, and she grabbed it out of her apron pocket to read it.

G, I’m sure your first day was a great success. Will I see you tonight? M

Georgina realized that she had been subconsciously waiting for him to call or stop by all day.

M, I feel really good about today. I hope you had a good day as well. Not tonight. I have to drive Aunt Val and Uncle Nate to the airport and then be back here at 8 a.m. G

It was another ten minutes before he replied.

G, I understand. Sweet dreams. M

It had been a long day on the farm. Max had a meeting with his accountant, Donna, Clarissa Pembroke, and Tavish to discuss business contracts, weather forecasts, consumer demands, financial aspects, and workloads to decide which crops to grow. They'd also started planting needed crops for feeding the cows in late summer and separating the young calves that needed to be taught how to milk in a smaller space.

After receiving her response to his text, Max decided to make the call.

He dialed and waited for his friend Casey Sullivan to pick up.

“What’s good, Mad Max?” Casey greeted cheerfully.

Max chuckled, “Everything, brother. Listen, I’d like to use your friend’s services after all. I don’t care about the price.”

There was a silence on the other end of the phone before Casey laughed softly. “So what’s the name of the woman that’s got you sprung?”

“What makes you think this has to do with a woman?” Max countered as he reached into the fridge for a bottle of beer before walking over to the microwave to retrieve the hot plate Betty had left of her famous mac ‘n’ cheese, baked chicken,

and green beans and walked over to sit down at the table. He popped the beer cap and waited for his friend's response. Max's mouth watered as he looked at the work of art sitting on his plate. Betty's macaroni was the only one he would eat. He didn't really know what she put in it aside from her foot and some elbow grease; he just knew it was a work of art and was probably the real reason she wound up with four kids.

"Because I haven't heard that level of desperation in a man's voice since Jack needed to help his wife out of a jam," Casey retorted smugly and Max laughed.

"If that's the category you placed me in, I'm in good company," Max said seriously. Casey's oldest brother Jack had come to be a good friend of Max's as well. They met when Jack, a P.R. whiz, came to Baymoor to help one of his clients out of a scandalous situation. Jack recommended his wife Noelle's event planning company to Max when he mentioned *Cinnamon Farms* was revising their preserves and condiment line. Aside from Nate and Valerie Banks, Max had never seen a couple more in love than Jack and Noelle Sullivan.

Casey whistled, "So it's like that, Max? Does Raquel know?"

"Raquel and I were never serious. She knows the deal, and I've never given her the impression that it could ever be more," Max stated firmly of his companion in D.C. "But because this is that serious, I am going to reach out to her when I come to the Take A Stand charity dinner next week and talk to her."

"Well damn, brother! Welcome to Club Sprung!" Casey said jokingly and Max laughed. "Shit man, did you ever think this would be *us*? I know I sure as hell didn't ever think along the lines of something long-term with a woman."

“Ever since I changed careers, I thought I might eventually, but my uncle was a confirmed bachelor and while I respected and loved him dearly, I knew I didn’t want to spend the rest of days alone,” Max confessed, looking down at his plate. “But I just didn’t want to settle with comfort. Who the hell wants Kraft mac ‘n’ cheese when you can have homemade macaroni and cheese? You really want basic, plastic orange shit that you can make in five minutes? Or do you want to put in the work shredding several different types of cheeses and making sure they blend together in melodious harmony with the secret spices and breadcrumbs because *you* committed the time and effort to create that relationship and then watched over it carefully-”

“Dude, are we still talkin’ about relationships? Because I’m hungry as fuck, listenin’ to you rhapsodizin’ about mac ‘n’ cheese,” Casey inquired with a groan. “You must *really* like this woman if you’re comparin’ her to one of womankind’s most glorious creations.”

“All bullshit aside, I do Case. She’s beautiful, smart, and complicated as fuck, but I wouldn’t have her any other way,” Max said seriously.

“Amen. That’s how I feel about Sidra,” Casey said softly.

“You mean you wouldn’t want her to be just a little more... stable?” Max asked delicately.

“Nope! Don’t knock sleeping with one eye open until you’ve tried it,” Casey said cheerfully, and Max snorted. “You’re just jealous because your eyes aren’t strong enough to do it.”

“Trust me, I’m not,” Max assured him. “But that does explain why I thought you looked a little cock-eyed the last time I saw you,” Max replied, causing Casey to howl with laughter. “Bye, fool. I’ll email you all the information and see you next week. Tell the family I said hello.”

Casey was too busy laughing to reply.

It was ten-thirty later that night when Max heard the knock at the door. He was lying on the sofa watching ESPN and thinking about Georgina. Max was really surprised when he looked out the peephole and saw her standing there. Quickly he opened the door.

“Hey, Georgie, what are you doing out here so late? Everything okay?” he asked with concern as his eyes quickly checked her over— brown trench coat, scarf, skinny jeans tucked into boots, and a large-sized duffel bag at her feet. He looked at the bag before raising an eyebrow in question.

“Everything’s fine. I was just driving by your house and decided to stop and say hi. I...ummm...also wanted to see if you felt slightly off balance or out of the loop today?” she asked nervously, and Max smiled down at her slowly, glad to know it wasn’t just him feeling a certain way.

“Are you by chance making a booty-call, Ms. Carlton?” he teased, watching her nervous expression change to one of seriousness.

“As long as it’s not a mind-fuck, I’m good with whatever you want to call it,” she said to Max solemnly, and he felt his spirits lifting because this was a big confession for someone like her. He bent down and picked up the duffle bag, before stepping back to let her in.

“Did you eat dinner?” Max asked as he set the bag by the stairs. He watched as Georgina shucked off her jacket, boots, and socks before walking over to him in a rumpled white t-shirt and jeans. With her bare feet and fresh face, she was adorable. She tilted her face up for a kiss, and he eagerly obliged as he wrapped her in his arms and picked her up. The kiss was long, tender, and perfect when they broke apart; they just smiled at each other.

“Hey,” he said gruffly, still boggled by the way she’d flipped his world upside down in such a short time.

“Hey, yourself,” she said softly.

The next morning Georgina woke to her six thirty phone alarm going off. She stretched and opened her eyes with a smile and remembered she was in Max’s bedroom and that he’d kissed her shoulder softly, before leaving for work. Last night after Max secured the house and set the alarm, they came upstairs, took a shower, and cuddled spoon-style in bed. Despite the

way his large hands caressed her body with the loofah sponge and his rigid erection pressing against her backside in bed, Max hadn't made any moves to jump her bones, which she appreciated because she wanted to do more than just have sex with him. She had fallen into the most peaceful sleep that she'd had in a long time. Georgina rolled over to Max's side of the bed to snuggle deep into the imprint he'd left behind and inhaled his scent. With a soft laugh, she thought of how incredible he made her feel. Max made her feel safe enough to let down her guard, something she'd never done with anyone, and surprisingly, she was okay with that. Georgina wondered if he could see them being together past four weeks. Would he want to do a long-distance relationship now that he knew her situation? With a sigh, she told herself, "Don't go jumping the gun, Georgie."

Chapter Eighteen

After another luxurious shower, she was pressed for time. Leaving her hair curly, she slipped into dark skinny jeans, a long white tank top, and her black blazer. After running around yesterday in her heels, Georgina opted for black ballet flats to give her aching feet a rest. She put on just a little more makeup and ran downstairs. There was a note propped up on the table.

G, Breakfast is in the microwave. Coffee is prepared, just reheat. I left you a house key under your mug. From now on, use it. I'll be at the café at six tonight. I order you to have a nice day. M

He was just so bossy and good to her. Opening the microwave, she found bacon, eggs, and croissants. She ate and washed her dishes, before locking the house up behind her.

Outside, the weather was bright and sunny with a small breeze. As Georgina hurried to her car, she glanced over to the barn, hoping for a glimpse of Max, but she only saw Tavish who gave her a wave. Smiling, she waved back, before getting in and driving away, feeling just a tad bit sad not to have seen Max before starting her day. The drive into town was beautiful with the winding road framed on either side by full, lush trees. Her phone rang and she switched on her Bluetooth when she saw Eliza's number.

"Hey, boo, heeey!" Georgina said cheerfully.

"*Georgie?*" Eliza asked suspiciously. "Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?"

"It's me, Eliza," Georgina assured her. "Are you okay? Why don't you recognize my voice? Too much sun?"

"Nooo, it's just that one of us, and I don't mean *me*, isn't a morning person, which leads me to believe that my sister may have been body-snatched," Eliza drawled. "Why do you sound so happy?"

"I'm not really sure how to take that comment," Georgina said indignantly; she wanted to frown, but her face wouldn't settle into it with the ease that it normally did, so she just kept smiling. "So how's your trip going? Is Camille having fun?"

"Camille is having tons of fun. I'm the one that's exhausted," Eliza said. "We've been sailing, fishing, scuba diving, and jet

skiing. You name it, and we've done it in the water. My old ass can't take it."

"Old my ass! You're only forty years old! Eliza, you are such a good mom. Camille is very lucky to have you, and I know I don't say it enough, but thank you for trying so hard on me," Georgina said humbly.

"Oh, baby, you don't have to thank me," Eliza said, "I love you so much, my little itty-bitty-witty Georgie Porgie-"

"Ugh! I'm about to throw up in my mouth; cut it out!" Georgina shouted with a laugh "No but seriously, I owe everything to you and Graham for trying to make the best out of our situation. I have to ask...do you ever wonder about... *her?*"

"No, I don't," Eliza said readily. "If I never saw her again, I wouldn't shed a tear over her trifling ass. She is dead to me, and that's what I told Camille the one time she ever brought it up. Don't waste a moment of your life thinking about *her*, Georgie. Uncle Nate coming to get you is the best thing that ever happened to you. Thank goodness she's out of our lives," Eliza said coolly.

"Ain't that the truth," Georgina mumbled. Guess she would be staying on the west coast after all.

Good mood now dimmed, she pulled up to *The Comfort Table* and noticed the Spring Chickens were huddled by the front door.

“Kill me now,” she groaned. Plastering a bright smile on her face, she approached them cautiously.

“Good morning, ladies. Out on another walk?” she asked politely as she rummaged in her purse for the restaurant keys and...oh good, *Effie* was present too. “Well please don’t let me keep you.”

“Good morning, dear. We were actually waiting for you,” Mrs. Laurent said with a friendly smile, and Georgina was immediately suspicious.

“*You* were...waiting...for...*me*.” She pointed to herself. “What can I do for you?” she asked cautiously. Mrs. Laurent was already shaking her head.

“No, dear girl, it’s what *we* can do for *you*. The girls and I were talking and well, we just feel absolutely horrible for the way we treated you. Plus, Valerie also called to give me a piece of her mind. We’d like to make it up to you by making you an honorary member of the Spring Chickens. Isn’t that right girls?” The ladies nodded their heads enthusiastically.

Georgina stared at them incredulously. “You want me to join the Spring Chickens?” The youngest member was fifty-eight, and it was Aunt Val. “That’s very nice of you, but unfortunately, I’m not going to be in town that long-”

“Oh, I know dear; that’s why we’re making you an honorary Spring Chicken. You can come and go as you please, no

initiation period. We even rushed your jacket. Ida, the jacket,” Mrs. Laurent demanded with an impatient snap of her fingers. Georgina watched in horror as a Pepto-Bismol pink velour jacket, with her name in rhinestones on the back, appeared and was presented to her. The ladies, all wearing proud smiles, began to clap. “And just to show you there’re no hard feelings, we are going to help you get a man since it appears you can’t get one on your own.”

“I don’t know what to say....” Georgina said smiling weakly.

Max was bent over with laughter as she told him the story. When she first mentioned the Spring Chickens Max, was concerned due to their last run-in. Then he started to smile, and it was quickly followed by uncontrollable laughter as he doubled over Uncle Nate’s desk. The café had closed for the day, and he had come to pick her up.

“Stop it, it’s not funny!” she said through gritted teeth, her arms crossed over her chest. She glared at him as he continued to chuckle, struggling to get his laughter under control. “If you don’t stop laughing, I won’t have sex with you.”

Immediately he stopped laughing. Pulling her close to wrap his arms around her while still leaning against the desk, he looked down at her. He lowered his head to press his lips against her pouting mouth. “I have had plenty of sex. I’ve fucked some girls that just wanted it that way, but what you and I do is neither. *It’s on a whole other level, got it, baby?*” he murmured as he continued to feed her soft kisses. She unfolded her arms to cling to the lapels of his denim jacket,

her knees going weak at his touch. Closing her eyes, she captured his sexy lips in a steamy kiss that had him gripping her hips. With a groan, he pulled her back and then stood up to get her coat and help her into it. He buttoned her up and bent to kiss her nose. Then he grabbed her hand. “C’mon, I promised you a football game.”

She smiled and let him lead the way out of the office. Outside, they ran into Farah.

The younger woman only had eyes for Max, whom she smiled seductively at and ignored Georgina completely. “Hi, Max, how are you?”

Georgina felt her irritation growing with Farah. Yesterday she seemed to have a hard time doing anything Georgina asked, and her responses had been borderline insolent. Today she had caught her side-eyeing her on more than one occasion. She had asked Raymond about her, and he just shrugged and said that ever since Farah came back from college two years ago, she had set her sights on Max.

“Cherie, she has her pick of any of the boys in town, but she doesn’t want any of them. Say she want a real man. Her grandmamma done told her about her foolishness, but she thick-headed.”

Georgina knew Max well enough to know he wasn’t interested in Farah, and she couldn’t help but feel sorry for the other woman. “Hi Farah, I thought you were already gone for the day. Did you need a ride?”

“I’m waiting for my grandmother to pick me up,” the younger woman replied testily as a navy Buick pulled up to the curb. The passenger window rolled down, and Mrs. Laurent’s beaming face was suddenly visible. “Helloooo you two!

Georgina, I don't know if Valerie told you, but the Spring Chickens weekly meeting is held here on Monday mornings at ten. Bye, dear!"

Farah got into the car and crossed her arms with her mouth poked out. The window was sliding back up, but not before Georgina saw Farah roll her eyes at her.

The stadium was jam-packed. Georgina had forgotten what football was to small towns. The other team was from Rockland, three miles away. The Baymoor Cougars were undefeated and had beat the Rockland Falcons twice last season. Town Rockland had driven in five busses deep to come support their team. Law enforcement was heavy everywhere.

Max found them a spot next to Baymoor's sheriff Wade Holloway, a big muscled man that stood as tall as Max. His shoulder-length, dirty blonde hair, deep blue eyes, killer smile, and goatee made him a dead ringer for the hot son on that show Sons of Anarchy. Georgina found out he was an ex-New York City cop who had had enough of terrible crimes and came back home to Baymoor when the old sheriff decided to retire. Georgina could tell from his eyes that he had seen a lot. Every once in a while, Georgina could feel his eyes on her when he thought she wasn't looking, but whenever she glanced at him, he quickly averted his gaze.

The game was intense, and the noise, deafening. At halftime, the score was tied 21-21, neither side willing to give. Georgina was standing in the concession stand line, talking with Kenya Griggs who was now the head high school coach for girls' sports when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning, she saw Davis standing behind her with a friendly smile. Kenya stared at Davis hard before rudely excusing herself. Puzzled, Georgina stared after her, but Davis ignored the situation entirely.

"I didn't know you were a football fan," he said with a raised eyebrow. She found herself thinking of the many times she and Chelsea had gone to a game just so she could swoon over him in his tight uniform, unbeknownst to Chelsea. At the time, she used to think that Annabelle was so lucky to have him for a boyfriend.

"I'm not, really. I just thought it would be a great idea to support BHS," Georgina replied. It was her turn to order, so she ordered nachos, a hotdog with everything, and two large sodas. She turned back around to face Davis, who was still smiling at her. He did that a lot, and she found it to be a bit unnerving.

"I like a woman with an appetite. Speaking of eating, when would you like to go to dinner?" he asked smoothly.

"Actually, I kind of have my hands full right now running the café. And I'm already seeing someone. I'm sorry, Davis, but it was good talking to you," she said apologetically. Davis's eyes seemed to flash with her answer, and it gave her a sense of déjà vu, but then they appeared normal again as he smiled at her. Suddenly Georgina felt uneasy, but not sure why as she looked past him for Max. She saw him in deep conversation with Sheriff Holloway. There was no way he would be able to

hear her over all of the noise. Then she felt an arm around her shoulder and Chelsea's voice close to her ear.

“Hey, babes, I didn't know you were going to be here!” she spoke loudly in her ear as she pulled Georgina away from Davis. “You'll have to excuse us, Davis. It's been a long time since I've gotten to see this lady. You don't mind, right?”

Not waiting for an answer, Chelsea hurriedly yanked her away. When they were nearing the bleachers, Chelsea pulled her around to give her a hard stare. “Girl, let's meet at the microbrewery after the game okay?” Then she gave Georgina a hug and went back to sit with her family, who all waved at Georgina.

She waved back, even as she felt someone staring at her from behind. Shivering, she pulled her coat closer around her and walked with her loaded tray back to her seat and Max. Georgina didn't need to turn around to know it was Davis.

The Cougars beat the Falcons 28-21. After the game, Georgina asked Max if she could stay at his place again, and he readily agreed. So they went to her house for more of her things. While there, Max collected all the mail, and she watered the plants. After she got more stuff, they reset the alarm and walked to the car. As they approached the truck, she got the feeling again that she was being watched, but after a quick look around, she saw nothing and decided that she was just being paranoid. When she got in the car, Max was looking at her with a frown.

“Everything okay?” he asked. She let out a deep breath and smiled at him. “Everything's fine, baby.”

Chapter Nineteen

The Rockin' Rooster was Baymoor's microbrewery. It was an old barn that was restored and updated and painted black with white trim; the roof and doors were red. There was a tavern sign hanging with the image of a big black rooster. Valerie Carlton had designed this place, and everywhere Georgina looked, she could see her aunt's signature touches. On the jukebox, Lenny Kravitz crooned about an "American Woman". Max gave Georgina a lingering kiss before she headed to join Chelsea at a booth. Max took a seat at the bar as he waited for Wade to join him. Jackie, their bartender, had already hit him with a bottle of Wino Ale. "On the house, sugar," she winked. "Leo's in a creative mood for the upcoming Wine Festival and needs some guinea pigs."

Leo Tolan was the owner of the Rockin' Rooster and the drama teacher at the local college. A retired theater director, Leo had given up everything to come to Baymoor to live with his painter boyfriend, Indigo. When Indigo decided Baymoor wasn't for him, Leo, who had fallen in love with the town at first sight, had stayed. He dabbled with brewing on the side but realized quickly that he was good enough to sell it. Nate helped him to create the menus, and the majority of the food was bought from *Cinnamon Farms*.

"Thanks, Jackie. I'm picking up the tab for the booth my pretty companion is occupying if you could let their server know."

Max took a sip from his bottle just as Wade pulled up a seat. He grimaced as it hit the back of his throat and then went

down smooth. “Damn, that’s good. Try Leo’s new one.” Wade grinned and turned to call down to Jackie. “Hey Jackie, can I have one of what Max’s drinking?”

She grinned and brought another bottle down, plunking it in front of Wade. “Hey, Sheriff, I take it you’re off duty?” Wade nodded as he took a sip. Jackie then leaned forward with an inviting smile. “Do you want to meet me later on at my house or should I come to yours?”

Wade smiled and said “Not tonight, darlin’. I’ve got a case that needs serious attention. Raincheck?” She pouted prettily and winked at Max before walking away, hips swaying. Wade watched for a second before grinning at Max’s startled expression.

“You and Jackie? How long has that been going on?” Max asked, surprised but happy for his friend. He was also a little relieved that the sheriff was getting some from somewhere. He didn’t want him having any thoughts of Georgina, considering the way he’d stared at her tonight.

“About three weeks now. She only lives two houses down from me. She’d been coming on pretty strong for the last year, and then she turned up at my house late one night and claimed to hearing strange noises in her backyard. I walked back with her to check it out. The lights were out everywhere except in her bedroom. She had candles lit and rose petals everywhere. I turned around, and she was standing behind me naked. A man can only say no so much. It’s been going good, but I try to keep my private life very private. Small town living, you know what I mean, I’m sure.” Wade said

Max nodded. “Yeah, I hear you, bro. You ever miss New York?”

Wade shook his head, eyes filled turbulence. “Naw, man, after my partner was killed by a man that we had been doing surveillance on, I was in a really terrible place. I wanted personal justice. I turned my badge in and thought about taking the law into my own hands.” His eyes hardened. “Plus there was a woman involved, which always make everything more complicated. I fell pretty hard for her. I found out later that she had been part of the plot to lure me in.” He took a sip of ale before continuing. “I had to get out of there. Baymoor is the complete opposite of the life I was living, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. What looks good tonight?” he looked down at the menu, wanting to change the subject.

“So what happened to the asshole and the woman? You can’t leave me hanging, man” Max asked.

“That bastard died of natural causes, and she disappeared,” Wade grimaced. “Hey Jackie, can we get two orders of bacon cheeseburgers and garlic parmesan fries?” That was Wade’s way of changing the subject. Clearly he was not over the woman who had hurt him.

It was nice to have a moment to catch up with her good friend, Georgina thought. They had been inseparable in elementary all the way through high school. It was their senior year when Chelsea started to pull away from their group of friends. She became distant and reclusive. Everyone had been so concerned about her, and it seemed the more they reached out to her the angrier she became. Only Georgina, Valerie, and Nate knew that she had tried to kill herself, and her parents sent her to a

mental hospital. For a year, Georgina wrote to her friend every week. She never got a response to her letters, but they were never sent back either.

Over the years, she often wondered about her; Georgina had wanted to reach out but had just been happy knowing that her friend was okay. As they sat, Chelsea smiled at her. "It's really great to see you, Georgie. I've wanted to apologize a thousand times for my horrible behavior, and the way I cut you off. We were so close, and I just turned my back on you. I owe you the truth, so here it goes." She took a deep breath and said, "I'm gay." She continued as Georgina watched her. "I always knew my feelings for boys weren't that strong, but I thought it was because I hadn't met "the one". It wasn't until I went away to summer camp before junior year that I realized it was because I liked girls. There was another girl at camp a year older than me, Elaine, who helped me to realize what my problem was," she said softly and looked out the window. "After I came back, we continued to stay in contact. She was my first love, and I was desperate to be with her. I called her daily and wrote her letters all the time. I think it got to be too much for her.

One day I came home from school to find her and her parents at my house. Her family was very hippy-dippy, "love is free" etc. They didn't have a problem with their daughter being a lesbian; they just thought I was oppressing her freedom. My mother was crying hysterically, and my father was furious. Elaine said that she wanted me to leave her alone; it was just a fling. All of my letters were spread out on our coffee table. Humiliated beyond belief, I apologized for any inconvenience and went to my room. That night my mother, who always used to brush my hair and hold me close while we talked about my dreams, brought a tray to my room with dinner and left the room. Never once did she look at me. I could hear the rest of my family having dinner like nothing had happened. I no longer mattered to them. I then went to my parent's room and took my dad's bottle of sleeping pills back to my room where I locked the door to my room and took twenty.

The next time I woke, I felt like I went ten rounds with Mike Tyson, and I was in a padded room at a mental hospital for disturbed children,” she laughed harshly. “The counselors determined that there was nothing wrong with me, but to me, it was where I felt safest. My visits with my parents were horrible, and I asked them to stop visiting me. I stayed and continued with school. All around me, there were kids with real problems, and my biggest was one was that I couldn’t admit that I was gay. I decided to major in youth counseling. When I graduated from college, I opened a clinic in Baltimore and lived above it.”

Three years ago I was working late one night when one of youth patients ran in hysterically and asked me to help her cousin. I quickly went with her to the parking lot, and a lady whose face was beaten and swollen lay in the backseat of her mother’s car. She was still alive, just unconscious. The mother helped me to get her inside and lay her down in the living room. She then turned to me and said, ‘Please, Ms. Chelsea, don’t tell anybody we were here. You can’t go to the cops because they’re on the take. He’ll *kill* her if she goes back. Please; we’re just trying to protect her!’.”

Chelsea took a sip of water, and Georgina didn’t even know what to say about her story except, “What happened next?”

“Well, they were desperate, so I gave them my word and locked up when they left. I went to get my first aid kit to help clean the woman up. She had been beaten and choked and had two black eyes, a swollen lip, and cuts on her forehead and cheeks. Judging from the bruising around her throat, it would be awhile before she could speak. When I turned her face to clean it, she seemed familiar. By the time I was done cleaning

the best that I could, I realized it was Annabelle Gaines in my office.”

They played three games of pool, and Wade won all three. “You’re definitely off your game tonight, brother,” he said with a chuckle.

Didn’t Max just know it; his mind was focused on Georgie and her friend who seemed to be having a very intense conversation. Suddenly there was a movement next to him, and he saw Wade’s eyes widen. Max turned to look and saw Farah leaning against the pool table in a short nude-colored, curve-hugging dress that left little to the imagination. She smiled at him coquettishly as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

“Hi, Max. I thought I saw you over here. Thought I’d come say hello.”

He smiled politely. “Hey Farah, how’s it going?”

She smiled and leaned in closer to him, and Max shifted away in annoyance as Wade hid a grin behind his pool stick. “Do you think you could give me a ride home? I think I’ve had a little too much to drink, and I’m sure Sheriff Holloway wouldn’t approve of me getting behind the wheel. Isn’t that right, sir?” she asked flashing an innocent smile toward Wade.

“Farah, I truly appreciate your attempts at being a law-abiding citizen,” he replied with a straight face. She turned back to look at Max and licked her full lips.

Max looked at her pretty face and curvy body. She was obviously offering herself to him and had flirted shamelessly with him in the past, but he just wasn't interested in her. Or Raquel, who was smart, gorgeous, loved sports, and had a voracious sexual appetite, and yet...nothing. They'd had a good thing going, but he knew that whatever happened or didn't happen with Georgina, he wouldn't be paying any more visits to her bed. Without taking his eyes off of Farah's face, he called out, “Hey Jackie, can you call a cab for Farah? Let me know when it gets here, and I'll pay for it.”

Max saw the hurt and anger on her face and spoke in a low voice to her. “You should find someone that can appreciate all you have to offer. I'm not that person and never will be. Don't approach me again, or I won't be as nice.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she replied venomously, “Is it because of *HER*? Is she the reason you won't give anyone a chance? What's so great about her? She never even came back to visit her aunt and uncle, but everyone thinks she walks on water. You're making a big mistake with her, Max. You'll see.”

She turned and stomped away, angrily wiping tears from her eyes. Watching her go, Wade whistled softly, “She's got it bad for you, my friend.”

Max just shook his head because he knew exactly how she felt.

Chapter Twenty.

Chelsea's confession last night shocked the hell out of Georgina, and if they hadn't been interrupted by more old friends coming to say hi to Georgina, she would have insisted that her friend elaborate further. She also couldn't place the feeling of unease growing at the back of her mind. As she went through the process of making coffee, Georgina struggled to figure out what was eluding her. She was so intent on her private thoughts that she didn't hear Max come up behind her and touch her arm.

"Shit!!!" she screamed and jumped almost knocking the mugs over. Both dogs started to bark. Max stepped back with his hands raised in a gesture of surrender. Breathing heavily, she just stared at him wildly.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you, I was just going to say good morning," Max said slowly, observing her tense face and heaving chest. Gone was the wild child from last night. When they got back from the brewery, she'd seemed so preoccupied when she upstairs that, he'd let her be as he went into the study to compose an email to Casey, requesting the information that he wanted, and responded to new emails. When he finally went upstairs, Georgina was asleep with her design sketchbooks sprawled across the bed. After moving the books, Max slipped her clothes off and tucked her into bed, before going to take a shower.

Max was sitting on the bench with his eyes closed letting the warm water run all over his body when he sensed her presence and opened his eyes to look directly at her standing in the doorway clad in the bronze lace bra and matching panties he'd left on her. The color complemented her gorgeous skin

and curves, and the lace of the bra was sheer enough that he saw her aroused nipples, stirring his manhood to rigid attention. Never taking her eyes off of him, she unsnapped her bra and removed it and her panties, letting them drop to the floor. Max's eyes darkened with desire as she opened the shower door and joined him. She stood in front of him with water sluicing all over her curves and plastering her short curls to her head. Max gripped her hips and pulled her close and captured a swollen nipple in his mouth, enjoying her sighs of pleasure as he stroked and swirled the hardened nub with his tongue. The sounds grew louder as he switched to her other breast, and he urged her to climb onto his lap, which she eagerly did, her thighs gripping his hips and her slick pussy sliding against his dick.

One hand clasped his head to her breast and the other slid between his legs to cup his sack. Max moaned against her breast as she flexed her hips. "Keep on, baby, and I'll fuck you right now. You might want to wait until I put the condom on, love."

Georgina was too aroused to care. His dick felt so good sliding between her swollen nether lips, and she loved the way he kept teasing her nipples with the hot suction of his mouth alternating with the tiny bites. "Maybe I don't want to wait, Max. Do you?"

Max raised his head to look at her, eyes searching her face before speaking. "I've never been without protection in my life," he said looking at her intently, and Georgina knew he was telling the truth. It was the same for her as well. She opened her thighs wider and said "Me neither. I've been taking the pill like clockwork since I was eighteen."

"Then ride me, baby," he ordered harshly, gripping her waist. "I want to see you fuck me."

Georgina guided him to her entrance; slowly she stroked the head at her opening, shivering with delight as it rubbed against her sensitive clit. Max growled at her teasing before entering her so deep she almost fainted. Georgina placed her hands behind her on his thighs as he leaned back against the tiled wall and gripped her thighs, as she started to ride him, giving him a world class view of the rodeo show.

Max enjoyed the view of Georgina's head tilted back with utter abandon as she slowly rose up and down on his cock with her breasts bobbing up and down as her hips dipped and twisted sensuously, driving him out of his mind almost as much as the tight, wet heat of her sex gushing around his clenching cock.

"Is it good for you, baby?" he asked slyly as his fingers edged over to brush against her clit.

'Mmmmm...it's everything,' she gasped as she started to move faster with every stroke of his finger. "Aaaagh! Yessss!"

The warm water continued to come down on them as Max shifted to sit upright and pull her to him. Georgina eagerly wrapped her arms and legs around him as he stood and placed her back against the wall. She pulled Max's head down for heady kisses as he thrust into her over and over again. Max unwrapped one of her legs and pushed it towards the wall, leaving her open and eager for even more of him. Georgina screamed as he went deeper than ever and banged on her g-spot, and she saw stars as she came harder than she'd ever before in her life. Max struggled to hold back, but the feeling of her clamping down on him and milking his cock so hard, was too much and he almost blacked out as he came.
"Fuuuuck!"

“Bacon and eggs sound good. Let me help,” Max replied as he brought out the eggs and grabbed the slab of bacon. Georgina quickly took everything out of his hands and reached up to give him a kiss on the cheek.

“Nope, I’ve got it. Sit and let me cook for you; you’re always doing things for me, it’s the least I can do,” she insisted as she led him to the table.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you say you can’t cook?” Max asked warily as he pulled a chair out and reached for his electronic tablet.

“Okay, well consider yourself corrected,” Georgina returned smartly. “What I said was I don’t *like* to cook. I don’t really have the time for it.”

Max checked his emails and saw that Casey had responded. His friend would meet with Max during the charity event. Perfect. “So how do you eat?”

“I have a friend who is a personal chef. I pay her to make meals for me,” Georgina said as she cracked eggs into a bowl and added salt and pepper, before whisking the concoction.

“So you never have get-togethers with friends?” Max asked as he checked his stock portfolio next.

“No, I mean I’ve been invited to functions...but I’m always... busy,” Georgina said as she laid bacon in the heated cast iron skillet, and the kitchen was filled with the aroma of the sizzling bacon. “I’m sure I don’t need to explain to you about how much running a business can be time-consuming. Do you want potatoes?”

“Yes, it certainly can. Some day’s I’m dead on my feet,” Max agreed as he switched apps to check out CNN. “Potatoes sound great. So what do you do for fun?”

“I read a lot and do research for my company’s market,” Georgina replied as she flipped the bacon and took a bowl of already peeled chopped potatoes out of the fridge. “Where’s your strainer?”

“Lower cabinet on the right side of the oven,” Max informed her as he Googled *Feminine Intuition* and the website popped up. He clicked on the contact info and found Renee’s email address. Max quickly composed an email to her asking for Georgina’s measurements. “Damn, it smells good in here, baby. Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“I’ve got everything under control,” she assured him as she removed the bacon from the skillet onto a rack she’d placed over a sheet pan to drain. Quickly she moved onto frying potatoes and then scrambling eggs.

“So you only hang out with Renee and Lavon?” Max asked as he stood up to set the table and pour orange juice as Georgina plated the food.

“Mmmm...not really. If Renee and I are together, we’ll grab something to eat. Usually, she and Lavon are together, and they’ll drag me along with them,” she offered as she grabbed hot sauce and the salt and pepper shakers and brought them to the table. “They are big pains in my ass, but my rocks. Those two don’t leave me alone for a minute.”

After pulling Georgina's chair out and she was seated, Max sat down across from her. She grabbed his hands, and they said grace before eating.

"This is pretty good coming from a non-cooker. So how did it feel to catch up with your friends?" Max asked and noticed the frown that briefly marred her face.

"It was good. Chelsea and I go way back and have always had a good time together," Georgina said as she bit into her bacon and again thought of what Chelsea had revealed, perhaps Max knew something "Kenya too. She was always a character and down for a laugh. You know I really thought I would have seen Inez or Annabelle Gaines last night, but there was no sign of either of them."

Smiling fondly, Max added hot sauce to his potatoes. "Inez has been promoting her new lifestyle book and isn't scheduled back until next month."

Georgina's eyes narrowed on his smile, "Are you two good friends? What's that smile for?"

"I'm friends with Inez, but I'm even better friends with her fiancée Rafe. As for Annabelle, she took off a couple of years ago, and her parents seemed to think she's off finding herself. Everyone was pretty shaken up about it, especially her fiancé, Davis Fowler," Max said forking some potatoes into his mouth and narrowing his own eyes at Georgina. "You know... the guy you looked pretty chummy with at the concession stand. What was that about?"

"Nothing. He mentioned getting together for old time's sake, but I said no," Georgina said slowly, thinking about

Annabelle's beating. "I wasn't aware that they were engaged. For how long?"

"For about two years. They were both doctors at his father's veterinarian practice, and I guess one thing led to another. I really liked Annabelle; she had a way with the animals that was really sincere. Dr. Doolittle is good enough, but he has a God complex. I'm pretty sure he busts a nut after every animal he heals," Max said sarcastically, causing Georgina to choke on her sip of orange juice.

"What is wrong with you?!" Georgina said, wiping the table with her napkin and glaring at him.

"Don't blame me because you can't handle your O.J. responsibly," he teased and grinned when Georgina stuck her tongue out at him. "Promises, promises."

She rolled her eyes and looked around the kitchen. It was her favorite room in the house, with the worn wooden floors and huge farm table. She pictured family meals and school projects taking place here. Kids. Did Max want any? Georgina looked at him again as he broke a strip of bacon in two and tossed the pieces to Sherlock and Watson. Eagerly the dogs caught the treat and Max smiled his approval. She could easily picture him, so big and strong, helping his children patiently. Hell, she was no walk in the park and look how patient he was with her.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he commanded and smirked when Georgina scowled at him. "Baby, don't be mad that I know you so well."

She lifted her chin defiantly "And what exactly do you think it is you know about me?"

Max pinned Georgina with an unwavering stare. “Between today and last night, I’ve come to some conclusions about you. Aside from being a flexible lover, you are starved for friendship and affection— two things that you’ve deliberately denied yourself for fear of people getting too close to you. You don’t want to form friendships because you’re scared you’ll form attachments, and Ingrid might taint them.”

Stiff with anger, Georgina sat up straight, “That’s not true; I’m just extremely busy. I thought you understood what I was saying earlier.”

“I do understand, but this is what I also understand. I understand that you have to try to control everything because you’ve been scared of everything, and that’s a sad way to live,” Max countered.

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for me!” Georgina snapped, standing up and tossing her napkin.

“Sit your ass down!” Max thundered and Georgina froze. “We are not done, so sit. Down.”

“Go to hell!” Georgina hissed, shaking as she turned and walked out of the kitchen. She should have known this was too good to be true. Oh, God, he *pitied* her! They didn’t have some connection; that was all in her mind. She was his second chance to get it right with another damaged girl. Quickly she stormed up the stairs and grabbed her overnight bag. Georgina gathered all of the things she’d left lying around his room and tossed them into the bag.

Satisfied that she'd retrieved everything, she whirled around to see Max blocking the doorway. Calmly he was removing his watch, his movements smooth and efficient as he removed his Stetson next and placed it on the dresser. If it hadn't been for the fire in his eyes, she would have thought everything was okay.

"Get out of my way, Max," she ordered as she strolled over to the doorway, where he stood blocking her. Her racing heart hurt being this close to him and knowing she was just a charity case to him. "*Move dammit!*"

"You've sorely tested my patience, Georgina," Max said mildly. "And I've told you about running. Now it's time to do things my way."

Swiftly Max grabbed her and yanked her hard against him, his lips came crashing down on hers with a kiss that subdued the heat of her anger. Caressing her face he confessed, "You are the stubbornest woman I've ever met, and whether you want to hear it or not, I'm going to continue to speak the truth to you, love. Just like I will always come for you if you try to run from me. Do you understand? I'm not going anywhere, baby."

Georgina looked up into the handsome face of the man that was a soothing healing balm to her scars and knew he spoke the truth. "I'm sorry, I'm such a coward. I'm just not used to people seeing so clearly what I try to hide. No one's ever called me on my shit before so thoroughly— except Renee."

"Hmmm," Max murmured as he bit her earlobe. "I want you to strip for me, baby..."

Georgina could feel the desire coursing through her body as she eagerly rushed to do his bidding. Max undressed as well,

watching her with hooded eyes. Her eyes dropped to his rigid length that she couldn't wait to taste. "Get on your knees love and show me that ass."

Aroused to the point that her desire trickled onto her thighs, she obeyed, her body heavy with anticipation for his lovemaking. Feeling him behind her, Georgina moaned softly so ready for him to...*SMACK!* A sharp stinging slap landed on her ass, and she yelped. "Oww! What the hell?!"

Max took advantage of her shock to flip her around so that she lay across his lap ass up. He kept her legs in place by trapping them with one of his and holding her wrists together above her head. "You bastard! Release me!"

"Oh, I will. Just as soon as you've learned your lesson, baby," Max said darkly and delivered another stinging smack. "You do not run from me. Ever." *SMACK!*

Even as tears stung her eyes from the spanking Max was giving her, Georgina could feel herself becoming wetter and wetter from the heat on her ass. *SMACK!*

SMACK! SMACK! Subconsciously she lifted her ass up to receive another blow but stiffened as Max gave a dark laugh. "That's what I thought, Georgie."

He released her, and she scrambled up and tried to turn away, humiliated beyond belief. Max caught her hand and lifted her averted gaze. "Look at me, Georgina."

Proudly she lifted her gaze to meet his as he slipped a hand between her legs and teased her slickness, making her gasp as he caressed her swollen nub. "Are we clear?"

“Crystal,” Georgina bit out, fighting the urge to cant her hips and beg for more of his touch. Max smiled slowly, aware of her internal turmoil.

“Good,” he said triumphantly as he removed his hand and pulled her down to lay on top of him. Their lips met as he quickly rolled over and proceeded to make slow love to her.

Chapter Twenty- One

It was early afternoon before Georgina stirred lazily in Max's arms. His hand came down to caress her butt and she smiled. Max had spanked her ass, but more than made up for it with his slow, tender lovemaking. It was heartbreakingly good, and she'd almost blurted out something that she wouldn't have been able to take back. To stop herself, she'd begged for him to take her from behind so she could bury her face in a pillow.

"I think it's time you told me what happened to you and your siblings," Max said gently but firmly as he pulled himself up to lean back on the headboard. He laid a pillow across his lower half and motioned for her to come and lay in his lap, which she did, rubbing her thumb and index finger together until he caught her hand and kissed it.

Georgina was silent for a moment, not knowing where to start. Clearing her throat, she finally spoke, "Ingrid is Uncle Nate's younger sister. According to him and Aunt Val, she was a bright, shining star that was smart, the center of everyone's universe, and a talented ballet dancer. She and Nate were best friends until he went off to school in Oregon. She came to visit and became infatuated with a good-for-nothing womanizer — my father, Russell Carlton. After that first meeting, Uncle Nate never let her come back to visit him at school. He also told her to stay away from Russell and avoid him at all costs. Ingrid said she would, and he believed her. After visiting Aunt Val in Europe, he came home to a mess. His seventeen-year-old sister was four months pregnant, and Russell was the father. It turns out that Russell was from Richmond, and after getting kicked out of school for sexually assaulting another female student, he had returned home when he started calling Ingrid. Instead

of going to dance practice, Ingrid had been sneaking off to see him. My grandparents were furious and Uncle Nate was also, but at himself. They decided that she would go away to live with an aunt in Idaho, have the baby, and then give it up for adoption. Instead, Ingrid ran away to be with Russell, and they got married when she turned eighteen. My grandparents were furious but decided to give it a chance. They moved in with his parents. Eliza was born, and everyone fell in love with her.

According to my uncle, Ingrid doted on the baby girl, and Russell was good for a while but then the running around with other women started, and the fighting between them began. She was nineteen when she found out she was pregnant with Graham, and Russell was furious. He already resented being tied to her and felt she held him back from succeeding. The drinking started and then the beatings. Ingrid was four months pregnant when she left him the first time and came back to Baymoor with Eliza. She had a broken arm and a black eye because she'd had the nerve to confront him about bringing another woman with him to pick Eliza up from daycare. He beat her right in front of his parents, and they did nothing. Uncle Nate was furious, and he drove to Virginia and found Russell in a backwoods juke joint. It took four men to pull him off of Russell, and when he was done, Russell was in the hospital for two weeks recovering from his injuries.

Instead of wising up, Ingrid was furious at what Nate had done and refused to speak to her brother. Graham was born while they were separated, and when he was a year old, Russell came strolling back into their lives, claiming he had found God. He had a flashy new Cadillac and was dressed sharply in suits. Although Ingrid had started going back to school and had a job working as the accounts manager at her dad's auto shop, she fell for him all over again. Against her parents and brother's wishes, they left the state and headed out west to Las Vegas where he claimed there was a church waiting for him to lead them. Only there was no church. There was a big house

with lots of women and kids. It was a brothel. He had started making money with his cousin who was a pimp.

Then he got Ingrid hooked on coke and started pimping her out. There was a nanny for all the kids while their moms went to make money. She still slept in Russell's bed but, they fucked other people— her for money, and him for pleasure. Eliza told me that Ingrid used to come to the nursery and hold her tightly and cry. That she would always whisper to her and Graham that she was going to get them out of there. Russell never bothered spending any time with them. Then one day the cops came and raided the place; they arrested everyone that was there. Luckily Ingrid and the kids were out. She didn't know what to do, so she called Uncle Nate. He flew out to Vegas and decided to take the kids. He begged Ingrid to go, but she was ashamed for her parents to see her like this. She promised to get clean. He enrolled her in rehab before leaving with the kids.

When she got out of rehab, she got a job as a maid at the Flamingo Hotel and got the kids back. Then she went to visit Russell in jail. He swore that he would change his ways and had found God once again. He was released two years later, and she was waiting for him with the kids. Eliza and Graham hated being there away from their grandparents. Russell struggled to find work, but because he was an ex-con, it was hard. He soon began taking it out on the three of them again. They were miserable, and then I came along. Russell had started drug dealing and apparently money was good until he started dealing in someone else's turf. He paid the price with three shots to the head and his body floating in Lake Mead. I was three. Ingrid was starting to get frustrated by the bills piling up. She would scream and hit me out of frustration. Soon she went back to prostitution.

I was seven years old when she brought Arthur Watts home for the first time. He was a big, well-dressed man with lots of

flashy jewelry. He had wavy black hair and piggy eyes and licked his lips a lot...especially when he looked at Eliza or me. Graham hated him on sight. He was sixteen and tall for his age. He also had a lot of pent up anger towards his parents. When Russell died, he thought things would finally get better, but instead, they got worse. The day that Arthur Watts came into our lives, Graham started boxing at the neighborhood gym. My siblings always made sure that if we were home, we were all together, or if we were out, it was all at the same time.

Arthur introduced Ingrid to heroin, and it became her new baby. Eliza got a fake identification card and started working at a strip club. Money was great for her, so she paid the bills and bought our clothes. Ingrid was too fucking high to care what was happening around her. I would stay with a neighbor until either she or Graham picked me up. Arthur started bringing different men home so Ingrid could be a “stay at home” mom. I didn’t have my own bed, so I would sleep under her bed sometimes where no one would find me. If there were a lot of people in the apartment. I would hide under clothes and would curl up and sleep until her screams and moans would wake me. Eliza and Graham would be furious with me, but they knew they couldn’t say anything to give up my hiding spot.

Tension was starting to build more than usual when Arthur started to really pay attention to Eliza. She ignored him but started to make plans for us to leave sooner rather than later. Ingrid hated Eliza. Anything maternal she had felt for her was now replaced with jealousy in the face of her daughter’s youth and beauty. She would scream at Arthur for staring at her daughter, but he would laugh and ignore her until Graham entered the room. He would stare at Arthur coldly until the bigger man left the room. My siblings did the best they could with me. Graham would make my meals and school lunches and make sure my clothes were washed. During school events, they were always there to support me. I still wanted a mom, though. I wanted Ingrid to get her shit together and be there for

us. Despite their efforts, I was doing so poorly in school that my teacher had started calling home. Eliza would try to cover up and pretend to be Ingrid, but it was all starting to catch up to us.

One day a woman from Child Protective Services showed up as Eliza and I were heading out. The woman looked from me to Eliza and asked if our mother was home. Eliza said she was indisposed. She told us that she would be back tomorrow. Eliza freaked out, took me to school, and went to Graham's job. She told him that we needed to leave tonight when she was done with work. She asked him to pick me up from school. He told her he would, but he didn't," Georgina bit her lip and looked away. Max's eyes never left her face. He stroked her arm encouraging her to speak. She drew in a shaky breath before continuing, "I waited downstairs for Graham for two hours, and he never showed up, so I walked to our neighbors and called Eliza at work. She left early and was furious at Graham, but we had to go back to get our stuff and the money she'd saved. We went up to the apartment, and she listened outside for a while, before she opened it and motioned for me to stay outside. I was sitting on the steps for maybe ten minutes before Graham walked up. He was so happy until he saw me sitting there. He'd forgotten all about me and apologized to me. He explained that some scouts had come by the gym and had liked the way he boxed. They challenged him to a fight with their top pick, and Graham beat him. Afterward the owner of the gym took them out to celebrate. He asked me where Eliza was and how mad she was.

At that moment, we heard a scream followed by a crash. Graham went racing into the apartment, telling me to stay put. I heard his angry roar and then he said 'Get the fuck off of her, you bastard!' I disobeyed him and ran into the apartment. I saw Graham punch Arthur, and the older man lunged at him. Arthur never stood a chance. Graham's rage was years in the making, and his target was the recipient of all his pent up anger towards Russell and Ingrid. Eliza was in the corner in

shock. Her blouse had been ripped open and tears were rolling down her face, and she had blood on her cheek. Graham kept punching the big man and down he went, but Graham didn't stop hitting him. In the stomach, chest, and face, it was like he was in a trance. There was blood everywhere, and Arthur's face was bloody and beyond recognizable. I screamed at him to stop, and Eliza finally jumped up and pushed him back, but it was too late. Arthur Watts was dead."

"Jesus Christ," Max muttered as Georgina rubbed her eyes.

"Still want me to continue?" she asked sadly, and Max kissed her palm.

"Let it all out, babe," he urged tenderly, and she gave him a tremulous smile.

"After Graham's fight, Eliza made two calls. One was in private, the other to the police. They came and took statements from Eliza, Graham, and me. The cops were suspicious of Graham's self-defense claim, because aside from his bloodied fists, he didn't have one scratch on him. They started talking about excessive violence. CSI soon came, and while looking around the apartment, they discovered Ingrid passed out in the bedroom next to a john she had been servicing, and there was heroin and used needles were on the nightstand. They'd slept through the whole thing. Arthur had been sleeping in the living room. That's why when Eliza heard nothing; she thought it was safe to go in because they were gone. She had seen Arthur sleeping and thought she could be in and out before he awoke. He caught her by surprise in her room and tried to force himself on her, shoving her on the bed with a hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream as he assaulted her. She almost passed out from struggling and lack of oxygen when she managed to knee him in the balls.

Then Graham burst in, and the bastard got what he deserved. The police arrested Ingrid and the john. She was so fucking out of it until she saw Arthur laying there. That's when she started freaking out— screaming and crying for him over and over again. Not once did she acknowledge us, her kids. The body had been taken, but the two cops pulled Graham to the side and asked him to take a ride to the station. The lady from CPS was there to take me, and I started to cry and Graham started to get agitated, but Eliza kept looking at the door. Suddenly two men appeared, dressed in expensive suits. The younger one was tall and handsome. He looked like he stepped right off the cover of GQ. His eyes went straight to Eliza. The other was an elderly gentleman with a briefcase. He set his briefcase down and walked over to Eliza. She reached in her pocket and gave him a dollar. He took it and told the cops his clients weren't going anywhere. One of the cops sneered at the younger guy who watched Eliza like a hawk. But he just dismissed them and said if they needed anything to go through Mr. Santos.

The older gentleman talking to Graham was Nero Santos, the best criminal defense attorney on the west coast. At the time, he'd just gotten that famous basketball player acquitted for shooting his team mate. Eliza and Mr. Rossini talked softly, and when they were finished talking, he and Mr. Santos stayed with the lady from CPS and assured her he would bring us down shortly. When she left, he told us to pack up whatever we wanted to take with us because we wouldn't be coming back here ever again. When we left the apartment for the last time, there was a limo waiting to take us to Child Protective Services. Eliza called Uncle Nate to come get us. He met with social services, and they did a background check on him. They said if Ingrid agreed to sign papers, he could take us back to Maryland. I cried and cried because part of me was still hoping that now that all the bad shit was out of our lives, she could finally be the mother I needed and wanted her to be.

Uncle Nate posted her bail so she could come and say goodbye to us. She showed up with some older, flashy white guy. Turned out to be her new pimp. Uncle Nate was really mad. Without a word to any of us, she signed the papers and my secret dream died.

That's when the man spoke and said 'Baby, why don't you talk to your oldest daughter; she's a looker and would definitely bring in more money, so you won't have to work so hard,' he laughed lecherously, and that's when Graham lost it. He ran past Ingrid and snatched the man out of the car and started wailing on him. Uncle Nate pulled him off, but by then, Graham had given him a concussion, broken his nose and several of his ribs, as well as shattered his left cheekbone.

He went to juvenile detention but was in so much trouble that when he turned eighteen, the only deal Mr. Santos was able to help him get was to either enter the military or go to jail. He chose the marines. Our family was officially broken up."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Georgina was just finishing cleaning the kitchen when Max came in and informed her that it was time to do some farm work. Needing some fresh air after airing her dirty laundry, she readily grabbed her jacket, before heading out into the afternoon sunshine. Max gave her a piggyback ride to the barn. When they reached it, he grabbed a couple of baskets so

they could gather eggs from the chicken coops, which were now moved to the back of the barn.

“Did you know that in order to use feathers on lingerie, they have to be certified bird-flu free?” Georgina asked conversationally as she reached into a nest and confidently pulled out an egg, which she added to her growing basket, from underneath a docile chicken. After Max had shown her how to pick eggs without being pecked, she considered herself something of an expert.

Max looked thoughtful. “I suppose that makes sense...shit!! Watch out!”

“Watch out? For whaaa-,” she asked, when all of a sudden she felt a painful nudge on her backside that lurched her forward, causing her to lose footing and fall forward onto her stomach. There was a sickening crunch before she felt a wetness spreading on her shirt. She looked down in confusion that turned to abject horror as she realized that she’d landed on all of her eggs. “*WHAT. THE. HELL, MAX?!*”

She scrambled to her feet and whirled around in a crouched karate stance, freezing when Max yelled, “Don’t move, Georgie!”

Freezing in place, Georgina heard hooves, before she saw the bastard culprit. It was a fluffy-looking, espresso-colored goat that stopped right in front of her with a sneer as it bleated at her disdainfully, “*Neeaaahhhhh!*”

“Stand down, Georgie!” Max ordered, coming up to the goat and rubbing its neck.

“Stand down?! What are you talking about?” she snarled as she watched the animal close its eyes, with a sigh of pleasure at his touch. Jesus...women, children, animals...was no one immune to this man?

Max grinned as he turned back to Georgina with an apologetic look. “Sorry, I wasn’t talking to you, baby; how’s your behind? I guess I should have warned you, but I thought Tavish had him locked up. Allow me to introduce, George Jefferson; he’s a Pygora goat and a Guardian Animal here at *Cinnamon Farms*.”

“A Guardian Animal?” Georgina asked slowly as she straightened up, but kept her eyes on the little bastard, rubbing itself against Max’s thigh as it opened one eye and stuck its tongue out at her. “*Neeaaahhhh!*”

“Yes, here at the farm we have certain animals that keep watch over the place and alert us to anything that might be a threat. It’s this little guy’s job to watch over the chickens, and he takes it very seriously,” Max said fondly.

Georgina grimaced as the smell of the broken eggs started to overwhelm her, and she picked eggshell pieces from her shirt. “I...see...and you named him George Jefferson?”

“Yes but his nickname is Georgie. The reason we named him after that character is because he’s ornery with a cranky attitude...” Max trailed off at her narrowed expression and the realization that his woman and the goat had a lot in common. He started to laugh, which prompted Georgina who had come to the same realization, to give him the finger before stomping off. “Awww, come on, baby! I didn’t even *know* you when we named him!”

Max looked down at the goat, who was batting his eyes at him.
“You Georgies are killing me.”

“Neeaaahhhh!”

After Georgina changed into one of Max’s spare shirt’s that he kept in the barn closet, they went to change the sheep’s water, and she noticed that one of the two groups of the sheep had pink noses; their heads and legs were clear of wool, and they had rat tails. “That group of sheep is not very attractive.”

Max chuckled and told her they were East Friesians. “They’re a type of dairy sheep from northern Germany, one of the best in terms of milk from a ewe. The East Friesian produces roughly three hundred to six hundred liters of milk, over a two hundred-to three hundred a day lactation period. Our cheeses are made with the milk they produce. They’re a pretty high maintenance bunch, but the cheese made with their milk is on point.”

He pointed to the other group of sheep. “Those are karakul sheep. They come from the desert regions of Central Asia. Karakul sheep are renowned for their ability to forage and thrive under extremely harsh living conditions. They can survive because of a special quality they have— storing fat in their tails. They don’t make as much milk as the Friesians do, but they eat proportionally less to produce what it does. They’re also more resilient to disease. Our intention is to cross these two breeds to create a flock of sheep that efficiently

produce the most milk possible from the pasture available here while maintaining optimum health within the flock. Sheep are gregarious by nature, and they band together for reassurance and protection. They are very communicative, using their ears, stomping, nodding, and glaring, as well as using different tones in their “baaing” to convey their messages. Did you know that sheep recognize faces for up to two years and have been known to recognize about fifty different faces?” he winked at her.

She smiled at him, thinking of how proud Farmer Jennings would be of his nephew. “No, I didn’t know that, Mr. Know-It-All.”

Then it was on to pigs. “We have Herefords, Durocs, and Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs. The Herefords are temperamental, and the G.O.S. need to be kept in the shade because they could easily sunburn. The Durocs are usually show pigs. We get our pork, ham, and salami for charcuterie from those guys. We’re going to be receiving turkeys here at the farm soon and then taking orders for them for Thanksgiving. We also do pates, rillettes, and terrines from the chickens and ducks.”

Max pointed to the empty troughs “Which do you want to do? Fill them or rinse them when they’re done?”

Georgina balked and shook her head when she saw the dirty troughs. “No thanks, that’s like asking me what seat I want on the Titanic.”

With a raised eyebrow Max looked at her; patiently waiting for her answer. “Ugh, okay I’ll fill them!”

“That’s my girl,” he said watching with amusement as she attempted to fill a trough and some of the slop splattered on her boot. Georgina cursed a blue streak, and Max hid a grin as she frantically tried to wipe her boot in the grass. “Don’t do that, Georgie! That’s not only mud you stepped in.”

Georgina was livid as she tried to find a clean patch of grass to wipe her Coach boots in. *Don’t scream*, she told herself sternly. *Don’t you dare scream in front of him!*

Max walked away, lest he start laughing in her face again. He planned on getting some tonight, and laughing was the quickest way to get himself cock-blocked.

Georgina’s was contemplating going back to the house, grabbing her bag and heading back to civilized town life when her phone rang, she answered it after seeing Graham’s name.

“Hey, Little Bit, how are you doing?” he asked cheerfully.

“Ummm, fine,” Georgina responded shortly as she observed the lush green fields in front of her. “I’m helping out at *Cinnamon Farms* today. You know, being one with Mother Nature and all that jazz.”

“*You???* Being one...with...nature. Are you feeling okay, Georgie?” Graham asked with concern. “That’s just...so unlike...*you*.”

“Are you kidding me? I freaking love being outdoors,” she snapped, scowling down at her ruined boot. An odor was starting to fill her senses, and Max’s suspicion that it wasn’t just mud she had stepped in was confirmed. Her irritation rose to new levels with her current situation, as she stomped this

time carefully watching where she walked, in the grass towards Max who was much farther ahead. His broad shoulders were shaking, and she had the suspicious feeling he was laughing at her. *Jerk.*

“So you’re with the farmer?” Graham asked, and the intensity in his voice brought Georgina to a halt. “I’m just going to assume you took my advice?”

“That’s none of your business, Graham,” she retorted. “All you need to know is that he makes me *very* happy.”

“See, that’s where your wrong, Little Bit.” he said coolly, “Everything and anyone that our family comes into contact with *is* my business. If he hurts you, he won’t get the chance to right the wrong. You’ve waited too long for happiness for anyone to screw it up,” Graham finished grimly, and Georgina’s heart went out to her brother, because now that she’d experienced happiness with Max, she couldn’t believe that she’d lived a one- dimensional life for so long.

“I agree with that last part,” Georgina said firmly “And I thank you for caring and loving me to the extent that you do, but I need you to stand down on this one, Graham. If there’s a problem, *I* will be the one to handle it, not *you*. But there *is* something else you could help me with, big brother.”

There was silence on the other end, before her brother gruffly said, “Name it.”

“I want...you to try to find out everything you can on an old classmate of mine...”

“Georgie, this is Trevor, the Master Gardener. He oversees the orchards, gardens. He’s also in charge of foraging.”

“Hi Trevor, it’s nice to meet you,” she smiled warmly at the tall, slender man with bifocal glasses. “What exactly is foraging?”

“Likewise, miss. Right here in our own backyard is an abundance of natural products like mushrooms and ramps, a kind of wild leek that is known for its sweet but garlicky taste and knock-you-down odor. They grow for only a few weeks each spring, so ramps have come to symbolize the end of winter. They add so much flavor to simple dishes like omelets. The hunts are pretty popular. Even more so than Tavish’s tours!” he boasted, causing an image of the big brawny Scotsman to pop into Georgina’s head, and she remained silently dubious on Trevor’s declaration.

Max then asked if he’d brought the basket. Nodding his head, Trevor walked to the truck and brought back a large picnic basket complete with a red and white gingham blanket. Then he tipped his hat to Georgina before getting back in the truck and driving off. Max held out his arm for her. “Shall we, my lady?”

They walked to a shaded tree that faced the road, and Max laid the blanket out while Georgina took the contents out of the basket and she laughed. “When did you have time to plan this?”

There was a charcuterie plate with savory cured meats and various cheeses, a long crusty baguette, duck rilette, and a grilled apple salad. A bottle of white sangria with two glasses had also been packaged with care. He grinned and popped the cork. “This morning. I wanted to show you what we did here on the farm and have you taste everything. Eating farm to table is very important to me. Nothing tastes better.... except you,” he said as he leaned over and gave her a lingering kiss, and Georgina clung to him.

In such a short time, Max had invaded her heart. He was smart, sexy, funny, kind, and caring, and all he seemed to want was to make her happy. She hoped he could feel all of her emotions in the kiss. When she finally pulled back, he gave her a funny little smile. “Let’s eat, baby.”

So they ate and talked about the farm and her company. When they were done, Max laid back and pulled her into his arms. She laid her head on his chest, and they stayed that way—perfectly content just to be in each other’s arms.

That night as Georgina slept peacefully next to him, Max observed the serene expression on her lovely face. The weight of her past had been removed, and Max was determined to make sure it stayed that way. If he hadn’t come along, he was certain that she could have lived with the darkness for the rest of her life. Nate’s words came back to him.

“The ones who don’t ask for *ANYTHING* deserve *EVERYTHING*.”

Max was going to make sure she got it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Two days later, Chelsea stopped by the café for breakfast. Georgina took a break to eat with her outside, and they split plates of eggs benedict and banana bread pancakes as Chelsea resumed where she left off last week.

“I let Annabelle stay in my office, using the spare room, for a month. During that time, whenever I left the building, I always felt like someone was watching me. She never said who did it to her, but when I asked if it was Davis, she threw up violently. Judging from her determination to not talk about it, I knew this wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. Davis’s cousin was the captain of the police department, and on more than one occasion, I received visits from cops who claimed to be responding to noise complaints and wanted to check it out. When I heard that someone had thrown a Molotov cocktail into her cousin’s house when no one was home, I knew it was time to move her.

I had contacts within the domestic violence groups in the area, so when she was able to move and her face had healed, I gave her three thousand dollars and sent her on their underground railroad. She made it to her destination safely, and I haven’t seen or heard from her since. I decided to move home because I missed Baymoor a lot and to keep an eye on Davis. Eventually, my parents and I made up. We’re not as close as we were, but it’s a work in progress,” she said while shrugging her shoulders.

Georgina reached across the table to squeeze her hand hard. “Thank you for telling me that Chelsea. I’m so sorry that all of that was happening to you. I feel so terrible for Annabelle. I’m just glad you were able to help her,” she shuddered at the thought of Davis and the crush she used to have on him. It made her even more thankful for Max.

“Georgina, Davis is a bad man. A lot of people have their suspicions about him but can’t prove anything. Kenya was Annabelle’s best friend and had always hated him. I truly believe her being the former sheriff’s daughter was the only reason she never met with any foul play. Please be careful. I really didn’t like the way he looked at you last week. Don’t look so surprised, just please be careful,” Chelsea emphasized and gave her hand a tight squeeze.

Georgina smiled reassuringly at her friend. “I’m not the least bit interested in Davis. So you don’t have to worry about that.”

Chelsea gave her a coy look. “Is it because of sexy-ass Farmer Hayes?” she laughed at Georgina’s blush. “Oh my goodness, it is, isn’t it? Girl, I don’t blame you; he’s fine enough for me to rethink being gay!”

Georgina couldn’t stop smiling as Chelsea continued. “Dish, girl! All of the single women in town are in love with him. He’s always polite but not once has he ever encouraged them. How’d you guys get together?”

Georgina shrugged because it was too complicated to explain aside from, “We just really like each other.”

After Chelsea left, she went back to work, enjoying interacting with all the regulars and seeing old acquaintances. The only down spot in her day was Farah. She seemed even more

unwilling to do anything that Georgina asked her. Twice she had caught her texting by the register and had taken her aside to point out that it was unprofessional and against company policy. Farah had muttered sorry and walked away. Raymond had just rolled his eyes at her and motioned for Georgina to pay it no mind.

Max stopped in on his way to the bank. She had already informed him that she would be staying at her house tonight to go walking with the Spring Chickens and work on *Feminine Intuition's* catalog. Although he had seemed disappointed, he had accepted her decision.

“Hey there, mister. What can I get for you?” she asked with a teasing smile.

His heated gaze traveled slowly down her body as he wiggled his eyebrows roguishly at her, “I’ll have an order of legs, thighs, and breasts.”

Georgina blushed and smacked his arm as she looked around. “Cut it out!”

“Actually, I came to tell you that I have a charity event that I planned to attend months ago in D.C. tomorrow,” he said nonchalantly as he looked around and noticed “Templeton” giving him the stink-eye.

She smiled brightly. “Sounds like fun.”

Max surveyed her with a gleam in his eye. “Yeah, it’s for a really good cause. One that’s close to not only my heart, but Nate’s and Val’s also. Anyways, I never responded formally to the invite, so I did today and added a plus one. So please make sure you’re off in time to get ready. The event starts at eight, so we need to leave here by five in order to be there in time.”

Georgina was shocked. She pointed her finger at herself and squeaked, “Me? You want to take me?”

Max raised an eyebrow, “Yes, you. Who else would I take? FYI: It’s formal attire.”

She racked her brain trying to figure out what she would wear. She’d call Aunt Val and see what she had in one of her closets. “I would love to go with you, Max. But I’m just not sure I have anything to wear on such short notice.”

“It’s already been delivered to your house, including shoes and accessories. I used Nate’s emergency key,” he replied in a bored tone as he handed the key to her. “Any more objections?”

“Your bossiness is very annoying,” she said crossly, despite her excitement of going on a date with him.

“Stop being so negative and try to see things from a positive perspective. What you look at as being bossy, I look at as having outstanding leadership skills,” Max said cheerfully. “Now kiss me, so I can get back to work.”

Georgina reached up to peck his cheek, but Max pulled her into his arms and bent her backward as he explored her mouth thoroughly. The café was filled with applause when he let her back up. Max took a bow and winked at a fuming Georgina before turning away. At the last minute, he turned back, “Oh, Georgie?”

At her questioning look, he looked her up and down lustily. “Pack an overnight bag.”

Laughing, she waved him off and caught a grinning Raymond’s eye. Blushing, she looked away only to meet Farah’s hostile glare. The younger woman looked away and slammed through the swinging kitchen doors.

That evening she went home and found a big white box laying on the dining room table with a black satin bow wrapped around it with a card attached. With a smile, Georgina opened the card and read the words in Max’s bold handwriting.

Georgina,

I read somewhere that all Cinderella needed was a dress to make her dreams come true. I can’t wait to see you in this.

Max

Eagerly she unwrapped the bow and lifted the lid and beneath the numerous layers of tissue paper was a beautiful bronze-pink Valentino gown that she pulled out, gasping in awe. The gown boasted spaghetti straps, and the bodice was lace with a deep v and satin ribbon ties at the waist. The skirt was layers and layers of chiffon in a lighter shade, with a thigh high slit.

There were matching stilettos in the same color as the dress, a necklace, tiara, and teardrop earrings. Georgina held the delicate earrings in her palm and watched them shimmer in the early evening light. Up close she could make out the signature feline on the back of them that declared them originals by famous jewelry designer Vixen.

“Oh my goodness,” she breathed, unable to believe the incredible gifts Max had given her. She put everything back in the box and went upstairs to her room, where she tried everything on before stepping in front of the floor-length mirror.

The dress and shoes complimented her complexion perfectly. The dainty necklace lay just right on her collar bones, and the tiara in her pixie cut was the piece de resistance. Georgina blinked back tears and laughed happily as she twirled around and the dress shimmered around her.

She grabbed her phone and called Max. “Hello?”

“Oh my god, thank you so much! Everything is so beautiful! How did you do it?” she asked, still stunned by the generosity of his gifts.

Max’s soft laugh made her pulse race. It was the same teasing laugh he gave when he drove her to dizzying heights of pleasure. “You’re welcome, baby. Do you like it?”

“Oh, Max,” she whispered, *“I love it. I really, really love it.”*
And you...

“I can’t wait until tomorrow, love,” his voice lowered seductively, and her body responded accordingly. “Goodnight,

baby.”

“Goodnight,” Georgina whispered before he disconnected the call. She looked at herself in the mirror again, before throwing herself back on the bed with a happy sigh.

The next morning Georgina awoke to the house phone ringing. She looked at her phone and saw that it was five thirty in the morning. Perhaps it was Uncle Nate or Aunt Val calling for her. She jumped out of bed and rushed to get the phone. “Hello?” she held her breath when there was no answer. “Who the fuck is this?” she shouted. Someone cleared their throat and spoke. “Georgina, this is Mrs. Laurent.” Mentally she groaned. “We were going to be picking you up for our walk this morning at seven.” She paused. “It seems that you’re not really a morning person, though, so perhaps another time....”

Her first thought was, she would rather die than walk around in her Pepto-Bismol jacket, but the more she thought of it, who better to give her town gossip than the Spring Chickens? Surely they had to know something about Annabelle and Davis.

“Sorry about that, Mrs. Laurent. Seven sounds good. I’m just going to jump in the shower and be right out. See you shortly.”

So now here it was, seven in the frigging morning, and she was doing warm up stretches in front of the house with the rest of the gals. It was a bit chilly and a breeze was starting to pick up. Ida was in charge today it seemed. “Come on, ladies, stretch those legs!! Raise those arms!! Hut! Hut!” she

commanded them like a drill sergeant. “All right, girls, let’s hit it!”

They were off walking at a brisk pace that impressed Georgina. Normally she kept fit by going to Zumba classes, but she’d be damned if she’d be outdone by the Spring Chickens. They weren’t even out of breath as they chatted about their daily soap opera *The World Is a Small Place*. Talk soon turned to the Spring Carnival and what a great success it would be.

Mrs. Laurent asked Georgina what Max had planned. “That young man is truly a godsend. He’s so community-oriented and not hard on the eyes either, wouldn’t you agree, ladies?”

They all murmured in agreement. Mrs. Downing then said something to Mrs. Laurent that caught Georgina’s attention. “Grace, does your Farah still have that tiny crush on him?”

Mrs. Laurent quickly shook her head. “That’s nonsense! Farah doesn’t have a crush on him. That girl is too focused on her studies to be paying attention to boys.”

She missed the look that the other ladies exchanged. Georgina tended to agree with the silent exchange. She also decided that it was a good time as any to ask about the Gaines family. “Does anyone know how I might be able to get into contact with Annabelle Gaines?”

Everyone froze, but she continued on, “I thought for sure I would have seen her by now...”

Silence. Finally, Mrs. Taylor spoke after glancing around at the group. “Honestly, it struck us as odd too. She was always so polite and well-mannered. Quick with a kind word and a smile and loved by everybody. The only time we felt as though she wasn’t herself was when she was with...Davis.” All the ladies nodded. “It seemed like she was really unhappy when she was with him, and we wondered why she was marrying him. A week before the wedding, Ida heard them having an awful row at the park.”

Georgina looked at Ida who nodded. “It’s true. I had been walking my Maltese, Ida Jr. when I saw them ahead of me on the trail park. He was shouting and cursing, and she was standing there looking petrified. He then turned and kicked a bench next to them over. Ida Jr. started barking loudly, and when he turned and saw me standing there, he quickly walked away. Annabelle was shaking so hard, I put my arms around her and helped her to sit down on the other bench. She smiled shakily and thanked me. Then

she said that Davis had been so upset lately. He’d been trying to get a loan to expand the animal hospital, but it wasn’t going that well. I just patted her hand and sat with her for a while. The next thing I heard was that she went off to find herself.”

Ida looked at Georgina. “A word of advice: Be careful what you go asking around town, dearie. You might not want to poke the hornets’ nest.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next day flew by, and thanks to Chandra agreeing to close the café, Georgina was home by four to get ready. She kept her makeup elegantly simple with a shimmery lip-gloss, nude smoky eyes, and a bronzer on her cheeks. She decided to call Aunt Valerie, as she did her hair, to see how they were doing.

“Hi, Aunt Val! How are you guys doing?” She smiled as her aunt squealed loudly in her ear, causing her to hold the phone away.

“Oh Georgie, we are having the best time!! We took a walk on the river Seine, and your uncle insisted that we add our initials to a padlock that we attached to thousands of other locks on the Love Lock bridge. We visited the Louvre and rode to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Tomorrow, we’re going to Versailles and then on to Normandy before heading home. Max knows a guy who runs an excellent bed and breakfast there that we are dying to check out.”

Georgina listened to her aunt with fondness. Valerie Carlton took such pleasure in all things. She had used the exact same voice to describe Georgina’s first school field trip to the zoo to her husband. Everything was a great adventure to her because life was to be enjoyed to the fullest.

“So how are things going, love?”

Georgina cleared her throat. “Things are going well. I love working at the café. All of the customers are great. I’ve been spending time at the farm as well.”

Suddenly she was shy about mentioning Max, but Valerie was not. “So how are things going with Max?”

In the background, her uncle chimed in.” Yeah, tell us, Georgie. How are things going with him?”

She giggled. *Giggled*. Jeez, she had it bad! “Actually, things seem to be going okay. He did ask me to go to a charity event in Baltimore tonight.”

“It must be for the No Child Starving organization. We all feel really blessed to have access to generous amounts of food, but not everyone grows up like that. Max donates lots of food to domestic shelters and group homes. It’s really important, as you know, that every child has a childhood,” Valerie said passionately.

Maxwell Jason Hayes, with all his redeeming qualities, had definitely broadened her horizons in what to look for in a man. Before she met him, she’d never even thought she could have a relationship, so she’d never even bothered to make a list of desired qualities in a partner. He would definitely be a hard act to follow, and she wasn’t sure she would even want to try.

“What are you going to wear?” Valerie asked eagerly. “Do you need anything? You can always raid my closets. I have tons of vintage designer wear that I brought from Europe if you’re interested.”

“That’s very generous of you, but I actually have everything I need...Max bought me a dress,” Georgina admitted with a hot blush. “With matching accessories.”

“Oh my,” Valerie said softly, and Georgina could hear the happiness in her voice. “Well, I guess you’re all set then, darling. Have a great time and send me a picture, love.”

The doorbell rang as she was spraying her perfume. Grabbing the dainty stilettos, she carefully headed down the stairs and looked in the peephole. “Just a second, Max.”

She pressed her forehead against the door and took a deep breath. Good lord, tuxedos must have been invented just for Max. Letting out her breath, she opened the door and smiled at him. He smiled back as he took in her appearance and whistled softly. They let their eyes travel over one another admiringly.

This black tux was custom-made, no doubt. It fit him like a glove, sleekly encasing his finely muscled body. Max was drinking her in also. The dress complemented Georgina’s beauty fantastically. The lacy, deep-v plunge of her dress framed her breasts perfectly as the chiffon poured over the rest of her sexy body. He wanted to bury his face in her luscious cleavage. The skirt swirled around her as she sat down to put her heels on. He watched her slide her foot in one of the dainty heels, and as she did, the chiffon layers separated to reveal her well-toned thigh and leg. *Holy shit*. He swallowed hard and approached her, bending down on one knee to buckle her shoe, and when he was finished, he slid his hand along the silky length of her leg to caress her thigh. Their eyes met, and she smiled at him seductively. “Later,” she whispered. She quickly buckled the other sandal, and he helped her up. Her large eyes were all smoky, and her lips were so glossy, that Max couldn’t resist. His hands slid up to palm her breasts, and he stole her lips in a sensuous kiss, brushing his thumbs teasingly over her hardened nipples.

Max lifted his lips and slowly Georgina opened her drowsy eyes. “You look absolutely stunning and “later” can’t come soon enough for me.”

As Georgina walked, he was afforded the view of her legs playing hide n’ seek with him. Outside, they walked to the

sleek black BMW I8 at the curb. She laughed when he shrugged unapologetically. “Even farmers have their vices, baby.”

He helped her into the two-seater, and they were off, the sleek car cruising down the road, eating up miles as they talked and Mary J. Blige’s *Share my World* album played softly in the background. It was a beautiful night with a full moon and the stars shining brightly. Max opened the moon roof so that Georgina could further enjoy the view.

“God, it’s beautiful out here. In Vegas, everything is so brightly lit, nature dims in comparison.”

He stole a glance at her. “I know what you mean. I remember when I first moved here. My friends gave me shit, saying I would be done in two weeks. They were completely wrong. I love how quiet it is. You can just chill. When you live in a big city, it comes with big crowds of people, and you can’t concentrate sometimes. Out here, I’ve never had that problem.”

“Did I tell you how handsome you look tonight? You are, you know. Devastatingly so,” she said softly.

He grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. “Thank you, Georgie.”

They pulled up in front of the Ritz-Carlton to be greeted by bright lights and photographers. Police were out in full effect as groups of people in formal attire entered the huge building. Before they got out of the car, Max slipped her business cards into her clutch. Georgina's door was opened by a valet attendant whom Max noticed was giving her an appreciative once-over as he helped her out of the car. Annoyed by the little punk, Max gave him a look, which made the man quickly avert his gaze and step away from her. He was well aware of what a beautiful woman she was, and he was proud to have her on his arm tonight. What he didn't care for was the attention she was already getting as her sleek legs were revealed with each step she took and the daring dip revealing her cleavage. In his eagerness to see the dress on her, he hadn't really given any thought to who else would see her in it when he purchased it.

The ballroom was decorated beautifully in a neutral palette of white, off-white, and creams. The table centerpieces were tall white orchid arrangements in cascading and upright varieties. A big band played with an energetic singer next to the large dance floor. "Let me introduce you to some of my favorite people."

Keeping her arm around his, he drew her to where an older couple was just coming off the dance floor. The woman's eyes lit up as soon as she saw him. "Max, darling! Edgar, look who it is!"

Edgar grinned broadly at him. "Max! Great to see you!" The two men shook hands, and Max leaned down to give the tiny woman a hug. "Hello, Lennie. Edgar. Always a pleasure to see you both. May I introduce my date? Ms. Georgina Carlton. Georgina, this is Edgar and Lennie Kenton, they've purchased horses for each of their grandchildren from *Cinnamon Farms*." The couple gave her a friendly smile.

“Any relation to the Carltons of Baymoor, dear?” Lennie asked with a friendly smile.

Georgina felt at ease with her immediately. She stood at about five feet in her heels, and her hair was silver and cropped. Her skin was wrinkle-free except for the laugh lines around her kind eyes. Edgar was tall and built like a bull. He had a lion’s mane of salt and pepper hair. He was a very stern-looking man, except when he smiled it made him look more youthful. “Yes, they are my aunt & uncle. It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

They conversed for a few minutes before more people joined the group, and Max excused them and guided her through the crowded room packed with professional athletes and politicians.

He steered them towards a small group that consisted of two extremely good-looking white men and one beautiful, but heavily pregnant, black woman. The older of the two men, with black curly hair, kept a protective arm around the woman as he slowly caressed her swollen belly. The group saw Max and greeted him enthusiastically with man-hugs and a peck on the cheek, before turning to look at her with friendly curiosity.

Max slid his arm around her waist and proudly introduced her, “Georgina, I’d like for you to meet my good friends, the Sullivan’s. This is Casey and his older brother Jack and his lovely wife Noelle. Guys, this is my...date, Georgina Carlton.”

“Ms. Georgina, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Casey said, giving her a charming smile, which she shyly returned.

“It’s nice to meet you as well,” she said, and Jack gave her a devastating smile.

“It certainly is a pleasure. Are you from Baymoor as well?” he asked politely.

“No, I’m actually from Las Vegas, but my aunt and uncle live there,” Georgina said.

“Her family owns *The Comfort Table* café,” Max explained to the brothers and recognition lit up their faces.

“Don’t get my husband started on the dumplings he had there. I love your Vixen jewelry,” Noelle gushed. “And your Valentino dress is to die for! So, what is it that you do, Georgina?” She gave her an apologetic look. “Sorry for being so pushy, but you look like a nice girl that I want to be friends with before this baby comes and cuts off all my socializing.”

Georgina laughed, liking Noelle Sullivan immediately. “I own an intimate apparel company called *Feminine Intuition*.”

Max smiled as the trio surveyed her with new interest. “I think it’s safe to say they are all fans of your designs, baby.”

“And how,” Jack murmured. “Thanks to you, Ms. Georgina, we’ve got baby number two on the way.”

Noelle gave a peal of laughter as she covered her husband’s mouth with her hand, and he nibbled her fingers, somehow pulling her closer despite her large tummy. “Baby, you’re not supposed to say stuff like that in public!”

Casey gave her mournful eyes. “I’m ashamed to say, Ms. Georgina, that some of your pieces have died a painful death on my living room floor, bedroom floor, dining room...”

“We get it, dude; you love your woman,” Max said, and everyone laughed.

“So who represents you? I have to say that aside from your website and social media, I don’t really see too much of your designs anywhere,” Noelle said curiously.

Georgina smiled apologetically, “I know; it’s actually something that I’m working on expanding.”

“Well, honey, there’s no time like the present! Have you heard of *R. R. & S. Publications*?” When Georgina nodded her head in affirmation, Noelle beamed proudly as she linked her arm with her husband’s. “Allow me to introduce you to the “S” part of the firm.”

Jack grinned down at his wife and kissed her forehead. He produced a card and handed it to Georgina. “It should be obvious at this point that we are admirers of your work. I would love to sit down and talk to you about representation and making your name internationally known.”

Swallowing hard, Georgina took the card, “Yes, of course! I would love to.”

She looked up at Max, and he winked at her, which she returned.

“So where’s everyone else?” Max asked looking around.

“Darby’s working on a personal assignment,” Jack said, and the group exchanged a meaningful look. Sidra’s deejaying in Miami, and Avery’s vacationing before Noelle goes on maternity leave.”

“That’s too bad. I was looking forward to seeing everyone. Well, if you’ll excuse us, I’d like to dance with my date,” Max said smoothly, before leading Georgina to the dance floor.

As they walked away, Georgina heard Casey say, “They look really good together, don’t they?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

They stepped onto the dance floor while the singer crooned Luther Vandross’s “Excuse Me Miss”. They kept their gazes locked on one as he twirled her around the dance floor, and they played off of each other’s moves. Soon they gathered an encouraging crowd, and it was five dances later that they finally left the floor. As they stepped off the dance floor, they came face-to-face with a stunning Latina beauty. The woman was about five feet nine inches tall with voluptuous curves. She showcased them in a violet- colored, fitted satin sheath with a plunging sweetheart neckline. Black waves fell around her olive shoulders. Her eyes, tilted up at the corners, appeared almost black with long lashes . Her full lips were crimson-colored. Her eyes lit up when Max looked at her. In a breathy

voice she exclaimed, “Darling, I didn’t know you were going to be here. Why didn’t you call me?”

She pouted playfully, ignoring Georgina completely, as she waited for Max’s answer. *Oh. Hell. No.* Georgina felt Max’s grip on her waist tighten as she shifted towards the other woman, and he addressed the woman firmly. “Hello, Raquel. I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend Georgina. Georgina, this is Raquel.”

Georgina tried to smile politely, but it came out like a rabid animal’s growl as she said, “Hello.”

So this was the woman Max hooked up with occasionally. The woman was pure sex appeal and looked like she could make grown men call *her* daddy in bed. She made Salma Hayek look like dog poop. Images of Raquel wearing her designs to seduce Max flashed through her mind and Georgina found herself torn between wanting to throw up on the woman’s open-toed shoes and wishing she’d brought *Effie*. But she’d be damned if she let either of them know how out of her element she was feeling. Besides, what did it matter? Max had called *her* his *girlfriend*. Raquel continued to eye Max without acknowledging her. Max returned her gaze steadily. Something seemed to pass between them.

Finally, Raquel gave a sad laugh and hugged a surprised Georgina. “Ah, it is very nice to meet you, Georgina. I can’t say that I am happy to *meet* you, though. I never thought I’d see the day this one would come off the market, but I wish the two of you very well. Georgina, take care of him. He is a very special man.”

With a saucy wink, she turned and swished away. Max kept his hand at her waist and led her away in the opposite direction when suddenly Georgina spied Davis Fowler, standing

opposite from her across the room with a group of men, watching her. He raised his glass and smiled at her. She nodded her head in acknowledgment and continued to scan the room as if looking for someone.

“So I’m your girlfriend?” she asked casually, and his arm tightened as his lips briefly touched her forehead.

“No...you’re my woman,” he declared, looking down at her possessively, and although she should have protested, the happy feeling inside of her wouldn’t allow her to be mad at his arrogance.

They went and sat down at their table with Noelle, as Jack and Casey hosted the night’s event. Jack introduced the guest speaker, a young, well-known football player for the Baltimore Ravens, who came from extremely humble beginnings. He talked about being homeless until he was nine and that his family lived in a van, and how it was always hard to know where his next meal was coming from. If it hadn’t been for organizations like No Child Hungry, they probably would have starved. Then one day his father was out looking for work and stopped to help an elderly gentleman who had passed out. His father performed CPR and called 911. That man was Walter Jennings, and his father had saved his life. Soon after, they moved to Baymoor, and his father got a job at *Cinnamon Farms*, and his mother was a waitress at *The Comfort Table*. He stressed the importance of paying it forward. He also thanked and recognized local and national businesses who were heavily involved in looking to end child hunger, and how proud he was to have partnered with the *Take A Stand Foundation*. He mentioned *Cinnamon Farms* and *The Comfort Table* several times, and by the end of his speech, he was awarding Max with a plaque. Max accepted the award graciously. Georgina’s eyes filled with tears, and she’d never been more proud of him, as she stood, clapping so hard her palms stung. He was everything a woman could ask for in a

friend, mentor, and lover. As he walked back to the table, he only had eyes for her as he leaned down to give her a kiss while his friends congratulated him

For dinner, Georgina chose the pan-seared Scottish salmon with a caper sauce and whipped potatoes, while Max had the other entrée option of double cut pork chop and loaded baked potato. Both were served with a green salad. During dinner, Noelle and Georgina discussed events that *Feminine Intuition* had planned, and Noelle offered ideas on themes that Georgina listened to but was already calculating costs in her head. Even with the generous amount she would receive from Max, she would have to watch her spending very carefully.

Dinner was ending when Georgina excused herself to go to the ladies room.

Max was in deep conversation with the Sullivan brothers, and they all stood up when she left the table. *Sigh. Who said chivalry was dead?* After using the restroom and retouching her makeup, she walked out to find Davis leaning against the wall across from the ladies room. He straightened quickly and approached her. She felt a twinge of unease because he'd obviously been waiting for her. She could smell alcohol on his breath when he spoke, "You look very lovely tonight, Georgina. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am, thank you. How about you?" He didn't reply but just stared at her. Then he reached out and touched her cheek. She

steeled herself not to flinch as he mumbled to himself. “You are just too beautiful for words. How did I let you get away in high school? Wasting my time with someone who couldn’t stand a little pain,” he laughed harshly.

Georgina stepped back, escaping from his repulsive touch. Had he just admitted to doing something to Annabelle? She was furious at this asshole that had hurt her friend. Coolly she said, “I think you may have had enough to drink, Davis.” He narrowed his eyes and went to reach for her. She sidestepped him and braced herself to give him a lesson her brother had insisted she learn when someone interrupted.

“Davis! I do believe the young lady is right.” Davis dropped his arm and his mouth turned upwards in a nasty grin. Georgina looked around him to see a tall, muscular man in a decorated police uniform. From their resemblance to each other and the uniform, she assumed this was his cousin that Chelsea had mentioned. “Would you excuse us, miss?”

She nodded her head and walked away. When she turned the corner, she stopped to listen. “This isn’t your country bumpkin town! It’s bad enough I’ve already had to clean up your mess once; there better not be a second fucking time or there will be nowhere you can hide!! Are we clear?”

Georgina shivered at the sinister tone in his voice before hurrying away. When she got back to the table, she found Max standing beside it. He gave her a concerned look as he took in her worried frown. “Everything okay?”

“Just a slight headache,” she said smiling tensely.

“Georgina, do you have a moment to talk shop?” Jack asked politely. “We’re going to be headed out shortly because my

beautiful wife is exhausted even though she refuses to admit it.”

Noelle pouted at him, and Georgina laughed, enjoying the love that they had for each other. “Yes please, chat for a moment! Maybe you can give us a hint of what you’re going to release next?”

“Go for it, baby. I’ll be right back,” Max said and dropped a brief kiss on her lips before hurrying out of the ballroom.

The side patio was shrouded in complete darkness when Max stepped out.

“I didn’t think you were going to be able to tear yourself away from your woman to come meet me, my brother.” The voice was gritty, dark and sounded like Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor from Lord of the Rings, causing Max to stiffen.

“If I’d known you were gonna be checking for me so hard, I would’ve made you wait longer,” Max said coolly as he spotted the large, shadowed figure at an empty patio table to his left and headed towards it. “And keep my woman outta your mouth.”

“But isn’t she the reason you’re *here*? Georgina Marie Carlton. Age thirty. Younger sibling of Eliza Isabel Rossini and Graham Lewis Carlton. Beloved niece of Nathaniel and Valerie Banks. Sole proprietor of *Feminine Intuition*-”

“I’m not paying you to give me information I already know, man,” Max stated impatiently as he withdrew an envelope and placed it on the table. “Your payment. Did you get the other information?”

“About discreet, responsible rehabilitation programs? Yes, it’s all in the dossier. Does your woman have a drug problem?” the voice asked curiously. “If she does, she’s hiding it pretty well-”

“No, my woman doesn’t have a drug problem, but her mother does. She’s been blackmailing her and pretty much making her life hell for the last ten years,” Max stated flatly as he picked up the folder. “I need her clean, sober, and aware of the error of her ways, so she’ll never bother Georgina again.”

“So *how* exactly is she blackmailing her daughter?”

“If Georgina stays in Las Vegas and makes herself accessible, then her mother will stay away from the rest of the family, especially her other kids,” Max said in frustration. “Georgina refuses to let anyone’s life be disrupted again, but I want my woman to be the person that she was meant to be, not live in fear over someone who never gave a damn about her!”

“Consider this a freebie then,” the voice reeked of disgust. “So it sounds like you really love her?”

Max turned away because it didn't feel right for him to say words that were meant for Georgie to be said aloud to a cloak-and-dagger stranger for the first time. "Please text me when it's done. Despite all the pain she's caused, I just want her to get better. I also want you to dig up everything you can on a man named Davis Fowler."

"How far back do you want me to go?" Shadow Man asked idly.

"From the time he was conceived. I'll wire your next payment unless you can arrange for us to meet again in another creepy way," Max said drily as he walked back to the door. When he received no reply, he turned around to find Shadow Man gone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Georgina was on a high and nothing, short of making love with Max, felt better. Jackson Sullivan loved her company and wanted to take her to the next level. As people came by the table to pay their respects to Max and the Sullivan family, everyone introduced her and informed them of her company. People started asking for her business cards, and she had a moment's panic when she realized that she didn't have any until Max calmly opened her clutch, and she saw the business cards inside. When it was time to go, the ladies promised to stay in touch, and Jack said that he and his partners would be in touch soon.

On the drive back, Georgina insisted they would have to make love with her dress on because it was pure magic. At a red

light, Max leaned over and placed a sweet kiss on her lips.
“Thank you for being my date tonight.”

“Thank you for helping to make my dreams come true,” she said softly and sighed with regret. “I wish we could have danced more; I’m not ready for this night to end.”

When they got to the farmhouse, the dogs rushed out to greet them, and as she bent down to pet them, Rihanna’s ballad “Diamonds” filled the air. Max placed his phone on the railing and held out his hand to Georgina. “May I have this dance?”

Eagerly she wiped her hands, before placing one in his as he pulled her close to him, before twirling her around on the wide porch.

*Shine bright like a diamond
Shine bright like a diamond*

*Find light in the beautiful sea, I choose to be happy
You and I, you and I, we’re like diamonds in the sky
You’re a shooting star I see, a vision of ecstasy
When you hold me, I’m alive
We’re like diamonds in the sky*

*I knew that we’d become one right away
Oh, right away
At first sight, I felt the energy of sun rays
I saw the life inside your eyes*

They moved together seductively, eyes locked on each other as the fitting words of the song caressed them. In the moonlight, Georgina’s dress sparkled and shimmered as she spun around, and Max thought she’d never looked lovelier as a smile lit up her face, and she sang aloud to the words. It made his chest tighten to keep the words he longed to say to her out loud bottled in.

Georgina wanted this moment to never end as she danced with him underneath the starry sky. They didn't need a fancy place for it to be perfect, just each other and Sherlock and Watson who lay watching them. The look in Max's eyes spoke of promises she knew he would never break if he gave them. It made her long for the elusive fairytale of having it all that was building right in front of her eyes. A successful career and a man as wonderful as Max that would give her babies to keep a big farmhouse alive as they created new memories.

*So shine bright tonight,
You and I
We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky
Eye to eye,
So alive
We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky*

*Shine bright like a diamond
Shine bright like a diamond
Shining bright like a diamond
We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky*

Their lovemaking that night was slow, sweet, and oh so addicting. While he moved inside of her, her eyes drifted shut as she felt the vortex of her orgasm tugging at her soul. "Open your eyes, Georgie. Stay with me, love."

She struggled to obey and hold his gaze, but when she saw the depths of emotion in his beautiful eyes, she shattered into a million pieces, crying out his name. And as the intense hot rush of her pleasure surrounded him, Max was unable to hold out and came as well, with a harshly whispered, "*Georgina.*"

They were going to meet friends at King Pinz for a night of bowling. Max called Wade who said he'd bring Jackie. Georgina called Chelsea, who was bringing a date, and Kenya, who would bring her husband. The bowling alley was packed, and the noise was deafening. Wade had saved them two lanes. As they walked to join the group, Georgina felt very relaxed. She just wanted to chill with Max and have a good time. Hugs were exchanged, and introductions were made. Chelsea's date Megan turned out to be Darlene Myer's younger sister. The gangly girl with bifocals, acne, and frizzy hair had turned out to be a beautiful woman, who only had eyes for Chelsea. Georgina was happy for her friend, who seemed just as captivated with the red-headed beauty. Kenya's husband Rodney was an easygoing guy from Australia that adored his wife and referred to everyone as "mate". They met when she did an exchange program in college and reconnected two years ago.

They ordered pizza, nachos, and beer after confirming designated drivers. Wade wouldn't be drinking at all because he was on call. Teams paired up, and Max and Georgina wound up on opposite teams. The trash-talking commenced. As they laced up their shoes, Georgina smirked at Max. "Prepare to get spanked and not in a good way."

"Yeah right, baby. No hard feelings, right? You're still putting out after you lose, correct?" Max teased and laughed as she crossed her eyes at him and stuck her tongue out, before stealing a quick kiss from her. Max *was* a good bowler, but Georgina was even better, thanks to her aunt and uncle who were bowling champions and took her to every bowling tournament they participated in. Unfortunately for the group, Georgina was a trash-talking, poor sport winner.

“Oh yeaahhh! Who just bowled her fifth strike in a row? This girl right here!”

“Hey, Rodney, do you think you could work on Wade’s weak wrist? I sure hope that’s not your shooting hand, sheriff.”

“Someone call the fire department because I’m on F-I-Y-A-H!”

“Kenya, do we need to give you some blinders and put the bumpers up for you? I believe the ball was meant for this lane, not two lanes over!”

“You know what that smell is?? Of course you don’t because it’s the smell of a winner!”

“Hey, Chelsea, only dirty minds belong in gutters!”

“Come on! Hellen Keller could have hit those pins!”

Finally, Max grabbed Georgina’s hand and led her away to the restroom hallway.

“What’s going on? Did you see me out there handling my biz and kicking ass?” she asked as she jumped in place and twisted her neck around like a MMA fighter.

Max viewed her with grim amusement. “Oh, we all saw and heard you, Georgina. Now I’m asking you to cut them some slack, okay?”

“What are you talking about? It’s just a friendly game of bowling,” she said, bristling with indignation. “Everyone’s having a good time. There’s nothing wrong with a little competition...”

“Did your teachers ever put “Does not play well with others” on your progress reports?” Max asked and laughed as she punched his arm. “Holy shit they did, didn’t they?”

“Maybe once or twice I had to sit out kickball,” Georgina mumbled. “I can’t help it; I get so competitive and excited.” She gave him an innocent look. “I don’t mean anything by it.”

“Yeah right, baby,” he snorted. “Tell that shit to someone else! Don’t get me wrong, it was hot as fuck watching you kick ass so effortlessly out there, but just ease up a little on the trash-talking, okay? It’s not for everybody.”

Georgina laughed with relish, “Alright, that’s a lie! I enjoy the victory and crushing my opponents so effortlessly-”

“I think I get it, Donald Trump,” Max said dryly, and Georgina sighed with resignation.

“Fine, I’ll apologize.”

They walked back to the group, and everyone was talking and eating pizza. They fell silent as Georgina cleared her throat. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for getting so excited and expressing myself in the way that I did. I promise not to talk trash anymore.”

Wade looked at her with puppy-dog eyes, “Thanks to you, I now have trust issues.”

There was a moment of silence before the group burst into laughter, and Georgina spoke, “Okay, who wants to play again? Say, Jackie, why don’t I help you with your horrendous throw? Nothing would make me happier than to fix that awful tilt your hand does when you throw.”

The group fell silent and stared at her incredulously. “What? What’d I say?”

“*Seriously?*” Max asked her with a raised eyebrow.

Jackie side-eyed her. “With every minute that passes, I trust you less and less, Georgina Carlton.”

They all laughed again, except a confused Georgina. “What did I say?”

She had just bowled another strike and was high-fiving everyone when she noticed a couple four lanes down. It was Davis and a female companion. He smiled at her and raised his beer bottle. She nodded at him and went back to chatting with her friends. Georgina looked at Kenya and noticed she was giving Davis a dirty look. Max, Jackie, and Wade were in deep conversation with Rodney. Chelsea and Megan were swaying to the music, making lovey-dovey eyes at each other. She went

and sat next to Kenya. “God, do you ever have to tell them to get a room?” she joked with a teasing smile.

Kenya looked at her and smiled wanly. “What’d you say, hon?”

Georgina gave her a look of concern. “What’s wrong, Ken? You can talk to me.”

The other woman sighed heavily. “I just miss Annabelle so very much. She was my oldest and dearest friend. It’s like a piece of my soul is missing. She should have been my maid of honor in my wedding, and my daughter’s middle name is Annabelle. Whenever I look at that vile man, I feel so angry. It’s because of him that she can never come back. Meeting Rodney was a true blessing. He’s my soulmate no doubt, but there’s nothing like your sister from another mister, ya know?”

Georgina hoped Graham would have good news for her. She could feel Kenya’s sadness and wanted to bring her some sort of comfort. She reached over and held her hand tightly. “Chelsea told me everything she knows. I feel so bad for her. Did you know anything beforehand?”

Kenya’s hand tightened. “I would see the marks on her and the controlled mocking tone he would use. He was very careful. Everyone thought she was so lucky.” She laughed bitterly. “Even her own mother knew, but because he comes from a family with a great background, she felt her daughter should overlook his minor flaws,” she said, making quotations with her hands. “I feel terrible because we had an awful fight right before she left. I told her that she shouldn’t marry him. That if she had any self-respect, she would stand up for herself. She cried that I didn’t understand. I told her I was ashamed to be her friend.” she finished softly.

Georgina decided to do a beer run to the snack bar. She smiled, knowing Max watched her. Even while in conversation with his friends, he'd never taken his eyes off of her. The crowd had vanished, and it was only the two of them. She blew him a kiss, and he smiled appreciatively. Suddenly she felt so free. She'd trusted him with her troubled past, and he hadn't run. Georgina was glad that she'd come back to Baymoor. The timing just felt right to her. It was crowded, and she had to elbow her way through to the snack bar. As she leaned against the counter and waited for the beer, she felt someone press against her.

Instantly she knew it wasn't Max and immediately turned around and her front was now pressing against Davis's front. He smiled, and again she could smell the alcohol rolling off him as he placed an arm on either side of her, deliberately caging her in. "When are you going to give me some of what you're giving the farmer?"

Enraged, Georgina jumped in his face "The only thing I'm going to give you is a warning to back the fuck up. Fall back, *bitch.*"

Davis stopped smiling, and his eyes were full of menacing promise. Leaning down so their foreheads almost touched, he taunted her, "Be careful, Georgina. You should talk to the last

person that disrespected me...oh, that's right...they can't find her."

With a smirk, he left her staring after him, her heart pounding. *Motherfucker*. But he didn't get far as Max flung him back onto the snack bar counter and wrapped his large hands around his neck. His face was apoplectic with rage. "*Did you just threaten my woman?!*"

Frantically Davis struggled to pry Max's hands from around his neck, and Max lifted him and gave him two quick jabs to the face. Davis spun around and fell face down across the counter as blood spurted from his nose. Enraged, Max went for him again, but Georgina interceded, "Max, he's out! I'm okay; Don't bother yourself, with him, baby."

Wade appeared as did the rest of their group and looked from Max to Davis to Georgina. "Someone want to tell me what the hell happened?"

"That motherfucker tried to press up on Georgie and then got in her face to intimidate her!" Max barked, fists still clenched as he stood over Davis, staring at him, willing him to wake up so he could beat on his ass some more for daring to touch *his* Georgie.

Although Wade was inclined to walk away and allow his friend to dish out the private justice beat down Davis obviously deserved, unfortunately, he couldn't. He was the law and it had to be upheld. "Georgie, is this true?"

"Yes, everything Max said is true," she stated firmly, and grabbing Max's hand, she led him away as Wade gave an

irritated sigh and helped the bastard up.

Max had watched Georgina go to the snack bar. Then he saw Dr. Fowler behind her in the crowd. Ignoring Wade's questioning look, he followed after him and saw the whole thing. By then, he was close enough to hear the man's words, which just confirmed what an asshole Fowler really was. If Georgina hadn't interfered, Max intended to stomp his mangy ass into the floor. The other night in D.C. as he stood at the podium accepting his award, he'd observed Davis staring at her hungrily from across the room, not even trying to be discreet. Other men had given her admiring glances, which he understood; she was a beautiful woman. But the creepy way the doctor stared at her and licked his lips was a little too much for Max, and that was why he asked Shadow Man to look into him.

When they got to the farmhouse, Georgina went upstairs to take a quick shower, but Max stayed downstairs. When she came back down, he had poured himself a brandy and was sitting on the sofa, staring at the fire he'd built. Georgina curled up next to him. His silence made her uneasy, and she snuck furtive glances at him, but he seemed lost in thought staring at the flames until eventually they died. Finally, she couldn't stand it any longer, and she crawled into his lap and kissed him. He put his fingers in her hair and held her face in place as he explored her mouth.

“Take me to bed,” she whispered urgently, and he stood up with her wrapped around him and carried her up the stairs. Their kisses were hurried. She worked his belt buckle loose and unbuttoned his jeans. He bunched her nightgown up around her waist and felt that she had no panties on. At the top of the hallway, he leaned her against the guest bedroom door and freed himself. He slid the tip of his shaft through her slick folds teasing her, and she struggled to catch her breath. God, he loved the noises she made. She fed him teasing kisses, licking and biting at his lips. Holding her in place, he entered her in one thrust, and they sighed at the completeness of being one. Max broke the kiss to look deep into her eyes “I would never hurt you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she breathed cupping his face. “God yes, baby, I know that. I trust you so much. *I know.*”

“*Good,*” he breathed as he held her by her waist and surged into her again, this time even deeper. Georgina flexed around him as he continued to thrust into her. “*Because you are everything to me, Georgina, and I couldn’t stand the thought of you being afraid of me after everything you’ve been through.*”

Georgina clenched tighter around him as she started to move up and down on his cock. It was just too good between them, and they couldn’t get enough of each other as he trailed kisses along her jaw and neck. She arched off the door to give him better access, her fingers clenching in his hair tightly.

“*Nooooo, Max. Never. Oh gawwwd...yesss. You are everything to me as well. Aaaaghh... like that, baby.*”

“*Shiit, Georgie. Mmmm...baby, you’re sooo wet. You like that?*” He groaned and thrust harder and harder as he felt her pleasure coating his balls, and she moaned long and loud as he quickened his pace. “*So you’re not afraid of me? Of us? Tell me, baby.*”

“Never this and never us, Max! Uggghhh! Yesss, baby, don’t stop!” she shouted, twisting her head side to side as the pleasure became too unbearable. And because she couldn’t hold it in any longer, Georgina grabbed his face and ravaged his lips with hers as she breathed her truth into him, *“I LOVE YOU, MAX! Don’t you know that? I LOVE YOU! Cuuum with me, baby!”*

And he did, her admission was his undoing as they soared through the clouds and heaven and earth shifted, becoming one as they came together. Max came and came, emptying himself inside of her, and hoping to leave a piece of himself with her, long after she was gone. *“I love you too, Georgina.”*

Elation rushed through her, and she gave a tired laugh as he pushed her plastered hair off of her forehead and kissed her damp neck, *“Damn straight you do.”*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Alright, ladies, are we clear on how the routine goes?” Georgina asked as she met the eyes of the Spring Chickens members in the mirror. After receiving affirmative nods from the determined group, she smiled and nodded to Chelsea, who was sitting in the corner of the room, to play the music. “Remember, don’t forget to dip and roll with the beat! Just feel it! I want to see your booties bouncing! Not one of you better be standing still! We’re leaving it all on the floor today!” Beyoncé’s seductive voice filled the room.

*Let me hear you say "Hey Ms. Carter" (Hey Ms. Carter)
Say "Hey Ms. Carter" (Hey Ms. Carter)
Give me some!*

Georgina let the music flow over her as she moved along with the beat, watching with a grin at how the Spring Chickens didn't miss a beat. Ida even added a little electric slide to her movements. "I see you puttin' some stank on it, Ms. Ida!"

*See me up in the club with 50 of the girls
Posted in the back with my things on my grill
Brooklyn brim with my eyes sittin' low
Every boy in here with me got that smoke
Every girl in here got to look me up and down
All on Instagram, cake by the pound*

"Hey now, Ms. Mabel! Don't hurt 'em!" When Nate and Valerie arrived home a week ago, they'd released her of her duties at The Comfort Table, leaving her with free time to spend with Max. Unfortunately, Max went out of town the day after they returned, promising to be back in time for tonight's party but had left instructions, per their agreement, for her to teach dance classes until he got back. "Get it, Ms. Grace!"

*Drop the bass mane the bass get lower
Radio say speed it up I just go slower
High like treble, pumping on them mids
Ya man ain't never seen a booty like this*

So the next day she'd pinned a sign-up sheet in town square with the dance classes she'd be offering, and when she came back at noon, it was completely full. The second day of dancing, she was inspired for an idea for Uncle Nate's party

that she discussed with her students, and they eagerly agreed to. So far she'd taught praise dancing, hip-hop, reggaeton, Beyoncé, and Disney dance. The last class of the day was next, and it was her Disney dance. She planned to use Princess Tiana and Queen Elsa as her inspiration today. At first, Georgina was very apprehensive about teaching a class of strangers, but they were so eager to participate and hung on her every word that slowly she started to relax and enjoy herself. By the end of each class, she knew a little something about each person, and no one referred to the incident at King Pinz or Davis Fowler, who'd wisely checked himself into rehab.

Georgina clapped as the music ended; "Great job, ladies! You definitely put me to shame! Will I see you all tonight at Uncle Nate's party?"

There were enthusiastic yeses in response, and as the older ladies walked out, the little ones ran in, and she was greeted with a chorus of "Hi, Ms. Georgina!"

"Well helloooo, girls! Are we ready to dance and cheer on Tiana's "Almost There? And to help Elsa "Let It Go"?"

Their shrieks of joy almost burst Georgina's eardrums. "Okay then. Let me just talk to Ms. Chelsea for a moment, and we'll get started, ladybugs!"

Chelsea eyed her with a smile as she approached. "Stop eyeballing me, Reyes."

"I can't help it. It's just so weird to see you so...relaxed and... happy," Chelsea said as she frowned at the revolving door to the entrance of the studio. "Are you collecting peoples' souls as they pass through the door? Oww!"

“That’s what you get, brat. Now play the music please,” she said, taking a swig of water. “Can you make sure to record this lesson? I want to make copies to give to their parents.”

“You know you’re really good at this?” Chelsea stated, gesturing to the girls who were doing warm-up stretches as she rubbed her injured pinky. “You ever think about staying? Everyone with the exception of “Davis the Dick” and “Farah the Floozy” loves you, and whether you’ll admit or not, you *are* as community-orientated as your family.”

Georgina wouldn’t admit it aloud, but she really did like it in Baymoor this time around. As a child, she felt confused by Ingrid’s treatment, rejection, and abandonment of her. Then under different circumstances, Eliza and Graham left her as well, and she just felt misplaced. When she finally felt secure enough to open up and started making friends, Ingrid showed up and ruined it for her again. For years, malicious whispered gossip-plagued her, but she never told her aunt and uncle about the things kids would say after what happened with Darlene Myers. Only one person knew that her senior prom date, Kendrick Tollwell, had expected her to put out like Ingrid, and when she’d refused, he attempted to take regardless of her firm rejection.

“You’re gonna give it up, bitch! Quit trying to act innocent; we all know you’re a whore just like your mother. Come on, ho, spread your legs!” The round, brown face that she’d thought was so cute and harmless as he Eddie Haskell’ed her aunt and uncle was twisted with anger as she fought him. “Bitch, I spent money on you tonight! You’re definitely gonna give me some ass!”

He’d ripped the bodice of her dress and pawed at her like an animal until she punched him in the throat and slammed his

face on the steering wheel. Then she ran all the way home, struggling to hold it together, before going inside. Luckily Nate and Valerie were still at the café. Before cleaning herself up, she needed to make a call. With shaking hands, she dialed the familiar number.

“Hello?” the voice on the other end said. There was silence as Georgina struggled to speak. “Georgina, is that you? Talk to me, Bella!”

“D-D-Davey!” Her voice caught on a sob. “I-I need you, please!”

While it was true she was upset about what had happened, it was her rage that had her shaking and sobbing uncontrollably.

“Georgina! Tell me what has happened...”

Two days later Kendrick disappeared while hiking with friends. He was found hours later after it was discovered he'd lost his footing and fallen down a ravine. He survived the fall, but lost his phone and both of his arms and jaw were broken, which was why he was unable to call for help. Authorities were puzzled by the extent of his injuries, but he remained adamant that was how he received them. His family moved shortly after he fully recovered.

“Mmmm,” was all she said to Chelsea's comment. “Okay, please play the music.”

The song came on, and Georgina found herself singing her heart out along with Tiana as the little girls danced along with her.

Mama! I don't have time for dancing!

That's just gonna have to wait a while

Ain't got time for messing around

And it's not my style

This old town can slow you down

People taking the easy way

But I know exactly where I'm going

Getting closer and closer every day

And I'm almost there, I'm almost there

Sure Chelsea and her family would be glad to have her back, but there was one person she'd yet to discuss anything with. *Max*. Although she and Max had declared their love for each other, they'd yet to say it since. Despite the declarations, love hadn't been part of their month-long agreement. And neither had "Typhoon Ingrid".

The celebratory party for Nate Banks was supposed to be held indoors, but thanks to the beautiful weather Baymoor was experiencing, the location was moved to the town square. In the late afternoon light, string lights threaded amongst the trees twinkled, and a stage with a live band was set up. Tables were set up, and people had brought their own lawn chairs out to enjoy the event as they paid their respects to Nate who sat at the head table with Valerie, Mayor Gibbons, and his wife, Theresa. Local food trucks pitched in to help Raymond and his crew as they whipped out small bites, including short rib ragu over cheddar polenta, mini chicken tacos, blackberry ricotta pizza, cajun shrimp guacamole bites, and spring pea &

prosciutto crostinis that were quickly consumed. For desserts, there were snow cones, frozen yogurt, and cotton candy vendors.

Max walked through the square, exchanging greetings as he searched for his woman. Man, he'd missed her more than the comfort of sleeping in his own bed, but he'd definitely gotten a lot accomplished on his trip, and things were progressing as he hoped. Jack Sullivan had called him today and let him know he'd spoken with Georgina and liked her vision for her company, but she was concerned about the cost.

"Max, normally I wouldn't get into something between a man and his woman, but why doesn't Georgina know that she doesn't have to worry about costs?" Jack asked curiously.

"Because we haven't had that discussion yet. Don't worry about it, I'll be having that talk with her later this evening," Max replied confidently and Jack laughed.

"I would love to be a fly on that wall! Somethin' tells me she's not gonna take it as sweet and graciously as you planned," Jack whistled.

"It'd shock the hell out of me if she did," Max said wryly. "Regardless, spare no expense on her. She gets everything she wants, understood?"

"You got it, brother," Jack agreed in amusement.

He stopped by Nate's table and said his hellos. They asked him how his trip went, and he engaged in light conversation even as his eyes kept moving. *Where was she?*

“Was there something or *someone* you were looking for, Max? You seem preoccupied,” Valerie teased, and Nate chuckled knowingly as the mayor and his wife excused themselves to mingle.

Max smiled. “As a matter of fact, I’m looking for my woman. Would the two of you be so kind as to tell me where she is?”

Nate gave him a leveled gaze. “Did you get everything squared away?”

“Yes, sir,” Max said, and their silent communication spoke more than actual words could, and Nate seemed satisfied as he went back to teasing Max.

“Oh, so she’s your woman now?” Nate challenged with a smirk. “Does she know she’s your woman, and how far exactly are you planning to go with that title? Until the end of her visit or something more permanent?”

Max met his gaze, “The title alone should give you your answer. But as her parents,” he looked at Valerie, and her happy smile was a little bit wobbly as she clasped hands with her husband. “You should know that’s my end game. I want to give you and my parents lots of grandbabies, which of course means *lots of practice-*”

“By the cotton candy stand with Wade and Jackie,” Nate interrupted with a growl as Valerie leaned her head on his shoulder with a laugh.

With a smug smile at him, Max tipped his Stetson at Valerie and walked away, but not before he heard Valerie’s overjoyed

exclamation, “Can you imagine, Nate? More grandbabies!”

Georgina was regaling Wade and Jackie with stories of touring with El Sol & Le Moon when she felt *him* behind her. Max slipped his arm around her and dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder, and she turned to place a kiss on his bearded cheek, inhaling his sexy scent. “Welcome home, baby.”

“Yeah, baby, welcome home,” Wade mocked, grinning as Max gave him the finger discreetly, causing the other man to blow kisses at him, as Georgina and Jackie shook their heads at their antics. “Didn’t think you’d make it back in time. Everything go okay?”

Max met his eyes and saw the concern in them. As one of his closest friends, Max had confided in Wade. “Yeah, everything is fine. Of course, I planned on making it back today. Wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

“Well alright then, dude. We’re going to head to Leo’s when we’re done here. You two wanna hang?” Jackie asked.

“No thanks,” Georgina and Max replied quickly and looked at each other. Their attraction was a raging fire that would not be controlled, and they could not wait to be alone.

“OMG, you two were so meant for each other,” Wade teased.
“Later, guys.”

They hadn't taken four steps, before Georgina was spun around in Max's arms, and rising up to meet his seeking lips. “I better not get a report of indecent exposure on you two.”

“Bite me,” Max taunted him before his lips covered Georgina's. Aware of their audience, he kept the kiss brief, with the promise of more to come as he bit her lip. “I missed you, love.”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it. No calls or emails,” she said as she caressed his jaw, the soft hair of his beard tickling her palm. Although peeved about the lack of communication, she hadn't really dwelled on it so much, because of the great time she was having with her friends and family. “But because you're so cute, I forgive you.”

“I'm sorry, Georgie, but it couldn't be helped for most of the trip,” Max said apologetically as looked down at her in her form-fitting, chartreuse tube dress and matching sandals, with her bangs falling into her eyes. “You are definitely a sight for sore eyes. How are the dance classes going?”

“Oh you'll see,” she replied mysteriously. “Did you get everything squared away with the animal hospital?”

Max's face closed up. “I did. I interviewed Davis's partner, Dr. Greg Ashton, but I don't feel comfortable with Fowler anywhere in the picture. So I pulled my business from the Baymoor Animal Hospital and will have a vet flown in. I truly hate to do that, but it's necessary.”

Georgina averted her eyes, feeling horrible because she was the cause of the hospital losing out on revenue, which could possibly lead to layoffs. Sensing her guilt, Max captured her chin and forced her to look at him. He could see the worry in her face as her brow furrowed and she bit her lip...

“Georgina, I did offer the hospital a compromise: find me another vet, and the revenue stays, but only if they get rid of Fowler. Trust me, after what I found out about him, they will choose to do what is right,” Max said cryptically.

Before she could ask him to elaborate, the mayor stepped up to the podium, and it was time for the dedication part of the ceremony. There was a speech listing all of Nate’s accomplishments, a slide show of him performing community duties, and then to thunderous applause, he was called up and presented with the key to the “city”.

Georgina’s throat was clogged with tears as she listened to her uncle give a heartfelt speech on how much he loved the town, and how important it was for everyone to do their part to help out in the community in any way that they could.

She thought the speech was over, but then he became emotional.

“To my lovely wife Valerie: I love you with all my heart and am so blessed to be taking this adventure we call life with you. To my daughter, Georgina, thank you for coming home in my time of need. Just seeing your beautiful face has done wonders for your aunt and me. With that being said, we hate to put you on the spot, Little Bit, but we sure are hoping you’ll consider moving back!”

Georgina blushed as everyone turned to smile at her and applauded once more. Max squeezed her hand, and she leaned on his shoulder in embarrassment. All of a sudden Deniece Williams's "Let's Hear It For the Boy" floated in the air. She reached up and kissed Max again. "Gotta go!"

*Boy, boy, boy
Boy, boy, boy*

*My baby he don't talk sweet
He ain't got much to say
But he loves me, loves me, loves me
I know that he loves me anyway*

And maybe he don't dress fine

Amused Max watched as dancers popped out from all over the square and led by Georgina, they dedicated a carefully orchestrated routine in Baymoor's first flash mob to her elated uncle. Max was filled with pride as he watched her lead the group of small girls up to the front, their giggles contagious as they danced to the chorus.

*But I don't really mind, yeah
Cause every time he pulls me near
I just want to cheer*

*Let's hear it for the boy
Let's give the boy a hand
Let's hear it for my baby
You know you gotta understand*

Afterward, he was approached by the Spring Chickens. He greeted them with a charming smile. "Looking good out there, ladies."

“Cut the crap, Max!” Mrs. Laurent snapped to his surprise and jabbed him in the chest with her bony finger. “You better get that darling gal to stay. She’s perfect for you and us. Figure it out, sonny! Or else. Let’s roll, girls.”

And off they went, but not before each one gave him a look of dire warning.

“Well damn,” Max said aloud as he rubbed the sore spot on his chest.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When they reached the farm, Georgina changed her clothing so she could help Max feed the animals. This time, she didn’t wrinkle her nose with the smells from the pig pens. She laughed when she accidentally lost her footing and fell into a mud pile by the sheep pens.

Hand in hand they walked to the barn. Max was trying to be gentleman-like as he discreetly eyed her curves in her form-fitting yoga outfit. “I’m not sure which impresses me more: your newfound farm skills or your dance moves. What else have you been working on?”

“Oh a little bit of this and a little bit of that,” she said coyly as they came to the barn entrance and he walked in first, looking for George Jefferson. Tavish had texted him to tell him that he

hadn't locked the goat up. In his hurry to get to Georgie, Max drove straight by the farm. Now he wished he hadn't as he waited for the wily creature to reveal himself.

"Stay close to me," he warned Georgina as he listened intently.

Then he heard the hooves, and they were coming fast. "Stop, George! No!"

"Neeaaahhhh!" The animal refused to obey, hurtling full speed toward him, and Max braced himself to catch him. But at the last minute, he dipped around him and ran towards Georgina too fast for Max to catch him. He lunged and missed as he hit the barn floor shouting, "No George! Stand down! Georgina, don't run, he'll chase you!"

Pissed with himself, Max jumped to his feet and to his surprise, Georgina stood there petting George Jefferson. *"The hell?!"*

"Are you okay?" she asked innocently, but the wicked gleam in her eyes let him know she was pleased to catch him off guard as she reached into her fanny pack and produced an apple that she fed to the eager goat as he batted his eyes at her. "You seem... confused."

"When did this bonding thing happen?" Max grumbled as he dusted off his jeans.

"Oh, while you've been gone, I've been helping out here in my spare time," she said nonchalantly. Georgina didn't bother to disclose she came to the farm because it was where she felt closest to him, and she'd been missing him like crazy. She liked to think that George Jefferson did too, which was why he

followed her around relentlessly. Tavish said it was because she wore Max's shirts while performing farm duties. At first, she was wary of the goat, but as his eyes became more mournful with each passing day, she finally broke down and showed him the affection he was obviously yearning for. After all, there was no one that could relate better to him than her. "We kind of bonded. You know how it is. Us Georgies got to stick together."

"Neeaaahhhh!" George Jefferson confirmed her statement as he continued to look at her with adoring eyes. Max grinned as he ruffled the goat's head and dropped a kiss on Georgina's lips. For his efforts, he was rewarded with a sharp nudge from the goat, warning him to get back. First the Spring Chickens and now his goat. But he couldn't blame them when he'd fallen so hard for her himself.

"George Jefferson, BED!" Max ordered, and the animal gave him a mulish glare before slowly trotting off to his stall.

"Don't yell at him, baby," Georgina said sassily as she walked over to the sink by the entrance and washed her hands. "He missed you."

"Uh-huh," Max replied absentmindedly as he watched her pants clinging to her sexy ass. His cock was now straining against his jeans as he watched her bend to retrieve the hand soap and proceeded to wash her hands and arms. Her smooth movements as she washed her skin had Max picturing her stroking him. She quickly rinsed, wiped her hands dry, and turned around. Their eyes met before hers dropped, and she licked her lips.

"Come here, baby," he ordered and watched her struggle with telling him to kiss her ass or give in to what they were both feeling. In the end, she strutted towards him, and he growled

softly, appreciating her beauty— those beautiful brown eyes and pouty lips, the glow of her gorgeous brown skin, her lush breasts in her dirty shirt, and those curvy hips. His desire grew in another direction, one where her belly grew big and round with his child every day. Georgina, whether she knew it or not, would be a phenomenal mother. She had all that love inside bottled up and ready to give to a lucky child.

Max wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, “I love you, baby.”

“I love you too, Max,” she said fervently, savoring the words she would never grow tired of hearing and pulled his head down for a kiss, moaning as the familiar tickle of his beard rubbed against her jaw. His lips captured hers, and she opened up, allowing his skillful tongue in to tease and dance with hers. Max cupped her by the nape of her neck and massaged her back as the masterful kiss continued. The heady pleasure only his touch could bring was spinning her out of control, as she pressed closer to him, rubbing her breasts against his chest and sliding her hands down into his back pockets to cup his firm ass. “Mmmm, I missed you, baby.”

The kiss turned hotter as he dominated her mouth, and his hands slid down to palm the firm globes of her ass as he pressed his raging hard-on against her. “*Fuuuck!* Come on.”

Max walked to a cupboard and pulled out two thick blankets and grabbed her hand before leading her to the tall, steel sliding ladder. “Watch your step, baby, I’ll be right behind you.”

Up the ladder they went, Georgina following Max as they walked between bales of hay to a corner. Quickly he cut three stacks of hay open and fashioned them into a mattress of sorts. With his back to her, she slipped out of her dress. He laid one

blanket over the hay pile, and when he turned back around, he was already unbuckling his pants but froze in place. The sight of Georgina in her strawberry red one-piece bodysuit almost made him explode. The satin clung to her curves, and the bustier held her breasts firmly in place. They kissed long and deep while her hands unbuttoned his shirt and slid inside to caress his chest. “I can’t wait, Max. It’s been too long. Now please.”

Quickly they undressed and fell onto the hay bed with Max on top. Immediately Georgina grasped his large shaft and ran her hand up and down, moaning and pulling him towards her. He sucked in his breath at her touch as she positioned him at her wet portal and teased him with her slickness. “Hurry, baby; I can’t wait anymore.” Max surged into her, and she threw her arms over her head and arched her body towards him, panting heavily at the feel of his thickness inside of her. Still teasing her with his slow languid movements, he bent his head to capture a pebbled nipple. He withdrew and slowly bit down on her nipple, sucking it into his wet mouth before shoving himself completely in again.

“Maaaaxxx!!!” Immediately she started convulsing around him. Sweat broke out on his brow as he struggled for control, but she was so exquisitely tight. He pushed her legs onto his shoulders and managed four deep thrusts before he exploded. Georgina started to come all over again. He continued to move, feeling himself growing even harder than before as he lowered her legs and kept moving, but his movements were slow and languid now that that first time was out of the way. Her arms reached out to pull him closer until he was laying on her with her legs wrapped around his. They exchanged lazy kisses as she raised her hips up and down to receive him. She moved her hands to his ass and caressed him whispering, *“More please.”*

He groaned harshly, burying his face between her breasts. Latching on to one swollen nipple, he gave it a slow pull, swirling his tongue round and round. Georgina's breath caught, and her nails dug into his ass as he repeated the action to her other breast. Listening to her moaning was driving him crazy. He circled his arms around her and rolled over until she was on top and giving him a dreamy smile. She moved in a gentle rocking of her hips as she placed her hands on his chest. He gripped her hips and surged into her, making her back arch as he controlled her from below. She threw her head back and started to ride him with abandon. "*Oh God, oh God,*" she chanted and reached back with her left hand to caresses his balls.

"Yeah, baby, don't stop. Just like that," he encouraged as he held onto her hips and thrust deeply into her over and over again.

"I-Ugghh...I love you!!" Georgina wailed as her body started to tremble.

Max couldn't hold out any longer. Her fingernails caressing him were his undoing as he increased his thrusts and reached for her swollen clit. His thumb moved in slow circles over the sensitive bud before gently squeezing. She came undone, joining him in a shattering climax as he yanked her down to whisper, "*I love you, Georgina.*"

They lay together, Georgina resting her head against his chest and drew circles on his abdomen. Nothing beat the feeling of being in Max's arms with his heartbeat strong and steady

underneath her cheek. She teased him by allowing her fingers to drift lower and smiled against his skin as she saw his manhood stir. “Keep it up baby, and I promise I’ll make it worth your while,” he laughed wickedly. Giving a sigh, he kissed her forehead and pulled her closer. “I need to tell you something.”

“What’s up?” she asked as she yawned and snuggled closer, but he rolled her onto her back to lay over her. The sincerity and love radiating from his eyes held her captivated.

“I love you so much, and never in a million years did I ever think I would meet anyone like you. You came into my life and turned it upside down with your sassiness and strength. You’re incredibly amazing, and the strongest woman I’ve ever met. I hate to think of what my life would have been like if we’d never met. Yes, you’re complex, but the moment I saw you, I knew you were a risk worth taking,” Max said humbly. “You, Georgina Marie Carlton, are the love of my life.”

Holy shit, where was he going with this?! she wondered with terrified happiness as her heart raced a beating staccato, threatening to jump out of her chest.

“And because of that...I’m releasing you from our agreement,” Max said softly, watching as her eyes clouded with confusion.

“Wait...what? Why would you do that?” Georgina asked and Max pressed his forehead against hers, before pulling back and helping her sit up to lean with him against a bale of hay.

“Because as much as I want to ask you to stay with me forever, you have more important things to do,” Max said gently. It was killing him inside, but he knew it was the right

thing to do. “You are going to take the money and make your business everything you want it to be. *R. R. & S.* is there to help you accomplish that. They are damn good at what they do, so do not worry about costs, do you understand?”

“And us?” Georgina tried to swallow around the thick lump in her throat as tears filled her eyes, and she quickly brushed them away.

“Listen to me, Georgina,” Max commanded. “You have spent your entire life with a dark cloud hanging over it. Not living up to your full potential. That cloud is gone, and you don’t have to worry about it coming back.”

Georgina sat up quickly, a premonition that she wouldn’t like what was coming next growing in the pit of her stomach. “What does that mean exactly, Max?”

“It means that Ingrid is in a new facility where she can get the best treatment possible and not interfere in your life. She is living in a community that will help her get the best treatment, and she can live and work there. It is the best environment for her to be in,” Max explained. “You won’t have to worry about her.”

“I see. So that’s what you were doing while you were gone? Road tripping with my mother?” Georgina asked incredulously as she stood up and hurriedly put her clothes back on. “And in your spare time, you were conveniently planning and organizing my life for me?”

Max sighed. “Don’t act like you weren’t going to make moves when you left here. You were always going to be held back if nothing was ever done about her. Your name and company should be plastered across every billboard in Las Vegas, but

you were too scared to do it because Ingrid could pop-up like a cracked out jack-in-the-box at any time.” Max stood up as well and reached for his clothes. “Fuck her! In this day and age, everyone has family skeletons. Together your family is strong enough to withstand Ingrid’s bullshit. You shouldn’t have to bear the burden of her on your own, and you will no longer have to.”

“So you took care of all my problems like a good daddy does, right?” Georgina mocked him as she put her shoes on. “Well forgive me for not saying thank you like a good little girl. For any of it! Keep your damn money and kiss my ass! You are right about one thing: I do need to get my shit together and stop allowing people to manipulate me.”

She walked away and to the ladder as Max put the rest of his clothes on. Georgina was beyond furious at his high-handed scheming. They weren’t some love match, and she *was* his second chance to get it right and ease his guilty conscience. She couldn’t get away fast enough as she scrambled down the ladder. It made her sad to have to leave Baymoor when she felt like she was just starting to fit in, but there was no way she would be back anytime soon after what Max did.

“You’re being irrational right now, baby,” Max said calmly, struggling to keep his anger in check.

“*I’m* being irrational?! You’re joking right?” she asked sarcastically as she stepped off the ladder and looked up at him. Even in the midst of the deepest anger she’d ever felt in her life, her heart still skipped a beat as she looked up at him standing above her, so tall and majestic. His handsome face was twisted in anger, but she saw no remorse for what he’d done. She sneered at him, “How were you able to get Ingrid out? They wouldn’t just release her to anyone even a bonafide saint like *you*. You would need to be family.”

Max smiled grimly and nodded his head in agreement. “That’s correct. Even a well-meaning, sanctimonious, and resourceful asshole like myself would need help.” He took a deep breath, “Your brother helped me.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The ride home was made in silence. Well, not complete silence. Max attempted to talk to Georgina and had received two “whatever’s, four “nothings”, and a “wow, you are unbelievable”. He didn’t need Spidey senses to know this was going to all end badly. Max hadn’t even stopped the car before she jumped out and hurried down the sidewalk, rummaging for her key. Max was fast on her heels; she could hear his boots as the hot tears threatened to fall from her eyes.

“Don’t you dare do it!” she told herself as she finally found the keys. Not even in Ingrid’s vilest moments had she ever felt such...she didn’t even KNOW the word for how she felt. Suddenly she found herself whirled around and staring up into Max’s eyes that were snapping with fury.

He pulled her to him, and his mouth came crushing down on hers. The fighter in her wanted to take advantage of the vulnerability he’d exposed his body to by cupping her face, but the lover in her that had surrendered to him completely was all in. Tears spilling over, she grabbed the front of his shirt and gave as good as she got—tongues dueling, lip biting as desire flowed like hot lava through her body. God his lips and

tongue... Georgina was drowning... no...SUFFOCATING...she was being smothered by him. She wrenched her mouth away with a gasp and backpedaled, putting distance between them.

*“NO!” She hissed as she wiped the tears from her wet face.
“You don’t get to...to...do this!”*

“DO WHAT???” he asked coldly. “I don’t get to what, Georgina?! Tell me!”

“Be a goddamn knight in shining armor! I don’t need you to swoop in and save me from my shit, Max! I’m here because we had a deal and somewhere along the way-”

“You got a BETTER deal! It’s called a happy ending,” Max interrupted harshly, glowering furiously at her.

“You don’t see what you did and are still doing!” Georgina replied tightly. “I may be really new at this relationship thing, but I’m pretty sure that’s how it works. We do and discuss things TOGETHER. Not, one person goes off and does something impulsive without discussing it with the other. But you don’t even see it that way, do you??”

“And you don’t see what you’re NOT doing!” Max roared and Georgina flinched. The front door opened behind her as he continued. “You’re not trying to live up to your full potential and have a life filled with happiness! You want to run, then run dammit! That’s what you do best!” Max snatched his Stetson off of his head and slapped it against his thigh in frustration as he took in her beautiful, furious face. He wanted to hit something; his anger and frustration was escalating with every moment that passed. If it had been such a terrible idea, surely someone involved from Eliza to Nate would have stopped him right??? They would have suggested that he let...

Georgina have her moment of empowerment instead of... just taking it. SHIT. Maybe he did see after all.

Agitated, Max rubbed his beard furiously and looked up at the starlit sky. She was right. In a city, you couldn't appreciate the real beauty of something so simple, because the view or chaos around you always clouded your judgment. What they had was beautifully simple. She loved him and he loved her. In his efforts to make sure she was happy, he'd made moves and created a chaotic shit storm that now clouded that simplicity.

He looked back down at Georgina and then moved past her to look at the compassionate faces of his good friends and nodded his head in acknowledgment. They smiled at him encouragingly. With a sigh, he moved toward her slowly and was filled with relief that she allowed him to pull her back into his arms. Max dropped his forehead down to hers and looked deeply into her eyes as she clenched the bottom of his shirt tightly in her fists. The feelings that he evoked in her right now just about killed him as he saw the hurt, anger, and betrayal in those wide eyes. The smell of her perfume and hay teased him and reminded him of a simpler time, only an hour ago when they were in sync. He couldn't do this all on his own and never should have attempted to, but that's the price that you paid for the one you loved.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you. I would move heaven and earth to be with you and would die before intentionally hurting you." He dropped his arms and stepped back. "I love you to death, baby, but I'm not going to chase what shouldn't be running so hard. Take care, Georgina."

Then he turned and walked away.

Las Vegas, Nevada

One Month later...

“Good Morning, boss! I come bearing caffeinated gifts!” Renee said as she sailed into Georgina’s office and navigated her way between cardboard boxes. “Wow, I can’t believe you’ve got everything in here just about packed up!”

Georgina smiled enthusiastically at her assistant, “Hey, doll! Thank you very much! Did you bring more packing tape?”

“Yup, got it right here. I’ll start in the kitchen with the dishes. Damn, did you think your house would sell so fast?” Renee grinned. “I vote we throw a house party before you go.”

“No way! I didn’t think it would, but I’m sure as hell not complaining for the price they offered for it,” Georgina said as she placed files into a box and taped it up. After coming back from Baymoor, Georgina had put her house on the market. Her plan was to downsize to a two-bedroom condo in a less expensive part of town, and with the money saved, rent out an inexpensive storage space for her team. Her house hadn’t even been on the market for one day before her realtor called and informed her a bidding war had ensued. Apparently the school zone Georgina lived in was a highly coveted one, and the two parties battling it out were in it to win it as they sent Georgina letters, flowers, and cupcakes to butter her up. In the

end, Georgina would be walking away with seventy-five thousand dollars more than what she asked for it. So far she'd yet to see a condo that she really liked, but Renee had offered her guest bedroom while Georgina looked.

“Oh, and Ian called me on the way here. He said he has three interviews lined up with *Allure*, *In Style* and *Essence*,” Renee said excitedly as she handed Georgina an iced latte.

“Awesome! This morning's conference with Lavon and Vivienne went smoothly. I'm just so relieved and excited that everything is coming together,” Georgina said, pumping her fists and doing a little dance. “So for the fashion show, Lavon is going to do an ethereal look on the models. Lots of shimmery nudes, flower headdresses...and to keep in line with the Garden of Eden theme, we're going to rent the jungle background from Alexis.”

“Oooh, I'm loving the concept! Here's the proposal the deejay sent over for music,” Renee said. She walked over to Georgina, handed it to her, and gave her an impulsive hug. “I'm so proud of you! You're working so hard to make your dreams come true, despite what happened between you and Max.”

Georgina smiled brightly and tried to ignore the ache in her chest Renee's words caused.

*After leaving Baymoor, all she'd wanted to do was come home and lay in bed until her heart didn't feel like it wasn't covered in shards of glass, causing it to hurt each time she took a breath. But she couldn't after receiving the text on her phone from Max's accountant that five-hundred thousand dollars had been deposited into her account. Then Jack called and kept her moving one step in front of the other with all of his ideas and requesting information on *Feminine Intuition*, demanding*

a detailed written report on what her vision was for her company. He was tireless and showed no mercy as he maneuvered a toddler and newborn baby. So no there was no time for heartache. He pushed and pushed at her until Georgina wanted to throw something at him. But it did keep her regrets at what she'd thrown away so quickly down to a minimum of a hundred times a day.

But she didn't break, and on their Skype meeting last night as he held his adorable newborn, Jack smiled at her proudly, "Now tell the truth, aren't you glad I didn't leave you to wallow in your feelings?"

As she gaped at him, Jack winked and gently said, "You're gonna kill the lingerie game. Get some sleep, Georgie."

"I couldn't have done it without you, Renee," she admitted with feeling and returned the hug. The doorbell rang and Renee excused herself to answer it. Georgina took a deep breath and slowly released it, wishing she could confide just how much she missed Max— his kindness, warmth and fiery brand of lovemaking. He said she should be living to her full potential, which she already knew, but she'd taken his advice and run with it and even accepted a date with Marquise's cousin Carlos. The thought of going on a date depressed the hell out of Georgina, but she knew she'd have to try.

She was even more determined after doing her daily scouring of the internet for news on Max and hitting pay dirt. Two weeks ago, pictures surfaced of him hanging out with famous polo player, Tarik Owens and a pretty woman at a polo match. The woman leaned into Max as she stomped the divots. They were both laughing like they were having the time of their lives, and Georgina was beyond jealous. She wanted to shove the woman's big-ass hat down her throat and stomp on Max's "divots".

So she went on a date with Carlos, who was handsome, smart, and a good dancer. It was the worst time of her life. He took her dancing, but their bodies just didn't mesh well together, no matter how she tried to plaster herself to him. His soft kisses lacked fire and had her attacking him, practically shoving her tongue down his throat to get some sort of feeling. It was terribly hopeless because he wasn't Max and at the end of the date, Carlos looked relieved to be rid of her as he burned rubber down her driveway.

“Chile, who you tellin’? I had to tell him that you were fresh out the “big house” and that’s why you were actin’ so crazy, with your horny ass,” Lavon teased to her embarrassment when she warned him the date didn’t go well.

“Look who I found!” Renee trilled, and Georgina looked up to see Graham and Eliza standing in the doorway. She squealed and ran to them, launching herself into Eliza’s arms, and Graham picked them both up. Behind her, she heard Renee murmur as she left the room, “I like a strong man.”

“Hey, Little Bit, we heard you were moving so we thought we’d come and help,” Graham said warmly as he bussed her cheek.

Georgina wiggled down from her brother’s grasp and clasped a hand over her mouth as she looked from one to the other. “I can’t believe you’re both here in Vegas! We haven’t been together in this city since...”

“Well now it’s time to make new memories,” Eliza said firmly, and Graham nodded his head in agreement. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry about giving you shit when I called you last. You were probably trying to find the best way to tell me what

you've been keeping to yourself all these years, and my anti-Ingrid stance didn't help in the least bit."

Georgina could only look at them, still unable to process they were all together again *here*. Graham was six feet six inches of lean muscle with a body covered in tattoos. He kept his head shaved bald and wore a goatee. His nose was strong, his cheekbones high, and his lips, full. All in all, he was the consummate bad boy mothers warned their daughters about, but it was his eyes, so like Georgie's, that reeled women in. So soft looking, that every woman believed they could be the one to change him. According to him, he couldn't be changed, but he would say with a slick smile, they were more than welcomed to try.

And dear Eliza, like Georgina, she didn't wear any makeup, but where Georgina was pretty, Eliza was stunning. With her reddish-brown halo of shoulder-length curls, luminous hazel eyes, and full mouth, she looked like someone you'd find during the Renaissance or Woodstock eras. Tall and willowy built, she appeared to be fragile-looking, but her siblings knew she could take a man down faster than Lara Croft.

"Where is my darling niece?" Georgina asked, looking around as if Camille would magically appear out of nowhere.

"She's with the parentals in Baymoor," Eliza said. "Graham swooped me up, and we dropped her off before heading here. She's safe and perfectly happy, so don't worry about her. We have bigger things to discuss, young lady."

"You should have told us, Georgie," Graham stated with a frown as he stroked his goatee and death-glared his baby sister. "How come you didn't trust us to help you? Ingrid's a fucking nightmare on her best day. Do you know how stupid I felt to

hear a stranger say that he wanted to help my baby sis with her problem?”

“Max had no right to come to you,” Georgina maintained stubbornly. “I trusted him with my problem, and he turned around and betrayed me.”

“Kind of like us trusting you, and this entire time you’ve been holding out on the entire family?” Eliza asked sarcastically. “So you’re really done with Max just like that? You’re ready to walk away from that kind, sexy man for good? Because, honey, if you don’t want the farmer, there are plenty of women who do...”

“Yes I know, Eliza, thank you,” Georgina snapped already knowing what her big sister said was true and exactly how many different types of fools she’d been. Sometimes she wished she could go back to that moment and backhand herself. Like really hard. “Come on you two! Stop standing around and help me to finish packing!”

“So what are your plans? Did you find a place already?” Graham asked “Or are you going to stay with Renee? I have to warn you, it’ll be pretty crowded with the three of us there,” he said with a lecherous wink. “She generously offered to put me up.”

Rolling her eyes at her outrageous assistant, Georgina looked around the room full of boxes. For the last twelve years, she’d called Las Vegas home, but that was a lie. Home was where your heart was, and hers was with her family, Raymond’s cooking, the Spring Chickens, her dance classes, George Jefferson, and...Maxwell Jason Hayes.

“I’m going home to Baymoor,” she said with finality, and for the first time in a month, she felt completely at peace and happy with her decision.

Chapter Thirty.

“Alright, here’s your dinner! Max, Chef Raymond said to enjoy,” April said weakly as she placed a charred salmon burger in front of him. “He said that he’s celebrating his Cajun side tonight...and every night that you decide to eat here.”

She hastened away, and Wade chuckled as he looked at Max’s burnt meal. “Templeton still fucking with you?”

Max could feel the old bastard’s crazy eyes on him but wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of complaining as he picked up the disaster that was his dinner and took a big bite. It tasted like shit. “Yup, like clockwork. He’s got his thong wedged up his ass real tight, thinking I drove Baymoor’s princess away. But it’s not just him. The Spring Chickens aren’t speaking to me either. All the little girls that were in *her* dance class give me the stink-eye when I walk by, including *your* nieces.”

“The price you pay for breaking a princess’s heart,” Wade said good-naturedly as he dipped an air popped broccoli floret into the ramp-pesto vegetable dip. “Mmmm, that’s good stuff.”

“Yeah, well what about my heart?” Max asked sourly. “How come no one cares about my shit? Sherlock and Watson keep looking at the door and wagging their tails waiting for her to come through the it,” He shook his head, “*Hell, my goat won’t even listen to me!*”

“Damn! She got to George Jefferson too?” Wade asked incredulously. “Brother, there ain’t no coming back from that. So what are you going to do about-”

Wade cringed when he heard the voice that sounded like a rusty engine trying to turn over interrupt him. “Good evenin’, gentlemen. How’s your food tonight? I trust everything is to your liking?”

Max looked into the tricky good eye of Raymond and decided he’d had enough of his bullshit. “Everything tastes excellent. As a matter of fact, I was just about to post a pic of the delicious *Cajun* burger you made me and write a thoughtful review about its presentation, taste, and all the love you put into it for lil ole me.”

He was filled with satisfaction when he pulled out his phone, and the smirk disappeared from the older man’s face as he snatched Max’s plate and placed it behind his back. “Oh no, you don’t, Old MacDonald! You think you’re gonna run some sick mind game on me like you did *cherie*??? With that dirty, twisted mind...humph! Lookin’ at farm animals having “relations” all day has got you all kinds of messed up!”

Max shifted to the side just as Wade’s iced tea came spewing out of his mouth and across the table. The sheriff struggled between catching his breath and laughing at Raymond’s crazy observation. “*Who the fuck says shit like that, old man?!*”

Max ignored Wade because he could see that Raymond, like himself, was hurting at the thought of Georgie leaving again. “I’m sorry that you’re hurting, Raymond. Hell, that everyone is, but short of forcing her to stay, there was nothing I could do. She did what she felt she needed to do.”

Raymond exhaled a sigh of acquiescence and placed the plate back on the table, before pushing Wade’s shoulder. “Scoot your peanut-headed ass over.” At Wade’s glare, he sneered at him. “What you think I’m ‘posed to be scared ‘cause you carry a gun? I done put a voodoo on your meal, and we are now forever intertwined. You shootin’ me is like shootin yo’self.”

Wade stood up quickly and pointed at him, “See, this is that bullshit I’m talking about! I’m outta here, Max. Templeton, if anything happens to me-”

“Then it gonna happen to me too! Adieux, Sheriff,” Raymond said smugly and cackled gleefully as he watched the big man depart. “What’d he mean “Templeton”? Like the rat in that piggy movie?”

“I have no idea what he’s going on about,” Max declared as innocently as he could while mentally cursing Sheriff Bigmouth. *Didn’t Wade know the best nicknames were the ones people didn’t know they had?*

Raymond gave him a suspicious look before sighing heavily, “I don’t have to tell you what that girl’s been through. But she looked at you the way I would look if chitlins came odorless.”

“Wait...what???” Max looked at him incredulously. *“Did you just compare our LOVE to CHITLINS?!”*

Glass eye shining, Raymond nodded his head vigorously, “Well think about it. Chitlins are complex, but if you can get past the obstacles of their smell, cleaning them thoroughly, the way they *look*-”

“*And* now I’m out too. Bye, Temp-I mean Raymond,” Max corrected himself.

“Bring our girl back, Mr. E-I-E-I-O!” Raymond called to his retreating back, as he picked up Max’s burger and took a bite, muttering “Ain’t a damn thing wrong with this burger.”

The invitation to *Feminine Intuition’s* fashion show burned a whole in Max’s shirt pocket as he poured himself a glass of bourbon and sat down at his desk, attempting to get some paperwork done. Since checking the mail an hour ago, he’d taken it out and looked at it at least twenty times. The show would be held at the Plaza Hotel in New York. He looked at the small feminine writing. Georgina had written it personally, and if he concentrated hard enough, he could smell her perfume. He tipped his head back and swallowed the liquor, enjoying the fiery trail it burned down his throat. With a sigh he closed his eyes; then quickly opened them as *she* invaded his thoughts again.

Every time he closed them all he saw was Georgina’s beautiful face. The way she looked as her orgasm took control of her and her eyes slowly drifted shut, the gorgeous grin she wore when giving him shit, those big brown eyes, sparkling with

humor. She stole into his dreams and seduced him nightly, with that teasing laugh and her breathy moans, driving him Out. Of. His. Fucking. Mind. These days it wasn't unusual for him to wake up with his hand wrapped around his rigid shaft as he attempted to seek relief.

He stood up and turned off the lamp before leaving his office. After securing the alarm, he walked around turning off lights. There wasn't a room that didn't have a memory of Georgina in it. Slow dancing in the kitchen while dinner cooked. How she and the dogs cuddled on the floor in front of the fireplace. They'd made love in damn near every room, and he still had the list she'd made of rooms to "christen". The way her toiletries had taken up almost every space of his vanity counter in the master bath. Her off-key singing in the shower, or when she did office work, she spread it all over the bed and fell asleep right in the middle of her mess.

The more he thought of all their memories, the angrier he became. Who did she think she was to turn her back on, Maxwell Hayes? The man who would love her forever and beyond?? Max grabbed his laptop and opened it to book his flight. Fuck that. He would tell her face to face.

The venue at the Plaza was a madhouse as the time for the fashion show drew nearer.

“Alright, gather around everyone! I want to do a final check on faces and hair!” Georgina called as she and Lavon walked to the center of the backstage room. “Let’s go!”

The twenty models came together for one last inspection, and they looked each one over carefully, pleased with the diverse group they were able to put together. The models ranged the gamut in complexion from porcelain to polished onyx. It was mandatory that all the women had curves, and not one was below a size six and went up to size eighteen. In addition to the ladies, there were two male models who wore nothing but leaf loincloths on their gleaming bodies. They would stand with python snakes wrapped around them where the models would enter the runway. The snakes were faux but so detailed, they appeared real which definitely helped to enhance the Garden of Eden theme.

“Are we good here?” Renee asked as she hustled over to them with her clipboard and headset. “We’ve got a packed house out there, and it’s ten minutes to go time.”

Georgina turned to the large group. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s just about that time. Thank you so much for all of your hard work and just remember to go out there and have fun, but remember you represent my brand, so I expect you to still be professional!”

“Because she will cut a bitch if you get it twisted,” Lavon warned, and everyone laughed...but noticed that she didn’t dispute his words.

The group disassembled, and then it was just Georgina, Lavon, and Renee. They looked at each other in nervous excitement, and Georgina clasped their hands “I just wanted to say thank you for everything. For always being there for me and never

turning your backs on me. From the bottom of my heart I love you and could never have done this without you guys.”

Lavon blinked back tears, “Bish, please! You were already on your way, and I’m just happy you included me for the ride. Love you too, boo.”

Renee sighed dramatically, “Giiiiirl, you know how difficult you can be, but I wouldn’t take you any other way. I know after tonight, things are about to change in a major way, but you’ve been my A1 since day1, and that will never change.”

They shared a group hug, and Georgina tried to hold back tears as Lavon threatened her with, “You don’t even want to know what I had to do to get my hand on that brand spankin’ new Nars collection! Don’t you ruin your face!”

“Well whatever it was, I’m sure you enjoyed yourself immensely,” Georgina retorted as she fanned her eyes. “Okay y’all, how do I look?”

From behind her, the voice that belonged to the man of her dreams replied, “As if you could ever be anything but beautiful, Georgina.”

Stunned, she whirled around to see Max standing about fifteen feet behind her, looking immaculately sexy in a charcoal grey suit, white dress shirt, and a cobalt paisley printed tie. Georgina’s eyes were thirsty as she drank in the sight of him. His curls on top were a little longer, but he’d trimmed his beard shorter, and his rich sienna skin was slightly darker with the warming of the weather.

“Max...you came,” she replied stupidly, still unable to believe that after what seemed like an eternity apart, they were now breathing the same air.

Max nodded as he fought the urge to snatch her into his arms by shoving his hands deep into his pants pockets. She was clad in a navy robe and wore a gold flowered filigree headband in her pixie haircut. Her face was expertly made up, but she still looked like herself, except a little thinner. It had been a lifetime since he last touched and kissed her, and his hands were itching to do so. “Of course, I would come to support you. Congratulations on everything. You look good.”

There was a moment of stilted awkwardness, and it was nothing like they had ever experienced; even after their one-night stand had it never been this...weird.

“Thanks, so do you,” Georgina replied softly.

“Well I hate to inject myself into this moment but, Georgie, we’ve got five minutes until show time, and you still need to get dressed,” Renee said with an apologetic look towards Max as she gently led her friend away.

“You’re staying for the whole thing?” Georgina asked desperately as she was led away. The panicky feeling that if she took her eyes off of him he would disappear was quickly rising within her.

“I’m not going anywhere, Georgina,” he vowed, and only then would she go to get ready for one of the two biggest moments of her life.

Chapter Thirty-One

Max took his seat in the front row, nodding in greeting to Vivienne Romankov and Ian Rusnik, along with the Bankses, Eliza, and Graham. His assigned seat was in the center between Eliza and Graham. As he took it, Graham gave him a mocking smile. “Glad you could make it. I was starting to wonder if you were still hiding in a haystack on your farm.”

“I’d shut up if I were you, Shadow Man. My hogs can make a body disappear in twenty minutes, if I give the word,” Max growled menacingly.

Graham studied him for a moment, “Man, that is some seriously sick shit!”

Max tried to hold his intense expression, but burst out laughing, “I thought so too when I saw it on some Hannibal Lecter movie. Ayyye, but your face tho...”

“The Odd Couple, 2016 Edition,” Eliza said with a smile as they rolled their eyes at her.

After confessing Georgina’s problem to the Shadow Man, Max received a call, requesting that they meet, and Max suggested Mo’s. When he arrived, he was surprised to find a tense-looking Nate, Valerie and a pretty woman with a curly afro sitting with the Shadow Man.

“Graham Carlton, I presume?” Max asked him dryly, and the other man nodded his head. “You should have told me, man.”

“I needed to see who was looking into my family and determine for myself if you were friend or foe,” Graham said grimly. He pulled out the empty chair next to him. “Have a seat. There’s a lot to discuss.”

Max kept his eyes on him until Eliza held out her hand and introduced herself. “I’m Eliza Rossini, Georgie’s older sister. Sorry we’re meeting under these circumstances, but we need to know exactly what is going on with Ingrid, so we can figure out the best solution. I still can’t believe Georgie’s been in contact with her all these years...”

Max and Graham gave each other shit every chance they got, but there was mutual respect beneath it. Because they had a common ground. They both loved Georgie, albeit in different ways and wanted her to be happy above all else.

“It’s good to see you here showing your face and maybe staking your claim?” Graham asked slyly as he stared at the closed curtains in front of them. “I heard Georgie had a date, and it was pretty intense...”

“With whom?” Max asked quietly but forcefully and felt Eliza shift away from him with a look of alarm, but he kept his eyes locked on Graham who just smirked at him. Rage swept through Max’s body as he processed Graham’s words. Georgina had gone on a date. She’d been in close proximity to another man. *Had she allowed him to taste her soft mouth and caress those silken curves?*

Before Graham could answer, Missy Elliot’s “Get Ur Freak On” was blasting through the venue as the curtains were

pulled back to reveal a lush floral garden background and a runway covered in green moss. Models started to strut down the runway barefoot, and they were all glorious with their unique looks, curves, and complexions. The collection was like Georgina herself— a big contradiction: boldly sexy and demurely shy, all parts beautiful. There were so many facets to appreciate in her designs. The color capsule used appreciated all skin tones, strategic placing of lace cutouts, sheer panels, and bows. The dee-jay continued to spin sexy songs with pulsating beats throughout the show.

The entire show was a visual feast, and Max was so busy taking it all in and proudly listening to the excited chatter of reporters that he almost missed Georgina's entrance. She strutted down the runway wearing a flowy, white organza caftan with a v-neck and a white flower pattern that had puffy, short sleeves. It had a deep center slit that opened when she walked, and Max found himself growing impossibly hard as he rose with everyone else to give her a standing ovation as she waved to everyone. She came to a halt at the end and adjusted her headpiece as she said "thank you" over and over again.

Finally, the applause died down, and beaming with pride, Georgina spoke again. "Thank you so much for coming out and supporting me! I hope you enjoyed yourselves as much as I did. I just wanted to say thank you so much to my family, friends, and *R. R. & S.* for being with me every step of the way and supporting my vision. I am forever grateful for all of your time and appreciate everything you do."

Georgina took a deep breath as she tried to control the butterflies fluttering like crazy in her tummy. Her eyes locked with Max's burning gaze as she spoke. "I wanted to say one more thing. There's someone else who believed in me, whose faith in me was always unshakable until... recently. Thank you, Maxwell Hayes for loving me, and I'm sorry that I was

such a fool that I doubted you and ran away. I was a fool that I couldn't see that you just wanted to help me make my dreams come true.”

There were shocked gasps all around, and as Georgina turned to look around, she saw phones recording her as she exited the runway and carefully walked down the steps Graham had made sure to include earlier. She walked until she was standing in front of Max. His hands were in his pockets again, and his face was tight with concentration as he absorbed everything she was saying. “The thing is, I didn't dream big enough because I didn't allow myself to. I was too scared to do so. I wanted my business to be successful and for people to love it. That didn't scare me because I'm a firm believer of speaking things into existence and...well I'm just going to put it out there:

I want you to forgive me for being such a jackass and love me again. I want the big scary fairytale of having it all! Us being married, running our businesses, filling the farmhouse with babies. Of living, laughing and loving each other-”

She couldn't speak anymore as Max snatched her up and kissed her passionately amidst the clicking phones and thunderous applause. Closing her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck, Georgina gave herself up to the feeling of coming home in his strong arms and inhaling the scent that was inherently Max as his lips devoured hers. Slowly her eyes opened to his face watching as he blinked back tears. “So...I take it you're on board with the fairy tale?”

Max pressed his forehead to hers and was relieved to see this time around there was nothing but love shining in her eyes. *For him.* He was coming for her, but all along, she'd been making plans to come back to him. “Baby, you had me at jackass.”

With a groan, Max collapsed back on the bed and pulled a delightfully disheveled Georgie, with her back to him, close, tucking her in close to his side. He didn't care if their bodies were slick with sweat; Max needed to feel her in his arms and that she wasn't going anywhere. "Best. Yet."

"It gets better each and every time," Georgie purred as she wiggled her behind and felt Max's cock stir in response. "I think you tapped out on this round."

"You damn skippy I did, and with pleasure too," Max agreed readily.

"Well can you untie my wrists now?" she asked seductively and brushed against him again. She was rewarded with Max shifting to slide a muscled thigh in between hers and the swollen head of his cock at her entrance again. "I said I was sorry, baby."

They had managed to last an hour and a half at *Feminine Intuition's* after-party before bidding everyone good night. As their friends and family looked on in amusement, they beat a hasty retreat out the restaurant and hailed it back to the Plaza, barely making it into the room before tearing their clothes off of one another and falling into bed. The first time was fast and hard to take their edge off.

The second time, Max punished her by tying her wrists together and spanking her bottom until it stung deliciously, and she was a shuddering mass of need for him. Max refused to relent to her pleas for him to take her as he brought her to multiple orgasms with his hands and mouth in between the six stinging swats he gave her.

Slowly Max stroked himself at her soaked entry but did not enter as he tenderly kissed her neck and shoulders. “So what now, baby?”

“*Mmmm,*” she panted, trying to trap him between her swollen nether lips. Max laughed softly as he evaded her ministrations. “What are we talking about?”

“I asked what happens now,” he said as he bit her ear, making her gasp. “I’m not going to make assumptions on how this plays out, but you need to know that I refuse for us to be apart longer than necessary, Georgina.”

“I’ve sold my house and shipped all of my things to Baymoor. Uncle Nate had them stored last week,” she growled as she shifted her bottom, but once again he evaded her. “Max, quit playing!”

“Finish,” he ordered as he teased her with an inch and pinched her plump nipples, causing her to arch in pleasure.

“You’re moving in right away, correct?” Max breathed into her ear and cursed softly as she clenched around him, and unable to resist her, he surged into her slick, hot tightness. His arm slid below her and across her chest to hold her in place as his other hand caressed her swollen button. “When we get back

home, I'm proposing, you're accepting, and we'll be married before the year ends?"

"Yessss!" Georgina moaned, drowning in mindless pleasure from his lips, hands, and that magical dic- *"Aaaagh! Right there! Don't stop, Max!"*

Max growled as he thrust into her wetness harder and harder and nipped her neck. *"We talk, not run. EVER. I'm your man and will always be here to love and support you. But I need to know that you have my back too. That you believe and trust in ME. Do you understand?"*

"I do, baby," Georgina wailed as she opened wider to receive him. Her arousal coating both of their thighs. *"I'll never hurt you again."*

"Then come for me," he whispered, unable to hold back any longer, his body trembling as he lost himself deep within her. Georgina threw her head back, stars exploding behind her eyelids as she came, her orgasm rushing through her like a crazy roller coaster ride, dropping then shooting up and flipping her around and around, leaving her breathless and dizzy with pleasure.

Breathing harshly, Max withdrew from her slowly and left the bed to run them a bath. When it was full, he scooped her up and walked with her back to the bathroom.

"I want to tell the world how much I love you," she said drowsily, looking up at him with loving eyes, and Max smiled tenderly down at her, still unable to believe they were together again.

“Oh yeah? Like announce it on CNN?” he asked jokingly, but Georgina shook her head firmly and cupped his bearded cheek.

“I love you,” she informed him solemnly. “*You’re* my world.”

Epilogue

Two months later...

Their engagement party was held at Nate and Valerie's house, which they were adamant about hosting. They were extremely pleased to have all three of the Carlton siblings, along with their precious granddaughter, together at home. Guests dined al fresco on a buffet-style dinner of flank steak with green chile chimichurri, lobster mango salad and crab cakes with jicama slaw, roasted fingerling potatoes, and garlic butter rice. Smooth R&B flowed from the speakers as Nate deejayed.

Graham and Tavish were in charge of the margarita machine, and the line was packed with women of all ages waiting for drinks from the two handsome men. Eliza was running the popsicle bar where guests could pick from cherry-coconut milk, honey-lavender, or strawberry-watermelon mint popsicles as well as homemade pb&j and smores ice cream sandwiches.

Georgie smiled as she watched all of their friends and family having a wonderful time. According to her family, under no circumstances were she and Max to do anything but socialize and enjoy themselves. She glanced down at her ring and felt pleasure engulf her at the sight of the four carat, pear drop diamond set atop a rose gold pave band. True to his word, Max had "put a ring on it" as soon as they got back to Baymoor.

"It's gorgeous, Max! When did you do this?" she exclaimed holding her hand out and admiring the exquisite ring. "I can't accept this! It's too much!"

Max took her hand, satisfied that his woman was now wearing his ring. "The week I was gone. You will accept it, and I expect you to wear it every day, Georgina. Preferably with nothing else on. Set the damn date already."

"Girl, that man of yours did good, and you know it!" The teasing voice came from her employee Yolanda. While Renee continued to run the Vegas team, Georgina was building an east coast team. After advertising for open positions, the ad was answered by an extremely talented seamstress that was hungry for work. Georgina interviewed her and was impressed with her work. She had two adorable kids, and they'd just moved to Baltimore. Yolanda drove to Baymoor for the interview and liked it so much, that after accepting Georgina's offer, she decided to move there. She was an excellent employee and kept to herself, not really volunteering too much information about herself or her family.

"Didn't he, though?" Georgina said with a happy laugh and Yolanda joined in.

"Yes, ma'am. Georgina, thank you so much for inviting us; the kids are having a blast with Camille," Yolanda said earnestly and gestured to where her daughter, Joana and son, Aidan were playing with Camille and Wade's two nieces Sosie and Paisley. "When's the wedding again?"

"November eighth, and you're very welcome. I'm so glad you decided to come today. We work so hard, that it's nice to get out and let loose. I would love to get to know you guys away from work if you're open to it. We always have get-togethers at the farm. I'm sure the children would love to hang out and see the animals," Georgina offered with a friendly smile, already knowing what the answer would be as the other woman's smile faltered.

“Well, that sounds great, but we’re pretty busy on the weekends. Oh, if you’ll excuse me, I need to put more sunscreen on the kids,” Yolanda said and hurried off.

Georgina watched her retreat with concern. She definitely had a story, but Georgina knew in her heart of hearts, it wasn’t anything bad. Max would be furious if he knew that she hadn’t done a background check on the other woman, but something had told her not to. That if she did, she would find Yolanda laying low just like Annabelle still was. Her application showed a high turnover of employment in different places, which meant she was on the move. A background check might trigger what or whoever she was hiding from. If she didn’t do such amazing work, Georgina would never have hired her, but she really liked the other woman and her kids, so, for now, she was happy with her decision.

She glanced across the yard to where Graham was flirting with the ladies, particularly Farah. He was supremely frustrated with tracking Annabelle and how good she was at evasion. Georgina was almost nervous at the unholy gleam that entered his eyes whenever he spoke to her about her old friend. It was a good thing for Davis Fowler that he’d left town after being discharged from rehab. Georgina had the distinct feeling Graham would have loved to have “words” with him. The hospital decided that Max’s business was more important than keeping Davis, so they relieved him of his position and brought in Max’s recommendation. Graham didn’t think they’d seen the last of the asshole, though, so he asked his friend Darby Sullivan to put a security detail on him.

“What’s put the frown on your face, pretty girl?” Max drawled as he came up behind her with a manila envelope in his hand. “Wade said he’ll be by later after his shift ends. Chelsea just pulled up and will be out here shortly.”

Georgina turned to him, and he dropped a kiss on her ready lips. “Hi, babe! Whatcha got there?”

“This is from Capex’s office. I believe it’s the magazine with your ad in it,” Max said and handed it to her. “Here, you do the honors.”

Georgina eagerly opened it and pulled the magazine out. Quickly she flipped to their spread and was speechless as Max gave a slow whistle. “Damn, they did good work!”

The photos had come out better than Georgina could have dreamed. So rich and vivid in color, her designs looked great, and even though Lavon was a wizard at hair and makeup, she’d secretly been praying that she didn’t wind up looking like a crazy fool with the blonde wig on. But the best part of the pics was the way she and Max looked at each other. You could feel their love, and Georgina couldn’t believe she’d ever doubted him from the way he’d looked at her so early on in their relationship. “You knew back then didn’t you, babe?”

Max dropped his chin onto her head and happily surveyed the joyous celebration that was taking place in honor of their love. He no longer felt guilt over Danielle. Georgina had entered his world and filled it with light and love. Max couldn’t wait to make her his wife and practiced saying his vows in the mirror every morning. “I knew when I woke up alone in the hotel, baby. I was just waiting for your fine ass to catch up.”

“I love you, smart-ass,” she said sweetly.

“Come on, let’s go celebrate,” Max took her hand and they joined the festivities.

THE END

COMING FALL 2016

LOST & FOUND

(BAYMOOR BOOK TWO)

PLEASE SEE BELOW FOR A SNEAK PEAK!

Eliza needed a moment. Just one to herself, away from the loud music and crowd enjoying the celebration. Even though it was nine-thirty at night, the party was still going strong. People continued to stop by her aunt and uncle's house to congratulate Georgina and Max on their engagement. Eliza was so happy for her sister because Max was exactly what she needed. You could just see in Georgina's face all the love, trust, and respect she had for him. He was a really great guy, not to mention extremely easy on the eyes, and perfect for her

little sister. Just being around them made you feel good to witness their love and unbreakable bond.

Yes, her sister was indeed a lucky woman. Her relationship was the second great love story of this family. Uncle Nate and Aunt Val were definitely a tough act to follow, and at one time, she thought that she had a love like that, but she was wrong. Hers had shattered around her, the broken pieces embedded in her skin like teeny, tiny splinters that couldn't be pulled out. The agony of living with that feeling had been unbearable, but she had lived with it for six months until Camille had been placed in her arms for the first time.

Camille. She looked across the back yard to where her eight-year-old daughter sat, playing Goldfish with her Uncle Graham. Her beautiful darling girl. She had walked through fire to have her. As if he knew she would be watching, Graham looked up to meet her eyes. She shook her head slightly at his questioning look and motioned she was going outside. He nodded and went back to teasing Camille. Eliza smiled as the sounds of her daughter's delighted giggles reached across the room and wrapped around her heart.

She entered the house through the backdoor and didn't stop moving until she reached the front door, opened it and stepped out onto the empty porch. The cool air hit her, and she shivered but refused to go back in to retrieve her jacket. Instead, she went to sit on the loveseat enclosed in the shadows of Aunt Val's rose trellises and looked up at the sky. Tonight the sky was colored in various shades of blue, ranging from a baby blue to midnight. The full moon played peek-a-boo among the shifting clouds, and the stars shined brightly like diamonds.

As Eliza stared at the group of clouds hiding the moon, she thought about how good it was to be surrounded by family. In

Boston, it was only her and Camille rambling about in their big house, and her daughter had hinted on more than one occasion that she wouldn't mind moving here. They had only been in Baymoor, Maryland for only two days, but she had made several friends already at the Easter celebration Eliza had been unable to attend due to an emergency meeting at a client's house. Maybe it was time to think about it. Her family was here, and David had left her with more money than she knew what to do with. Truth be told, her architect firm could be run from anywhere.

David. God how she missed him! He had been her friend, mentor, and in the end, a great father to Camille. After his death two years ago, she became a recluse in their community, resigning from all social positions except for the kids programs that Camille was involved in.

The clouds shifted, allowing the moon its right to shine brightly, bathing all of the porch in silver light except where she sat hidden from it. The symbolic moment was not lost on her. It seemed fitting considering how she now lived her life—away from the world hidden in shadows. Eliza laughed softly, thinking that she made the perfect vampire. It hadn't always been this way, though. Once she too had been bathed in moonlight like this. Lovers light is what *he* had called it. Her soft limbs tangled with his bigger, muscular ones. Their skin covered in a fine sheen of perspiration as they flew together, soaring through the sky to land among the clouds. Suddenly she thought of that famous line from Batman.

Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight?

Oh, she had. A dance that had set her soul on fire as she twirled and whirled to the rhythm of two in sync hearts beating furiously for each other. She would never forget his devastating kisses or the way he possessed her body. Their

passion for each other had been all-consuming, and in the end, it had almost destroyed her. It was on nights like this that she thought of them together, and all that had been lost with betrayal. It had been nine years since Eliza saw him last, but every now and then she would see a man similar in build and hair color, and her heart would race. But then he would turn, and it would be a complete stranger who paled far beyond in comparison.

A car pulled up to the curb. She glanced through the bushes to see a tall, broad-shouldered man get out and start down the walkway. The clouds moved again, and all went dark. He didn't seem to be aware of her sitting still in the darkness as he moved steadily up the stairs. His cologne reached her. It was spicy and dark, shrouded in mystery just like him, and Eliza wondered if she should she say something. As he knocked on the door, the clouds shifted again. He turned to take in the moonlight, and she forgot to breathe.

The years had been good to him. He was a good-looking man. Not conventionally handsome, but he oozed sex appeal. His once shoulder-length blonde hair was now cut a little below his ears and slicked back. The brows, thick and straight, sat above intense, dark blue eyes that were closely set. His nose was strong and slightly crooked, cheekbones high. He had sensually firm lips surrounded by a dark blond, trimmed goatee. Underneath the dark suit was a body made for sinning. Her heart was beating so loudly, she thought he would be able to hear it.

He can't hurt you anymore, Eliza told herself. She was a different person now. Stronger, harder, and not so gullible. She must have made a sound because all of a sudden he was looking right where she sat with narrowed eyes. Slowly he approached, and his eyes went wide, first with recognition, followed by disbelief. She rose to her feet, tall and erect, with

her head held high, appearing calm even though her heart was racing.

Coolly, she spoke, “Hello, Wade. It’s been a long time.”