



L.R. Wards

His
Perfect
Mistress

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PROLOGUE

Theodore Blackwell looked over the edge of his paper he was reading at his son. He gave it a shake to straighten the spine after he turned the page, but left his eyes on him.

As he studied his handsome profile, a surge of pride went through him. Conner had just finished his MBA at Yale and Theo was taking him to his Chicago cooperate office which he intended his son to manage. He'd taken it upon himself to mentor his son for the first year and then it would be his. Then when his youngest son Ryan finished his degree, he intended to do the same and together both of his sons would run his multibillion dollar communications company. That is if Ryan quit his wild ways and finished school.

Conner was no angel either, but he was able to manage both a social life and completing his masters. Although he'd been schooling him since he was five in financial matters, so the MBA was a breeze for him. Of course it helped that Conner's I.Q was off the charts. Theo was certain that he was probably perfectly capable of stepping into his shoes as if he'd never left.

Conner was looking out the side window of the limousine so Theo kept eyes on him with no less than arrogant admiration in their depths knowing that he came from his loins. At twenty-five, his son was exceedingly attractive to the opposite sex, which made him know he possessed charisma as well. Even when he was a toddler, complete strangers were drawn to him, especially women. Some things didn't change. Women were still drawn to him but for entirely different reasons. That type of appeal was needed in this cutthroat business. He couldn't deny that he had a charm about him that he himself lacked. It must be inherited from his mother. That thought brought a smile to his face. Although that was all Theo would admit. He blamed his son's intelligence and good looks on himself.

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Driving to Chicago from New York was Theo's idea. There was a horse ranch that he intended to look at and wanted to buy from one of his retired cooperate lawyers as a tax write off. Also it gave him time with Conner. He wasn't getting any younger and sending the boy away to expensive boarding schools then college throughout his life made him miss him. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make for both of his sons, just so he could give them the proper education they needed. Although his wife Linda and he made sure the boys were home as often as possible, it still didn't leave much for the loneliness in their lives for their sons. Now, he was looking forward to grandchildren, but neither one of his boys were willing to settle down just yet. It was all right. He would give his oldest a few years to settle in then he would start pressuring him. Theo's and his wife's health was good, so they could wait. For now.

Conner agreed to the road trip without hesitation and Theo had hoped it was for the same reasons he had in spending time together. Conner wasn't very expressive, which was good in many ways, especially with business, yet he was always polite and respectful of his parents. He had him schooled in such a way, but he had an air of authority around him always. When he spoke, people would listen.

He watched Conner adjust his posture and flip one leg over the other resting his ankle above the knee of his other leg. He couldn't possibly look any more relaxed. As if feeling he was being watched, he adjusted his eyes to his father's and smiled when he saw him looking at him inclining his head in question.

Theo returned his smile and shook his head if it was nothing before returning his attention back to his paper.

Conner knew without question that his father was proud of him. He never said the words, but the look he'd just received was the same at the presentation of his Master's degree several weeks ago, the same when he came in first at the nationals for the two

hundred meter freestyle at twenty and when he got accepted to Yale when he was barely seventeen. There were many events like that in his life thanks to the privileged upbringing his father gave him. Now it was his turn to prove that he was worthy of stepping in his stead.

About four hours into the trip they had hit dirt roads. Barney their driver had let them know that he thought they were lost and pulled over several times to check the GPS. Theo could hear the big man swearing that they never include the back roads on the maps. Conner looked at his father sharing unspoken look and smiled.

Theo knew what this was about. Barney was talented in many ways, but driving and understanding anything electronic wasn't included. It was true the man had never been in an accident, but he came close a few times. He turned over his shoulder to speak to him, although he was amused by the man's frustration, it wasn't fair to leave him suffer. "Barney, we'll ask for directions at the next store, garage, or whomever we find first. Don't worry about it. We don't have to be in Chicago for another two days." He heard Barney grunt and push more buttons on the GPS followed by a bunch of digital blips and a sound of large granite fist hitting the consol. The man had a bit of a temper, which always amused Theo. He actually used to work for a senator as a bodyguard and was trained well in his trade. Theo hired him by offering him a ridiculous amount of money after he'd stopped a man from attacking his employer when they were at the same dinner five years ago. It impressed him enough to think he could use him. Barney was a big man, well muscled and looked like a professional wrestler at six foot six, two inches taller than Conner.

After another hour without a soul in sight, Theo heard the car sputter and Barney started swearing again.

"What is it?" Theo said over his shoulder.

“There’s steam coming out from under the hood.” Barney said from the front. “but there’s a garage up here.” He guided the car into the gravelled lot, thankful that he finally found civilization. “And it’s overheating so we might have some luck after all.”

The ‘garage’ happened to look like a dilapidated shack. It was made up with weathered cracked wood and evidence of blue paint flecks were the only indication of its original color. Over the door was a faded sign of red and white that said ‘Sam’s garage’. Off to the left was two bay garage that was pretty much the same aged wood exterior. There were old tires leaning against the side and the long grass next to it was littered with car parts and old cars long since abandoned by the weathered paint. Both doors of the garages were open and as far as anyone could see, dust covered everything.

Theo could hear Barney tapping more things up front, probably the temperature gage.

Barney turned off the car and swearing some more exited the limo after mumbling something about seeing if there was anyone alive in the shack.

Conner turned to his father suppressing a smile at Barney’s frustration, “I need to stretch my legs.” He said before he opened the door and got out. *All we need is tumbleweeds*, he thought with amusement as he adjusted the lines of his charcoal suit and glanced around his surroundings. It was warm out. Quite the contrast to the air conditioned interior of the limousine. However his surroundings interested him.

The place was a back hick town for sure. Who knew they still existed? The only sound he could hear besides the wind in the trees was the pounding of metal on metal from the open doors of the garage. Obviously they had a mechanic. He decided to follow Barney into the garage ‘shack’.

There was a barely visible sign hanging unevenly in the dust

covered window that said 'office'. Walking in, Barney was talking to a man in his mid-fifties who was wiping his greasy hands on a greasier rag. He wore old dirty blue coveralls that had stains on the knees and elbows with a few more on the chest and protruding belly along with what looked like a mustard stain. The name on the left pocket said 'Ted'.

"You're about two hundred miles from the nearest highway." Ted said looking over Barney's shoulder at Conner, while studying his expensive suit with an amused smile, "And you are a long way from the city son."

Conner nodded, "It's a side trip."

"Real sided, I see." He squinted his eyes and looked out the dusty window at the car, "Those fancy wheels aren't meant to travel these rough back roads." Just as he said it, a rusty old red ford rocketed down the road leaving a billow of road dust in its wake.

"Sir." Barney said quite indignantly. "If you can point us to the nearest Mercedes service shop..."

The man smiled, "Service shop?" He looked out the window at the car again steam still pouring out from under the hood, "That car ain't gonna make it up the road to Dolly's Diner, let alone a service shop. Look at the steam pouring out of the grill. You got a leak in the Rad."

Barney was about to give the man a piece of his mind, when Conner spoke up.

"Could you fix it?" He saw Barney's shoulders stiffen and knew he was just about at the end of his rope.

Barney swung around, "Sir, surely you don't mean for this man to touch *that* car?" he said not caring if the man was standing behind him.

Conner ignored him, "Can you?" The man behind the counter grinned, "I can't, but my mechanic can. All I do is change the oil in some vehicles, replace shocks, you know, simple

things. Charlie can fix that.” He nodded toward the car. “Although Charlie’s got Mr. Blue’s car in the garage doing a rebuilt on the engine. Stupid fool has more money than he knows what to do with, especially drivin’ that car on these shitty roads.” He continued on like Conner and Barney both knew all about Mr. Blue and his habits. “So I don’t know if there’s time for it but we can ask.”

Conner felt himself smile at the man’s overall simple personality, but he was friendly enough. “Could he possibly set aside some time fix the car? We would make it worth his while?” To his surprise the man’s smile widened like he found Conner’s statement amusing.

“You’ll have to ask Charlie. Come I’ll take you. My name is Ted, by the way.”

“Conner.” He offered hoping the man didn’t extend his hand in greeting and found it amusing that he forgotten that he wore his name on his coveralls. Thankfully he didn’t offer his hand.

“This way then.” He went through the back of the office through a door that adjoined the garage and pointed to a pair of skinny coverall covered legs sticking out from under a Jaguar.

Conner stood in stunned silence while staring at the classic sixty-seven masterpiece, “you said these cars aren’t meant to travel these roads.”

“I told you Mr. Blue has more money than he knows what to do with. Owns a big fancy horse ranch up the road. He could take the car to Chicago to get worked on, lord knows, he has enough money to do that, but he only trusts Charlie.”

Conner actually laughed at the absurd picture before him. A back hick town, a dilapidated garage and the thought of a rich man having a scrawny hillbilly work on his Jaguar. Either the mechanic was spectacular or Mr. Blue didn’t care about his Jaguar. Just then a hand came out looking for a ratchet that was close to the front tire. Ted walked over and kicked it with his

booted foot as the hand clasped around it and hauled it back under the car without a word like it was common practice.

“Charlie, there’s a man here to ask you some advice about his car.”

Conner watched grease stained petite hands reach out, grab the bumper and slide out from under the car. Everything in his body must’ve stopped at that moment, because those scrawny legs didn’t belong to a hillbilly at all.

Charlie was a *girl*.

Not just a girl, a woman. A young, stunning, woman.

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Ted said to Conner giving him a wry grin with amusement flashing in his eyes before leaving.

Charlie stood up, reached in her back pocket and pulled out a rag to wipe her hands. Then she turned her attention to the man beside her boss. Her eyes caught his expensive shoes and worked their way slowly up his four thousand dollar suit to his handsome face. He had a strong square jaw, beautifully chiselled masculine lips, strong, straight nose, and aqua blue eyes. His black hair was cropped short and perfectly around his ears without one strand out of place. At some point, she didn’t know when, she had stopped breathing as she soaked up more and more of him. She was sure that if she looked up ‘perfection’ in the dictionary his picture would be right there.

Then he smiled. It was a slow sensual smile of discovery. She felt her heart flutter in her chest as his eyes raked over her slowly. She wouldn’t have been so affected if he wasn’t so sinfully gorgeous. Yet, he was obviously just as surprised as she was and he didn’t seem disappointed in the least that she wasn’t a male which was common when a stranger brought their car in for repairs. When his eyes settled on her face, they lingered at her lips for a moment before he locked gazes with her. She saw the unmistakable glint of approval in his sapphire stare causing her mouth to momentarily go dry.

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Fearing her heart would suddenly stop causing her to faint she spoke to break the tension allowing a small smile “You expected a man.” Surprisingly her voice was steady in sharp contrast to the shakiness she was dealing with on the inside. He stood there with his hands thrust into his dress pants pockets looking at ease in such filthy surroundings with a pose that oozed enough confidence that the dust in this place wouldn’t dare settle on him.

“I expected a man.” He mimicked her statement with amusement. What he got was the most adorable looking female he’d ever seen. Her body was petite, but even in the blue grease splotched coveralls he could see the flare of her hips, tiny waist and the defines of an ample bosom. Her face was another story. She wasn’t just pretty, she was beautiful. A smudge of grease was on her nose and left cheek. Her full, lush lips were the color of pale roses and complimented a heart shaped face. Her eyes were large, green and framed by delicately arched brows and thick lashes and eyed him with a concealed intelligence. Her hair was an unusual shade of what he decided was strawberry blonde, completely natural in color, and when she turned to set tuck her rag on a table, he saw that it was pulled back into a pony tail that trailed halfway down her back. It was obvious she was young, but she held her head with an unusual self-assurance unbecoming of her young age and met his gaze unwavering. “You’re the mechanic?”

“Born and bred.” She answered with a slight smile turning back to him.

“How old are you?” This brought a laugh. A laugh that told him she got that often.

“Eighteen.” She eyed him with amused curiosity.

Too young, he near groaned. “Mr. Blue seems to have faith in your abilities.” He nodded toward the Jaguar, “or does he not care about his car?” To his surprise she wasn’t offended. Instead

she gave him that simple smile again that seemed to say, ‘I’ll humour him’.

“Mr. Blue, does care about his car, that is why I’m the only one allowed to work on it.”

“What do you know about a sixty-eight Jaguar?” He asked. She tilted her head a bit and her smile grew causing twin dimples to appear on either side of her lovely creamy cheeks. Just when he thought she couldn’t appeal to him any more she did that. *She’s too young*, he told himself, *way too young*. It was too bad his body didn’t understand that.

“Sixty-seven.” She offered near laughing as he tested her knowledge of cars.

Conner laughed, “Just checking.” He knew it was a sixty-seven jag, he loved classic cars.

“Sure you were. Now if you’re done quizzing me, show me your car Mr...?”

“Conner.”

“Mr. Conner.”

“Just Conner. I was just making sure that I wasn’t letting a high-school cheerleader near my father’s quarter of a million dollar car.” He looked down at her waiting for her sharp response and he got one.

She nodded, “Well, Conner...” She walked over to the garage door and looked at the car that was steaming in the lot while placing her hands on the curve of her hips. “first of all, if that car cost your father a two hundred and fifty, he got screwed. That’s not a car over two hundred. Second of all, I’m not in high school. I’m in my second year of college.” She cast him another pretty smile, “I graduated high school two years early. And,” she added with an irresistible dimpled smile and a knowing glint in her eyes, “I never liked cheerleading. Somehow bouncing on the sideline in front of several dozen testosterone filled boys, never appealed to me.”

He barked with laughter. “All right, point taken. I will not judge a book by its cover. Would you please see if you could fix it?”

“Delighted.” She said cheerfully and walked toward the car.

He watched her thoughtfully. There was an elegant sway to her hips and her pony tail emulated the right-left motion right along with them. He sighed, *too bad she was only eighteen.*

Barney had just lifted the hood when Charlie approached and shot her a startled look before quickly looking over her head to Conner who shook his subtly as Barney opened his mouth to protest.

Conner then watched that pretty little thing bend over the chrome grill and stick her hands down in the engine compartment to the point where he could see the graceful curve of her tight little ass. He had all kinds of lewd images of him and her go through his mind with that position and he had to look away before the physical evidence on him started to appear. What the hell was he thinking? She was eighteen and he was twenty-five. One thing he didn't do was play with little girls even if the little girl was a woman in body and mind. Before long she erected herself and turned to him.

“It's a hose. Easy fix. Leave it with me for the night.”

Barney began to sputter a protest but Conner raised his hand to stop him, “Is there a motel around these parts because I'm positive a courtesy car is out of the question.”

She shook her head laughing, like his question was absurd. “No, but I can set you up at Mr. Blue's for the night. He's got a fancy house about five miles down the road, with lots of rooms. He won't mind the company at all.”

“You're sure? He won't mind?”

“No, he'd love the company. I stay there. I'll take you guys out to the ranch, just give me a minute to tell Ted I'm leaving and phone Mr. Blue to let him know he'll be having company to

dinner.” She turned around to look at Barney. “Pull the car into the garage and take what you need out of it for tonight. I’ll come back and work on it this evening.”

Barney looked at him in disbelief and Conner just nodded, “Do as she says.” He watched Charlie walk back to the office as she was unzipping her coveralls when he heard his father get out of the car and looked at him over the top of it.

“Conner, tell me that pretty young thing isn’t the mechanic!”

Conner laughed and nodded while his father’s expression turned incredulous. “Born and bred.” He said using Charlie’s words.

Before Theo could ask Conner any more about the young woman, a roar of an engine caught his attention as an old Willy’s Jeep tore around the front of the garage and stopped with a flare of dust beside the limo.

He watched the young woman get out, minus the coveralls, now wearing faded cut-off jean shorts and a pink t-shirt. One thing was for certain, he was a good judge of a woman’s body even through grimy coveralls because she was just as exquisite as he thought she would be. Her legs were fantastic, slightly tanned, perfectly shaped and long. Her breasts were more than a handful and strained against the worn t-shirt almost begging to be released from the cotton prison. She opened the back of the jeep and told Barney to put what they needed in there for the night while Conner continued to study her body. She said she wasn’t a cheerleader, but she certainly had a shape of one.

Theo turned to Conner with a look of disbelief on his face and spoke low enough so only he could hear him, “You are sure that she’s the Mechanic? She looks like a model for playboy.”

Conner nodded with a glint of laughter in his eyes. “Isn’t she something?”

“Conner?” Theo said doubtfully as Barney and she started arguing about the handling of the luggage and how to load it in

the small space of the back of the jeep.

“Don’t worry, she’s perfectly capable.” He leaned in the car and got his briefcase, “by the way. She says you paid too much for this car.” He cast over his shoulder as he walked around to the jeep.

Theo followed him, “She said what?” He caught up with him, “How much was too much?”

It turned out Paul Blue was the man that Theodore was looking for. When Charlie pulled her jeep up in front of the two story colonial style mansion he was already waiting on the steps.

“Theo! What an interesting set of circumstances.”

“You’re telling me.” He got out of the jeep as if he was grateful for solid ground and shook hands with Paul. “This is my son Conner.”

Paul shook his hand with a warm smile, “I’ve heard plenty about you. Is it true, your father is letting you run Chicago?”

“Apparently.” Conner smiled as he shook the man’s hand.

Paul turned his attention to Charlie while Barney unloaded their luggage. “You should stay for dinner. Marg is making dumplings, your favourite.”

Conner turned to see Charlie give him a generous grin. He was intrigued by this young woman. He tried to talk to her a few times over the ten minute ride, but from the roar of the motor in the interior of the old jeep, she couldn’t hear him well. Not only that, they were hanging on to anything they could get their hands on. She drove like she was possessed.

“Hmmm Dumplings? I really shouldn’t, I promised Conner, I’d have their car ready tomorrow morning.”

Conner watched her thoughtfully, “I’m sure my father wouldn’t mind if we feed the mechanic just to give our car extra attention.”

Theo watched the exchange with interest before he

answered, “No, of course not. You should eat Miss...”

“My name is Charlie.”

“You are named after a boy?” Theo said with surprise.

She laughed while nodding, “My father wanted a boy. I assure you it’s not short for Charlene, Charmane or anything like that. Although having one girl seemed to grow on him. I have two older brothers.”

“Just be glad that you weren’t born a boy and your father wanted a girl.” Conner offered. She answered him without skipping a beat.

“I am. He probably would have named me Sally after my mother.”

He found himself laughing again.

“Come on in.” Paul said, “dinner’s just about ready. Ida, my housekeeper will show you to your rooms.”

Conner found Paul Blue to be quite a likable host. He was married once with no children, and was a retired corporate lawyer. Unlike most lawyers Conner knew, Paul retained his sense of humour. He devoted his retirement to raising racing thoroughbreds and Conner didn’t remember laughing so much as he had with Charlie. Even his own father was showing his humour. The girl was quite articulate and highly intelligent despite her age. Paul Blue spoke highly of her, right in front of her. Conner found himself becoming more and more intrigued as the evening wore on.

After he’d gone and changed into a white t-shirt and a pair of Levis he found himself searching for Charlie. He knew he should leave this alone, but he was intrigued about this young woman and actually wanted to get to know her better.

When he found her, she was settled in a porch swing with her feet resting on the railing crossed at the ankles giving him a view of her long slender legs. She was staring out into the rolling hills and sipping an ice tea. Conner shut the sliding doors

causing her to turn her head toward him. “Wow, now you look like one of us.” She looked over his attire trying not to pause suspiciously on what defined him as masculine. *God damn he looked good*, she thought turning her head back to the scenery, not missing the bulge in his jeans or the expanse of his chest and arms under his shirt. He must work out, because a desk job wouldn’t gain a body like that.

“Do you come here often?” He teased.

She laughed, “Yes, actually. I live in the guest house across the lake.” She nodded toward structure reflected off the water a short distance away.

He saw the small two story house that was a miniature of the one they stood at now. “Wow, very nice.” She shrugged as he walked toward her. “Mind if I sit.”

She shook her head and moved over while trying to keep her facial expression polite despite the pounding of the heart in her chest. This man was so undeniably gorgeous and she knew his nearness would only expound her attraction to him.

“Is Paul a relative?”

She turned and looked at him. Her intelligent eyes studied his features for a moment and her expression grew serious, “I’m not sleeping with him Conner.”

It surprised him that she figured out his hidden question. He couldn’t deny that he wasn’t thinking it, but why else would an eighteen year old girl be living with a fifty some year old man with no ties. “Sorry.” Even though she knew he thought it, she wasn’t offended.

“I get that often.” She said and returned her gaze to the scenery, “That’s why I refer to him as Mr. Blue. If I called him by his first name people would think I knew him on an intimate basis. People in small towns spread gossip quicker than the wind blows.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Charlie, it’s not common you see this type of arrangement

without some sort of..."

"Sexual favour?" She finished for him.

"Are you sure you're eighteen?" This brought a smile to her face and he felt relieved that he hadn't offended her. Normally he wasn't so pushy, but she intrigued him.

"I get that often too." She was glad he thought she was more mature than her age. *Maybe, just maybe*, she thought.

"I'm curious though, Charlie. How did you come to know Paul Blue?"

"Paul liked my father. He was the former mechanic on his Jag. They became good friends. There were many times my father would come here for dinner, play cards, and maybe share a bottle of that disgustingly aged brandy Paul drinks. When he died, he told him he'd take care of me. Not many people know that Paul was born here. He may be a rich lawyer now, but he was poor like my family. That's about all there is."

He raised his brows, "All?"

She smiled again, "Well, that and I'm the only one he'll let near his vintage Jaguar."

His curiosity peaked, "That leads me to another question. Where the hell did you learn about cars?"

"Two older brothers and a father." She smiled at his interest in her unusual ability.

"They were mechanics?"

"No, my father was. Taught us everything he knew. My oldest brother is at UCLA, football scholarship. My second oldest is doing a tour in Iraq."

"They left you to fend for yourself?"

"No, they left me with Mr. Blue." She defended, "It's not as bad as you think. We grew up with one parent. My mother took off when I was three. My father worked at the garage I work at. He used to take me to work with him, Ted didn't mind, because we couldn't afford a sitter. So I guess you could say I was raised

under a car. It's not like I'm a stranger to looking after myself." She said with a little defensiveness.

"I didn't mean to pry." Conner was raised with privilege and wealth and although his father gave heavily to several charities, it still never occurred to him how hard people like Charlie had it. Yet, she seemed quite happy and content with her circumstances and was making the most of it. Conner too worked very hard to achieve his goals. He didn't act like a spoiled son of a billionaire, but he obviously had a lot to learn about the other side of the tracks. Still, he couldn't help but admire her.

Her voice softened, "It's alright. It's not often I explain my life to someone. Not everyone has had an easy life, but my father did the best he could for me and there's not one thing I regret."

He decided to change the subject because it really wasn't like him to ask personal questions about someone he'd just met. Most women he knew blurting things out about themselves without waiting for his interest, but he realized now that Charlie was full of humility. "So what are you taking in College...what's your major?"

She grinned, "Prelaw."

"Really? Corporate?" he said with piqued interest.

"Why do you ask?" she raised her delicate lovely brows, "Are you offering me a job when I'm done?"

"Well, if it's a sign that you're as good as a lawyer as you are a mechanic, or if you drive like you cross examine. I might be." He stretched his arm behind her and set his long legs on the rail next to hers. "Which law schools did you apply to?"

"A few." She could feel the heat of his arm on her neck and was surprised at the tingling it caused.

"Any acceptances?"

"A few." She cast him a sideways glance almost embarrassed.

"Charlie?" he said in a way that he knew she was holding

something back.

She shrugged.

“You’re so modest honey—spill it.”

“Okay. I got accepted to Harvard last week.” She blushed a little. The use of an endearment caught her off guard. She liked it—a lot.

He didn’t doubt it for some reason. “Congratulations.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Should I be?”

She shrugged again.

They stared at the scenery again not saying anything for a long time.

“Conner?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you married?”

“*God* no.” He said abruptly causing her to laugh.

“It figures. I bet you play the field....a lot.” She said unabashed while letting her eyes glide over his form. She tried not to imagine his body naked, but God how could you not? There were bulging muscles everywhere on him. He was athletic, it was easy to see because her brother was an athlete and he had the same sort of build.

“I’m not discussing my sex life with a teenager.” He said with amusement casting her a sideways look from the beautiful view.

“I bet they line up at your door and I’m no more a teenager than you are married.”

“Charlie.” He warned with humour, “I’m still not discussing it...and you are.” He added finally turning his head so he could look at her. It was hard to because his eyes kept running over her exquisite form with more interest than he could keep out of them which is why he stared out to the open fields.

She waved a hand, “Around here, most girls my age are

already married with a kid on the way and one their hip already, or just a kid on the way. I'm old enough to know about sex. I have two older brothers. Women lined up at their doors when they hit puberty."

He threw back his head and laughed.

She felt his arm brush against the back of her neck when he did that causing her to stifle a gasp and her heart to skip a beat. If the heat of his body and the incredible way he looked didn't hypnotize her, his laugh definitely did the trick. "And you are much better looking than they are. So I can only imagine how long the line is."

"You are very brash." He chuckled not even affected by her compliment. Conner knew how he looked to the opposite sex and he had the track record to prove it, but he still appreciated a flattering remark from a beautiful woman when it was offered.

"Brothers." She offered as an excuse seeming unfazed by shrugging her shoulders again

"I see." He looked her over with interest, "And did your brothers educate you on the finer points of attraction?" somehow her confession made him look at her in the way he was trying to avoid earlier. She very sexy besides beautiful and why the hell shouldn't he let her know that?

His scrutinizing stare caused and her stomach to flip-flop, "Yes and no."

"What exactly does that mean?"

She set her glass down on the wicker table beside the swing, and turned to him, "There were a few boys interested in me in high school, but for some reason after my brothers spoke to them about their intentions, they were not longer interested."

He felt there was more to this story, "And...?"

"They usually accompanied a talk with a black eye or two." She grinned. "But just think, if they didn't, I'd be one of those married ones."

Good for me. As quick as he thought it, he stifled a curse reminding himself how young she was. “So, you aren’t allowed to date.”

“Well, I can now, but between finishing college and working. I just don’t have time.” She eyed him up, “So how young is too young for you?”

He was speechless at her candour. He was thinking it, but she had the balls to say it. There was no denying that he wanted her, but eighteen was way too young, even one who was mature beyond her years, “Look me up in a few years.” He noticed that she didn’t seem to put out by his answer. Instead she just looked at him with those big emerald eyes and slowly nodded as if she expected that answer from him.

“I might just do that Conner.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

A smile pulled at the corner of her mouth, “Nice way to let down the little girl.”

If she only knew. Unfortunately she wasn’t able to keep the disappointment out of her voice this time and it made him feel guilty. “Charlie, like you said, you are no more a little girl than I am married, but I have some scruples, although not many where woman are concerned, but deflowering a teenager is not on my list.” He liked her, no, more than liked her. By the tightening of his abdomen and heat in his groin, he was sexually attracted to her like fish to water, but she was off limits. In the last five minutes, he must’ve imagined her naked a hundred times writhing beneath him especially when she roamed those large green eyes over his torso several times with naked desire in their depths. It near made him grab her hand and take her to that little house across the lake and make love to her all night, but like he said, she was a virgin and he didn’t deflower virgins.

“It’s that obvious?” she said not denying it.

“Blatantly.” He drawled dropping his gaze to her luscious

mouth and back up again. She didn't seem to notice.

She sighed, "So, you're saying I need to be worldly before you'd consider going out with me. That's kind of odd. From what I hear about the possessive streak in men, they would prefer not to have their woman touched by another man."

He near groaned as images of touching her came to his mind, "Not so. I like a woman with experience."

She laughed, "A well used woman? There's a few of them around here, I mean, there's Rhoda...she gets used several times a day by the men because she's a...."

"...Don't say it!" he quickly cut her off, but then saw the look of amusement on her face and knew she was teasing him. "There's a difference between a used woman and an experienced woman."

"So you're saying you want me to play the field before you'd consider me?"

"That sounds cheap Charlie. It's not quite what I meant." He frowned looking down at her.

She laughed again, "I know what you meant...don't get snippety." She grinned up at him, causing him to finally smile, "I may look you up several years from now, but that won't change the difference in our ages. Not only that, I'll still be as belligerent and stubborn as I am now. Maybe even worse." She nudged him with her elbow causing him to widen his smile to a grin, "Maybe you should take advantage of a sweet little thing like me." She watched his face change from amusement to something she didn't recognize. She thought it might be anger, but when he reached over and cupped her chin to tilt her face up toward him, she realized it wasn't.

Conner knew she was inexperienced, but it was only a kiss. At least that's what he tried to tell himself, but the kiss sent raging desire through him. It was her fault for goading him into it. Although she had a valid point. She was a sweet little thing

and everything about her was sweet. His mouth covered hers with a gentle possession and it was then that he realized that she had never even been kissed before. Her inexperienced mouth remained closed like she was kissing a relative. This wouldn't do. He wanted to taste her, all of her, like a man should taste a woman.

He brought his hand to her slender jaw line and applied slight pressure with his thumb, "Open your mouth Charlie." He whispered against her lips brushing them with his as he spoke. She did, and he ran his tongue along their fullness, not too hurried to plunge into the hot depth of her mouth yet until she responded so as not to frighten her. Surprisingly, it only took her the fraction of the time he expected when he felt her arms around his neck crushing her lips to his. His hand guided through her hair at the back of her head to manipulate her mouth on his. His other slid down her to the small of her back and pulled her closer. Her body felt divine against his. Soft, supple and inviting with her breasts against his hard chest. Then he opened his mouth more against hers causing her to instinctively do the same and touched his tongue to hers. She moaned against him and he tightened his hold and began to caress her a little more than he should. His hand came up between them and cupped one of her full breasts, while rubbing his thumb over her nipple causing to immediately respond to him and harden. Suddenly, he remembered himself and pulled her away from him, "No, Charlie, we can't..." he said in a rush of air while pulling back and gently removing her arms from his neck. The look in her eyes was still urging him to continue, "I can't. It's not fair to you."

"Let me be the judge of that." She confessed still wanting him. The things he did to her and evoked in her were beyond description and she wanted more. She could still feel the imprint of his hand on her chest and his mouth on hers.

He shook his head slowly, "I shouldn't have let it get that far,

but the things you say, made me forget who you were for a moment.”

She turned her gaze away.

“Charlie, it has nothing to do with you. I find you very desirable in every way a man finds a woman, but this can’t happen and I gave you my reasons.” She nodded, but still didn’t look at him. “Charlie?” She finally did turn her face up to him.

“I’m fine Conner.” She said forcing a smile to hide her disappointment.

“You will make a good lawyer someday.” He said softly.

“What brought that up?”

“You lie very well.” She smiled.

“Thank you.” She said with a small smile, not denying it.

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, “I must admit, you certainly kiss like a woman, and you learn fast.” *And your body responds to me like a woman’s*, he added to himself.

“You are definitely all male.” She added without hesitation as her eyes guided to the bulge now evident in his jeans.

“Hell Charlie, is there anything about you that acts eighteen?” He choked out huskily, near grabbing her again with thoughts of throwing her down on the swing. She was young, and a virgin, and they way he was sexually would definitely be too much for her. Being a man in his sexual prime, he was lusty, aggressive, uncommitted and had a healthy appetite. This sweet little thing wouldn’t have a chance.

“What’s the point of beating around the bush?” She drank the last of the ice tea in her glass and stood up not seeing his eyes avert to her bottom. She was leaving, he was driving her crazy and she had to get away from him. “I may be young, but I know from the first moment I met you, that you’re not the type of man that likes frivolous talk. I’m an honest person Conner,” she grinned, “I don’t like frivolities either. So I’m going to bid you good evening. I need to get back to the garage and finish working

on your car” *and have a cold shower*, “so you can leave in the morning.” She turned and went to the door, and opened it, “But just so you know. I *might* look you up in a few years.” She shut the door behind her.

Conner shook his head and groaned. It was a shame she wasn’t a few years older. That young woman was definitely well developed for her age. The thought brought a wave of desire through him. *Too young*, he reminded himself trying to squelch it, she was way too young. Beautiful, she was very beautiful. In a few years she would be a force to be reckoned with. Now, she was almost impossible to resist. His eyes guided down to the bulge straining against the denim at his crotch thinking that she certainly was a sensual woman already. Hell he had satisfaction last night before his father picked him up and this is how he reacted to her? Christ, she’d conquer the male species in a few years.

Part of him hoped that she would look him up then just to see how she’d turned out. Now he had his own response to be bothered with. The woman could instil an erection in him as easy as the setting sun.

After four hours of sleeplessness, and staring at the ceiling in his room, Conner swore and sat up on the side of the bed and rubbed his face with his hands. His window faced the house across the lake and he could see a light on and wondered if she was having the same problem.

The next morning the car was sitting in the driveway and there was no sign of Charlie. He thought about going over to the garage to say goodbye, but it would have been unfair to her. Not only that, he had a cooperation to learn and run and that should be his priority, not a woman he just met and hardly knew. Still, he couldn’t stop the feeling of disappointment over not seeing her.

“Something wrong son?” his father asked once they were

settled back in the limousine and on their way.

“No.” he answered immediately.

“She was cute.”

Conner grinned. His dad had more insight than people gave him credit for. It’s what led to his success. “Young.” He countered.

“Your mother is twenty years younger than me.”

“She’s eighteen.”

“Oh hell, sorry.” Ted offered. That was barely out of school. She just acted older than that. Well, now that he thought about it, she did look quite young.

He shrugged not saying anything more about it.

Ted eyed him for a moment longer before he returned his attention to the paper that was left on the seat from the day before. If Conner didn’t want to talk about it, he wouldn’t push him.

CHAPTER ONE:

Six years later

It was two o’clock in the morning when the phone rang rousing Conner out of a sound sleep.

“Conner, who is that?” Came a feminine voice beside him

He looked at the caller I.D. and groaned. It was a familiar number. He picked up the phone and said groggily, “Hello.”

“Conner, I’ve been arrested.”

“Again?” he didn’t sound surprised. His younger brother phoned him on a regular basis when he got drunk and ended up in jail.

“You’ve got to help me.”

“Phone dad.”

“I can’t, he refuses to answer my calls anymore.”

Conner sighed as he sat up on the edge of his bed naked, and

ran his hand through his hair.

“Conner?”

“All right, how serious is it?” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Ryan, do I need to call a lawyer?”

“It would probably be a good idea.”

Conner swore, “Did you kill someone?”

“Not quite.”

He paused and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips, “Ah hell.”

“I’m sorry Conner.”

“Save it! I’ll be down in a few hours.” He gritted out angrily and hung up the phone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...” Shit, he forgot the woman’s name. She seemed to sense it.

“Janelle.” She said, insulted.

“Sorry.” Normally his memory was impeccable, but he was worried about Ryan despite his outward anger.

She got out of bed and began to dress, “I should have known better.”

Within five minutes she was gone. He was relieved, he didn’t like waking up next to women anyway, and always made a point of leaving early for work or have his car take them home. This was a routine he was well used to. He worked heavily and what play time he had wasn’t worth bragging about. He still made sure he stayed in shape like he did in college, but a relationship was impossible. His lifestyle didn’t allow it. He was a workaholic. Most of his acquaintances knew that, well, maybe except for Janelle. He worked until ten o’clock the night before and stopped by a local pub for a drink with his VP of finance when he met her. After a few more drinks, they ended up back at

his place in bed where he got rid of a lot of the daytime stress.

That wasn't uncommon for him. He knew his looks and his charm were successful at just about getting any woman he wanted and if that didn't work his wealth did. Only it was getting tiresome.

He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, now Ryan was in trouble—again. It wasn't even daylight and he already knew it would be a busy one.

He picked up the phone and dialled one of his lawyers. Darren would know the name of a good criminal lawyer or put him in contact with one who would.

An hour and a half later Charlie walked into the police station and unknown to her many of the men stopped what they were doing to peer at the strawberry blond in the light grey knee high skirt, matching blazer and pink blouse.

She received a phone call from one of her firm's major partners at three in the morning asking her to help out a very important client of a good friend of his. She knew this was important if one of the top men phoned her at home. She downed several cups of coffee before she left her apartment. She had worked late the night before and was exhausted, but she said she'd do it. It was obviously very important, and she'd take any opportunity she could to impress her superiors, because she was ambitious and had her eye on a junior partnership.

She made her way to the counter and introduced herself. The man behind the counter practically jumped out of his chair and led her to her client.

"The suspect's lawyer is here." He said to the men inside the cool grey room.

When the door opened she saw a ragged, yet handsome man sitting with his hand cuffed to a chair and two detectives sitting across from him. She looked around at the three without a stitch

of emotion reaching her expression, “You may stop interrogating my client gentlemen, he did ask for a lawyer, and anything that he has revealed to you in the time that he had asked for one, and the time I arrived, is inadmissible.”

The two men glared at her and stood to walk by her out of the room.

“Before you leave, you need to uncuff my client.”

The older of the two men, a balding man in his mid-fifties with a bit of a belly paused and said, “He nearly killed a guy and you want to be left alone with him?”

She levelled her stare on his, “My client was drunk at the time, and is not prone to violence until tonight. I assure you that he will be out of here in the hour, and I am perfectly safe with this man so unless you’re pressing charges for an obvious self defence case, uncuff him.”

He glared at her and did as she asked.

She took the seat opposite of him, “Ryan Blackwell?”

The man managed to allow a grin spread across his face as his eyes dipped over her, “My brother works really fast.”

Charlie kept her expression strictly professional. Ryan was very nice looking but she was his lawyer and he was obviously still a little inebriated. “I was hired by Obsidian industries to help you. I assure you I don’t know your brother. However, I need to know what happened to you, and then we’ll see about getting you out of here before the sun rises.”

This sobered him a bit, “What can I tell you?”

“Everything. And don’t leave anything out. I will know if you’re lying.” She shot him a warning look.

Ryan didn’t hesitate and began to tell her the events of the night.

Of course it was over a woman. Despite the beginnings of a black eye, he was handsome. Something about him looked vaguely familiar too, but she couldn’t quite capture the feeling it

gave her. She took extensive notes while that niggled her. Thankfully she was really good at multitasking because it was almost to the point of being distracting.

She was true to her word and had him out of the station before sunrise. Daylight just started to crest the sky as they walked down the steps together as a stretched limo pulled up.

“This is my ride.” he said sheepishly looking at the outrageously dark grey stretched car with the windows tinted black. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants, “Can I give you a ride home.”

“No thanks.” She replied unfazed by the car because she’d learned from an early age to stay focused on the task at hand, “I’ll talk to the D.A later this afternoon and get those charges dropped. You stay out of trouble.” She was faintly aware of the man that got out of the car and held the door open, but Ryan was standing in her way cutting off her view. The man’s voice was angry. “Ryan get in the car!”

Ryan was unaffected, like this happened a lot. “Thanks for your help Miss Murphy.” He took her hand for a moment before turning and getting in the car.

“Charlie?” It took Conner less than three seconds to recognize the radiant young woman when Ryan moved out of the way, “I don’t believe it!”

Charlie turned to see Conner just shutting the door of the car purposely just as Ryan was about to say something else.

“I’ll be damned; it is you, isn’t it?” He said enthusiastically. He saw confusion then a warmth of recognition in her eyes before she gave him a ravishing grin.

She stepped up to him and held out her hand, “I never put the two of you together. I should have recognized the name Blackwell.” She laughed.

He took her hand and shook it before letting it go. He really wanted to hug her, *God, Look at her,* he thought, *she was*

radiant. “A criminal lawyer? What happened to corporate?”

“Change of heart. Mr. Blue told me it was boring trivial work. That it wasn’t suited to my personality.” She laughed.

“You work for Chester and Wyncot?” he couldn’t help but give her one of his rakish grins. Her laugh was infectious.

“Started about six months ago. They must’ve seen something that impressed them.”

I’ll bet, he thought to himself while secretly looking her over, from her shapely legs to the hint of cleavage from the open vee in her blouse. He certainly was impressed.

“How is your father?” She asked with genuine curiosity.

“Working himself to death. Same man.”

“Do you see him often?”

“Only when he shows up unannounced to make sure I’m running his corporation his way.”

She smiled at him. “So Conner *are* you married yet?”

He laughed, “God no!” It was the same conversation they had had six years ago. He watched her smile, seeming pleased with his response.

“They still lining up at your door?” She said with a sly smile.

“As far as they can.” He answered. “And you?”

“Date a woman lawyer? Not a chance.” Causing him to laugh.

“Not married either.”

“God no!” she added with the same feeling he had, teasing him.

“Boyfriend.”

“No time. Girlfriend?”

“Several.” He said with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“I’m not surprised.” She figured as much. He was more handsome than she remembered. Five years only added to his charisma and his magnetic sex appeal. He did look older in some aspects but still had that beautiful boyish grin. There was some

grey in his hair above the ears, and some deepening laugh lines around his eyes, but other than that, he was still absolutely gorgeous.

“Charlie?”

“Yes.” She near stuttered at the use of her name with his deep sexy voice.

“Do you remember what you said to me six years ago?”

She grinned, “Of course.” She couldn’t believe he remembered and if he kept grinning at her, she felt her knees would buckle.

“Well it is several years later. You haven’t looked me up.” He said huskily while his eyes went to her lips.

Oh God he remembered that night. She really didn’t expect him to with his reputation, and she really couldn’t blame him. She was young and threw herself at him when she was eighteen. She was sure he’d had plenty of women since then that made that incident obsolete. Still she couldn’t ignore the familiar heat that stirred in her pelvis over seeing him again. Before she gave away her inner turmoil, she quickly recovered, “I couldn’t get through the throng of women. It’s like trying to compete in the running of the bulls right down to the sharp horns.” This time he laughed.

“It’s not that bad.”

“Liar.” She mused. It only took her a moment to realize what he was saying after being distracted by his heated gaze. She stared at him for a moment. Then she reached into her blazer pocket and pulled out a card, “Okay, maybe you can see through the crowd of groupies and give me a call.” She was deliberately putting the next move in his court. She shouldn’t be doing this. She knew his reputation with women, but she couldn’t deny that she was still utterly attracted to him. Although she acted collected around him she was anything but. Her knees went weak and her heart pounded in her chest when he smiled at her.

She watched him take the card and flip it over. Then he reached into his suit jacket and pulled out what looked like a gold pen and clicked it.

He lifted his brow and poised the pen over the card, “Cell phone?”

She felt a thrill go through her. She had given him her business card and he noticed that her personal number wasn't on it. She took her time telling him so she didn't seem too anxious. He still managed to make her feel like the eighteen year old she was when she met him for the first time. She watched him put his pen away and tuck the card with it.

“I've got to go.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek without her permission. He knew she wouldn't protest. Call it an excessive ego, or whatever, but he knew Charlie was attracted to him from the smile she'd just given him, “It was really nice seeing you again.” His face hovered near hers for a moment and she could feel his breath against her cheek when he spoke. Then he turned and got in the car, but not before giving her another good look and letting a smile loose.

“Jesus Conner, she's my lawyer and I saw her first.” Ryan said after he noticed the exchange between the two, and it was obvious he'd gotten her phone number.

“Shut up Ryan, you're lucky I don't kick the shit out of you. Not only that, she's way too classy for you and I actually saw her first. She's mine.”

Ryan smiled at his brother's threat. He may have been the fighter in the family but Conner wasn't a pushover. Their father made sure both brother's were trained well to look after themselves from the day they could walk, “So what makes you sure she wants you?”

Conner lifted a brow.

“Hell, you are a conceited bastard.” He said laughing.

“No more than you.” He countered resisting a smile. He was

still angry at him over this recent incident.

“Conner, you need to learn to relax. Dad works you too hard and I’m not quite ready for that life yet.”

He shook his head, “Dad doesn’t make me do anything, and I relax Ryan. Maybe not in the stupid ways you chose, but I do.”

His comment didn’t even affect him. He knew that Conner was just showing his concern even if he didn’t approve of what he did. Maybe he was right in many ways and one of these days he was going to take on too much and get hurt. He leaned back in his seat and eyed his older brother with the same keen Blackwell intelligence that Conner possessed in his pale stare, “You know he’s going to be pressing you for grandchildren soon.”

Conner just nodded. He knew his father as well as Ryan did.

“My point is, you’re not even close to settling down.”

He tilted his head at him, “That subject isn’t even open for discussion.”

Ryan chuckled and tossed a thumb over his shoulder to the direction they just came from, “That tasty little piece would give dad some gorgeous grandchildren.”

Inside Conner heated up in anger, but he kept his expression free of any indication. It wasn’t the comment itself because Charlie was tasty looking, it was the indication that Ryan seemed a little interested in her.

“If she looked at me like she looked at you a minute ago, I’d jump at the chance—“

“Like I said.” He interrupted, “The subject is closed.”

“Man, you are a sour one today, aren’t you?”

“First of all, Charlie doesn’t need to be spoken about like that in any event. Secondly, she’s not even a consideration in your arrogant head because I already told you that she was mine. Thirdly, it’s barely six in the morning and I missed my run because I’m picking my brother up at the police station.” He cocked his head, “—again.”

“She’s not like your other women Conner.” Ryan said ignoring the third comment. She wasn’t the least bit vain; even he could see that easily enough. It wasn’t that Ryan was judging Conner, because he was just as shallow as his brother was when it came to a beautiful woman but this one was a working woman and very intelligent.

“I’m sending you home to Dad.” He said with a pointed stare not touching that statement at all. Ryan was right but Charlie was special to him already even though he wasn’t sharing that information with his brother.

“Screw that!”

“You are going back to school, you are going to finish your education, and you will stay away from liquor and women.” He added.

“Come on Conner, just because you never cut loose every now and then, doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“You’re twenty two. Time to grow up.”

“That’s bullshit.” He said glaring at him. He should have known better than tease him. Obviously Charlie Murphy was a sensitive subject with Conner.

CHAPTER TWO

Charlie’s personal assistant Marianne Leasburg opened the door to her office conference room while Charlie was pouring over files with her team. A son of a wealthy client had been caught with a hefty amount of cocaine on him when he was pulled over for drinking and driving. Not only that, the idiot had the audacity to strike one of the officers. Edward Wyncot had asked her to handle the case and assigned her a team. This was her opportunity to shine and show her boss that she could handle an important case.

She was tired because of the early morning, but again, she needed to show that she could handle it all.

“Miss Murphy, there’s a...” she paused slightly looking at the others around the table with awe and amusement in her eyes, “Conner Blackwell on line two.”

Charlie, who was engrossed in a file, suddenly lifted her head. She caught herself in time not to show the shock on her face.

“*The* Conner Blackwell?” Said John Steadman, one of her legal assistants.

“I think so.” Marianne said with a smile.

“*The* multi-billionaire’s son?” he added with further disbelief.

Marianne nodded

Charlie stood, trying not to look to anxious, “I’ll take it in my office.”

“Of course you will,” Said Marianne with a knowing smile and a wink at the other two while Charlie walked stoically out of the room as if this was a common every day event that a gorgeous tycoon called her personally.

Linda Hayes, was another attorney recently hired with Chester and Wyncott watched her receding backside with a look of awe. Although she was several years older than Charlie, she soon discovered why Edward put Charlie in charge of the case. In a nutshell, the woman was brilliant. Not only did she dazzle all the men on the jury with her unimaginable good looks, she cross examined like a wildcat. After Linda had overcome the jealousy toward Charlie, she ended up really liking her. She was kind, besides brilliant, and self-confident. It was like the young woman had no flaws. Then she later found out from John that Charlie didn’t just graduate in the top percentile of her class, but she was *the* top of her class from Harvard no less! The only reason John knew was because he was the great nephew of

Edward Wyncot and was working as a paralegal for the summer, before he returned to law school in the fall. Edward had told him of Charlie's accomplishments when he protested being put on a team of a woman that was younger than him. After he had gotten to know Charlie, like everyone else, his attitude changed. Now he was quite protective of her. "Why would Conner Blackwell be calling her?" She finally said after Charlie closed the door behind her.

John gave her a wry look, "Why do you think?"

"He's in trouble?"

John smiled, "I doubt that. If he was in trouble, his lawyers would contact ours. This is personal. People like Conner Blackwell do not make personal calls unless it involves a beautiful woman." He nodded toward the door that Charlie went through while staring apprehensively at Linda, "Every time I see or hear of that man, he's got a woman on his arm. Never the same one and always someone ridiculously famous."

"Jealous?"

"More like wary." He admitted, "Charlie may be a shark in the courtroom, but she has no idea what men think of her."

Linda leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her abdomen and raised her brows. "Such as....?" She didn't hear locker room talk around the office like John did because she avoided gossip, but this was about Charlie, so she was quite curious.

John studied her for a moment, "You really want to know?"

"Oh yes." She smiled, "Tell me, what the office gossip is about our Charlie." As far as Linda was concerned, not one thing negative could be said about her. Only women with petty jealousies would spread gossip. How wrong she was.

"Fine, but I'm going to be blunt, so be prepared. There's not one male on this floor that doesn't think that body of hers could make a priest change religion and the fact that she's never dated

or even come close to noticing that men practically trip over themselves to see her,..."

"She's a workaholic John." Linda interrupted to defend her, "She doesn't let herself have a social life."

John knitted his brows together, "If you keep interrupting, I'm not going to tell you anymore. Remember, this isn't my opinion, it's just talk." She gave him an apologetic look and he continued, "I know she's a workaholic; you don't have to convince me. Now where was I? Oh, yes, because of her lack of social life caused rumours to circulate that she might be a lesbian," he held up his hand to stop Linda from interrupting again, "However that rumour faded, because it was thought, God wouldn't create such a goddess if she was meant for another female, not to mention her ongoing sweetness. It didn't help that one of them saw her on the arm of that renown chef one evening...what was his name, Claude...something or other. The man is nice looking and definitely not into lesbians. Several men have asked her out, and she's politely turned them down not wanting to complicate her working relationship. Do you know there is an office pool going around to see who she'll go out with?"

"That's demeaning." Linda frowned feeling defensive of her.

"Yes, I have fifty on Brice Wells."

Linda laughed at that prospect. "She's not interested in him, he's a snob."

"Yes, but he's the best looking man here, and a junior partner. Not only that, he's single."

"You mean, *he* thinks he's the best looking man in the firm. Brice is an ass. She wouldn't go out with an ass."

"No? Besides being a cutthroat businessman, Conner Blackwell is known for his women, He runs his father's multi-billion dollar company with the iron fist of a Russian Tsar. So he's not far from Brice, is he? Now, why would a man like that be

placing a personal call to our dear Charlie?”

“I don’t know.” However, she’d never met Conner Blackwell, so all John was giving her was a summation of reputation of the man. She knew Brice....the man thought he was a God’s gift to women. It just made her think that if that were so, then God had a great sense of humour.

“It’s personal Linda...he’s seen her somewhere and chances are, he wants her in his bed.”

“That’s a little blunt.” She knew that John was probably right. He may be a legal assistant for the summer, but his family was disgustingly wealthy and more than likely he’d come to know Conner Blackwell through the same circles.

“I told you I would be.” He nodded toward the door, “You could dress that woman in a burlap sack, but it wouldn’t hide the attributes she has.”

“Okay, that’s enough John; you sound like you’re in love with her.”

“I’m not. I care about her, but she’s not my type.”

“What’s your type then, if not a beauty like Charlie?” she looked astonished.

John just winked at her.

Charlie walked into her office and pushed a lit button on her phone to access the call. “Conner?”

“Hello Charlie.” Came the deep voice. “Are you busy?”

How come the sound of his voice saying her name set off a rapid pulse rate? “Not necessarily.” He obviously understood what that meant from what he said next.

“You are.” His voice came back with no indication of letting her go.

“Nothing that can’t wait for a friend.” She admitted. She heard his deep chuckle and felt her knees go weak. Jesus, even over the phone he was capable of affecting her. She sat down in

her chair ungracefully before she collapsed. “What do I owe the pleasure of this call?” She tried to keep the shaking out of her voice. Just then Marianne walked in and she signalled her to be quiet.

“Are you busy tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow? Just a minute I’ll check.” Charlie waved at Marianne who rushed up to her and began to flip through her planner. She shook her head smiling.

Charlie mouthed ‘thank you’ before answering him. “No, I’m free. Did you have something in mind?”

“Do you like Indian food?”

“Isn’t that spicy?”

“Very, and sweet, but I’m sure you could handle a little spice Charlie.” He said in a deep tone that had nothing to do with food.

She saw Marianne’s eyes widen before the woman blushed. Charlie was sure she was blushing too. “Why Indian then?”

“I have a dinner appointment with some clients from India, and I need a date for a little persuasion. You were the closest most persuasive woman I could think of.”

If she wasn’t blushing before, she certainly was now.

“Charlie?” he said after she didn’t answer him.

“Of course I’d be happy to go with you.” She near choked out.

“Good. I need your address. Could you be ready by seven-thirty?”

“I could.” Then she gave him her address.

“I’ll see you then...oh, and Charlie?”

“yes?”

“Wear something....*persuasive*.” He said seductively right before he hung up.

Charlie leaned back in her seat forgetting that Marianne stood next to her and released a long breath of relief. That man affected her so strongly, even over the phone. She near startled

when she spoke to her, causing the woman to laugh.

“Was I right? Is that *the* Conner Blackwell?”

Charlie gave a telling smile, “It is.”

“That man could pull a blush out of a rock,” Marianne said with surprise, “He practically seduced you over the phone. Who does that? In fact, who has that kind of talent?”

“Conner.” She said turning her head to look at her. Keeping her tone and demeanour free from her feelings was more work than she thought. Marianne was right though, Conner could definitely seduce a woman over the phone.

“You be careful young lady.” She said with concern. “Conner has a reputation with women.”

Her eyes guided to the older woman, “I’ve been in love with that man since I was eighteen Marianne. Even if I wanted to be careful, there’s no way I could. I know his reputation, but to me, it doesn’t matter.” She’d never sought out information on him, but every now and then a tabloid or a news clip caught her attention when his name was mentioned. She faced the fact years ago that he was way out of her league.

Marianne was old enough to be Charlie’s mother and expected her to be a spoiled rich kid when she first met her six months ago like the rest of the lawyers around there, but that quickly changed and like the rest of her team found herself being quite protective after getting to know her. Now that she flashed her that look of vulnerability, it just increased her protectiveness. She patted her shoulder and sat on the edge of Charlie’s desk facing her, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Charlie did just that. It wasn’t like her to discuss her childhood, or her personal life in general, but Marianne was genuinely concerned and she had a great ear for listening. Also, Charlie knew the woman would take her secrets to the grave.

At the same time Charlie was telling Marianne her story

Conner turned to his assistant, “Did you get that address?”

“Of course.” She said without emotion. Nancy had been with the company for over twenty years. She was very dependable and quite astute. She knew about Conner’s ongoing and overlapping love affairs, and she was the only one that dared say anything to him about them. Most, no, all of the women that showed up at the office were empty headed tramps. Most of them were quite wealthy but that didn’t shelter the similarities in them and as far as she was concerned they all fell in the same category. Now he just practically seduced another over the phone, no less. She had to give it to him though, he certainly had a gift.

She studied his sensual smile as he spoke to the woman. *What a rogue*, she thought. It was if they were standing in the same room together because she had heard the slight crack in the woman’s voice when she agreed to go out with him, although Conner didn’t seem to notice. Well, if she was thirty years younger she’d be swooning at his feet, but she was beyond that now, and felt more of a maternal affection toward him. She knew the other women in the office were just counting the days to her retirement so they could have her coveted position. *Hah*, she thought, *that won’t be anytime soon*. She wasn’t willing to subject him to those tittering flirts. What was puzzling to her, was that this woman worked at a law firm. A secretary perhaps? A mail room clerk? Conner had the uncanny ability to see the silk purse, even if it looked like a sow’s ear. He dated anything from movie stars and fashion models, and they all had one thing in common, they were beautiful. So where the hell did he meet this woman?

“What’s with the scowl Nance?” Conner eyed her expression intently.

She stared at him for a moment. The man was too clever and handsome for his own good. “I’m curious.”

“Curious?” his dark brows rose.

“Is this Charlie a model? Maybe the daughter of one of the firm’s senior partners?”

He chuckled, “No.”

“Secretary?” it was a stretch but she had an idea that this woman was a little different.

“Definitely not.” He stacked his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair enjoying the game. He knew why she was asking. Conner had a reputation with rich and beautiful women. Charlie on the other hand, wasn’t rich, but she was certainly gorgeous.

She raised her brows, “I need a clue. Where did you meet her.”

“At a garage.” He said truthfully.

“Getting her Benz fixed?”

“No.”

“Porsche?”

He laughed, “You aren’t giving me much credit.”

“I’ve seen the woman you date Conner. You don’t have much ammunition. Ferrari?” she continued all the while keeping her expression professional.

He kept smiling and decided to let her in on his secret, “A Jaguar, actually. A nineteen sixty seven forest green Jag. And she wasn’t having it fixed. She had her lovely little ass under it fixing it herself.”

Finally her composure broke as she shot him a look of disbelief, “*You* met a woman, who fixes antique cars, that works at one of the most prestige law firms in Chicago *and* you asked her out?”

“Yes. But let’s straighten out a few details. I met one of the sexiest women I’ve ever *seen*, under the belly of a rare antique car, her face smeared with grease and in a pair of ratty old coveralls that did absolutely no injustice for her beauty I might

add. Then I find out she was only eighteen.” he said with a fixed stare seeing her expression, “—no I didn’t touch her wipe that look off of your face. Five years later I hire Chester and Wyncot to help my brother and find out that she’s the star lawyer they send to defend him.”

Nancy’s look of disbelief just escalated, “She’s a lawyer?”

“A stunning lawyer.” He added, “A *damn* stunning, sexy, beautiful, intelligent...”

“You have the *hots* for a lawyer?” She continued incredulous having difficulty getting past the fact that the woman had more than one brain cell.

“She doesn’t look like a lawyer.” And the word *hots* is an understatement for what he felt toward Charlie. When he first saw her after all these years, he was tempted to grab her and kiss her passionately in front of whoever stopped to watch. That kiss they shared years ago still haunted his dreams. She may have been a virgin but she was the most desirable passionate woman he’d ever tasted. Leaving her the next morning was a test of his willpower. He wanted to march around the lake and drag her off to Chicago with him.

“Of course she doesn’t.” Nancy agreed quickly never seeing the woman, but knowing Conner’s reputation. Chances were, the woman looked like a Vogue model.

“But she’s smart.”

“Now I would find that hard to believe if I didn’t know Chester and Wyncot’s reputation....and yours.” She added without worry. Even if she half expected him to chastise her for her bluntness, he probably wouldn’t mean it. She spoke the truth and his next words proved her point.

“All I see is body and legs though.” He added and grinned just to ruffle her.

“You would.” Nancy stood up to leave then stopped to look at him, “You be careful Conner, one of these days a woman,

maybe this lawyer, will take you for a ride and God help you because you've dished it out long enough."

"Yes mother." He said with a hint of adoration.

She turned away trying to hide her smile as she left his office.

Charlie had just finished doing her hair when the doorman buzzed that she had a visitor. "Send him up Phil." She said. Then taking a final look at her appearance she went out into the foyer and pulled on her wrap when there was a knock at the door. She was hoping he didn't hear the sharp intake of breath she took when she soaked up his appearance. He wore a black tailor made suit with a black turtleneck. It just set off his ebony hair.

"Wow." he said when he looked at her, "You are stunning." She gave him a ravishing smile, showing twin dimples at the corners. She wore a light green empress style dress that ended just above the knees, showing off her perfect legs that were set in silver two inch heels. She had pinned her hair up, but allowed enough of her curls to escape to frame her delicate face. He was pleased to see that she had left it long because it was such an unusual shade of blonde. When he had met her the other day, it was pulled into a tight bun. He still couldn't decide if she was a strawberry blonde because of the coppery highlights that flashed every now and then in the play of light, or a light blonde. Regardless, she looked like an angel.

"Thank you. However, if I had known you would look better than me, I might have used my secret weapon." She added coyly trying not to blush over his scrutinizing.

"Secret weapon?" He cocked an interested eyebrow. "What is that?"

"If I told you. It would no longer be secret...or a weapon." She walked past him out the door.

He grinned, this would be a fine night indeed, as he watched

her swaying backside and the lovely shape of her legs. Hell, even the backs of her knees were sexy. “And Charlie, there’s no one on this planet that could look better than you.” He added thickly enjoying the blush that crept up her cheeks.

“Gosh, you haven’t changed a bit.”

“I’m taking that as a compliment.” He replied causing her to laugh. He placed his hand on the small of her back and led her to the elevator.

Charlie loved to have him touch her. In fact he was the only one that could ever instil that in her. She’d dated quite a bit after college, but never got serious with anyone. Unfortunately her heart belonged to him just from that first meeting six years ago when he kissed her. He had wrecked her for other men. She always looked for that attraction in others, but it wasn’t found, not once.

Now that he’d touched her again, there it was like no time had passed. Over the last six years she kept telling herself that it was a crush, a silly first time kiss, but now she knew different. There was something electrical between them. Well, at least she felt it. It made her wonder if all of his other women felt the same way. He was charismatic, that’s for sure. Almost to the point where he should be outlawed. It was as if every inch of him was designed to drive a woman crazy. His walk, poise and even that deep sexy baritone he possessed was completely unfair to her sex.

The elevator doors dinged and Conner led her out through the lobby to his stretched Limousine.

One inside the car he slid beside her and put his arm across the back of the plush leather seat while looking down at her, “Okay Charlie, out with it.”

She stared up at him, “With it?”

“You’re thinking about something serious from the look on your face.”

“hmm, aren’t you insightful.” But she wasn’t going to reveal her thoughts to him even if hell froze over.

He soon realized it, “tease.” He added with amusement.

“You bet I am. Besides Conner, you would think that with all the women you’ve dated over the years, that you’d have some insight so my lips are sealed.” She tapped her head with her index finger while giving him a sly look from those intelligent eyes.

His grin widened while his eyes dropped to that delicious mouth of hers, “Hell, I’m going to enjoy tonight.”

In fact Conner couldn’t remember ever enjoying himself with a woman as much as he did Charlie. Quite frankly, he was fascinated. She was funny, entertaining, and despite her poor upbringing, extremely sophisticated. Looking at her now, you would never know that she grew up in a backwoods town. He wasn’t the only one; his clients could hardly take their eyes off of her.

Charlie was right, he’d dated a lot of women, but none of them were as entertaining as she was. Usually he kept them amused and entertained. Charlie was completely self sufficient. The more the night wore on, the more he wanted her. In fact, he was aching all over just to touch her.

For the first time in a long time, he wished the night would come to a close so he could get her alone. All night he could hardly keep his eyes off of her.

A couple of times she gave him an inquisitive glance, but he merely smiled and shook his head. He watched as she lowered her lashes shyly and that just about did it for him. He nearly cut the night short, but this was an important contract and not only that, if his father found out that he did it for a woman, he’d want to know when his grandchildren would be born.

Conner never felt so damn restless and impatient. This had to be the longest three hours ever.

When dinner was over, he hardly said a word as he escorted her back to her apartment. The whole time his mind was swimming with images of them together.

“Can I come in?” Conner leaned an arm on the doorframe and looked down at her.

She took a deep breath and stared into his sapphire eyes. God he was dripping sexy! She almost consented, “I can’t. I have to be in court first thing tomorrow, and I still have some work to do.”

Conner dropped his arm and put it in his pants pocket, “You are making excuses.”

If he was disappointed he didn’t act like it, she thought. However, he was a perfect gentleman, “Not in the least.” She half-lied while giving him a smile, “However, I’m sure it’s not often a woman says ‘no’ to you.”

“It’s not.” Those pouting lips were driving him mad. His eyes drifted to them when he spoke, “And you didn’t six years ago.”

She gave him a ravishing smile, “No. I didn’t, but now I’m wiser.”

“You always were,” he gave her a sinful smile, “Could I at least have a kiss goodnight?” All through dinner he couldn’t help but be drawn to those beautiful lips remembering the kiss they shared and how eager she was to learn intimacy. Although he held back staring at her the way a man should stare at a beautiful woman all those years ago, he certainly didn’t tonight. She asked him outright why he looked at her the way he was when they were in his limousine. He had told her because he could, she was no longer eighteen. He watched a blush creep into her creamy cheeks but she still held his gaze. Then he found himself wondering about her sex life through those six absent years and how many lovers she has had since. Oddly enough it bothered

him, more than he wanted to admit. After all, he saw her first, kissed her first and he couldn't help but feel jealous. Even after the numerous relationships he had after that night, none of them made every muscle in his body tighten like they did when he set eyes on her.

She had offered herself to him first. Possessiveness welled up in him, taking him by surprise. Now, looking down on her, he could see the same vulnerable eighteen year old. He knew she was attracted to him, but she wasn't as eager as she was six years ago to show him. He should have been disappointed, but he heard the crack of resistance in her voice and knew she nearly said 'yes'. Obviously it wasn't easy to turn him down.

However in all of his arrogance, it was even less easy to accept. Unfortunately, he'd been thinking about him and her entwined naked mostly throughout dinner, not paying much attention to his clients, but thanks to Charlie's beauty and charm, they didn't seem to notice. *Fine*, he thought, *if she wants to play that way, I'll give her something to remember me by*. That's when he asked to kiss her.

She was sure her heart stopped, but she kept the shiver out of her voice, "Of course. You have shown a lady a wonderful time and..." That's all she got out before his lips captured hers. It wasn't a pleasant thank-you-for-a-nice-night-kiss either. It also wasn't slow, coaxing and teaching like it was all those years ago. It was wild, hot, and *God*, could he kiss. It was then she realized that it was just a sample of what he could do and memories flooded back into her mind. He had managed to push her back against the door of her apartment sliding his thigh between her legs and bringing his hard body up against hers while his mouth ravished her. It occurred to her that he knew *exactly* what he was doing when he did that. He shoved his hands in her hair and moved her head to comply with his assault of her mouth. His tongue slid between her lips and caressed hers and she actually

moaned. It was then he pulled back and stared down at her, but didn't remove his hands or his body from her.

Conner's eyes were drawn to her parted lips and closed eyes. He knew she could feel his arousal through their clothes, but he wouldn't force her into his bed. He could tell from her response to him that she was still inexperienced. She had told him that she didn't have time for a boyfriend, and after tasting her, he was glad. After the way she just responded to him, he was elated. He could tell that she would be a force to be reckoned with when he finally did make love to her. His blood fired with desire for her. Everything about her practically screamed wild rebellious passion and he was sure that once he got her in his bed, it would be well worth the wait. He was a very patient man. He lowered his head and took her mouth again. This time his movements were slow and deliberately sensual, teasing her lips and her tongue with his. Just then a door down the hall opened drawing his attention.

Charlie opened her eyes and stared up at his striking profile as something had distracted him, though she couldn't draw her eyes away from him to investigate. She really didn't expect a kiss like that. Everything she had practically fantasized about this man was just that, a fantasy. Now that he'd kissed her, pressed his body against hers, and did wild things with his tongue, her stomach lurched, her heart thudded in her ears, and her knees grew weak. She was always in control over everything in her life, but as soon as he reached for her and kissed her, all control was lost. He took every inch of it away from her, and she was ashamed to admit, that she liked it. There was no mistaking the desire in his eyes and the sensual play on his lips knowing that he affected her like he wanted to.

When she finally followed his stare her elderly neighbour stepped out of her apartment with her little cream colored poodle. However, his fingers were still entangled in her hair

which was now in disarray, and he was still intimately pressed up against her.

Through the haze of desire he created in her she managed to speak to the woman, in her best casual voice despite the position she was in. “good evening Mrs. Grindel, nice night for a walk.” The woman shot them an indignant look and hurried around the corner. Conner broke into a fit of laughter and stepped back releasing her.

“Good *evening?*” He couldn’t believe that she had spoken so calmly after what they just shared. Every cell in his body must’ve been on fire for her. After he lifted his head, just looking down at her made him stifle a moan. Her face was flushed slightly with excitement, upturned, and perfect. Yet, she spoke as if she was just ordering a coffee. He’d really wished she’d changed her mind in that moment, but knew she would be a prize worth waiting for.

She shrugged sheepishly at his comment.

He was still chuckling when he tilted up her chin with his finger and gave her a light kiss before walking away.

CHAPTER THREE

Nancy’s voice came over the intercom, just when he finished wrapping up an overseas meeting. “Conner, you’re father is here and he’s on his way in.”

At the time he was standing at one of the large windows that overlooked the skyline in his office thinking about last night. Nothing reached his expression, but his thoughts were deep on the matter until Nancy’s voice pulled him back to the present. He turned his head slightly at the sound of her voice but didn’t turn around.

Conner wasn’t the least bit surprised about his father; he had grown used to his spontaneous visits over the years. Besides,

he loved the man and hardly saw him anymore. Time spent with him was cherished.

The door opened before Nancy even finished the announcement and Theodore walked in the room smiling, “Hello son.” He said

Conner walked around the side of his desk and shook his father’s hand, “It’s been awhile.”

“It has.” He pounded his son on the shoulder with his other hand. Pride swelled in him. His son has indeed turned out to be everything he had hoped. The man had single handed tripled their holdings. However, it had been five years without so much as a weekend off. He came here with different intentions than he usually did. He wanted his son to have a vacation. He himself was a workaholic, and had no time for a personal life. However, he already had a wife, who had born him two sons. Conner was thirty one and still didn’t have a steady girlfriend.

“So what do I owe you for this visit?”

“Sit down son.” He knew Conner wouldn’t take time off unless he absolutely insisted he did. So he prepared for an argument and he did get one.

Conner nodded, his father sounded serious and that tone was all too familiar to him. He wouldn’t like what he was going to hear. “All right.” He set himself on his sofa crossing his long legs and stretching his arm across the back so he could turn and give his father his full attention.

Theo sat on the arm of it and inhaled deeply prior to speaking knowing Conner wasn’t going to like this. “I think you need some time off.”

Conner shook his head, “I can’t, there’s the merger with...” His father held his hand up.

“I want you to take the yacht for a few weeks and maybe cruise to the Mediterranean. I’ll send one of my most trusted managers to run Obsidian in your absence. He will pass any

major decisions through me.”

Conner looked puzzled, “Honestly, I don’t need a vacation.”

“Are you still putting in eighteen hour days?”

Conner remained silent keeping his eyes on him.

“As I thought. Look, you need some time off whether you think you need it or not. This isn’t a request Conner. Do it.”

Conner cursed. He respected his father and wouldn’t disobey him no matter how much he wanted to.

Theo smiled, “things won’t fall apart while you’re gone. I’ll make sure of it. Maybe find a woman, take her with you. Stay in bed for two weeks, I don’t care. But you will do as I say. I won’t have the burden of your burnout on my conscience.”

He leaned his head back on the couch in defeat. Ryan’s words a few days ago rang in his skull like a church bell. *You know he’s going to be pressing you for grandchildren soon.* Then as if on cue—

“I would really like for you to get married. “ Conner’s head shot up and he gave him a look of disbelief causing Theo to chuckle, “However, I can wish all I want for grandchildren, I’m sure it would be easier to part the red sea. Ryan won’t give me any soon either. I finally got that little brat back into Princeton. Bloodsuckers, I had to donate a wing to the library.” Conner laughed.

“He’s smart, he’s just wild. He’ll calm down.” Conner reassured.

Theo scoffed, “Sure he will.” He stood up, “I have to get my luggage to your place, and then when you’re done here lets go to dinner.”

Conner stood and took his father’s hand, “Yes sir.”

Theo turned and walked away saying over his shoulder, “If you want to bring a date, go ahead, I don’t know if I want to stare at your mug while I eat.” He said with amusement.

Conner knew exactly who to call.

His Perfect Mistress

Court went well that day for Charlie. It was the scene on the court steps afterward that didn't. She did get the judge to reduce the sentence to community service, which was more than any other talented lawyer would have gotten for the man, and her partners were pleased, but when the twenty six year old man she was defending caught her by her blouse and pushed her up against the wall screaming at her, it was John that pulled the man off her. She had never been so terrified.

"You little bitch!" He spat, "If you think I'm going to clean up streets or paint fucking curbs you can kiss my ass. Don't think I won't forget that you screwed me!"

Charlie was too frightened to say anything. She swallowed a lump of fear in her throat and breathed in alarm at the look of rage her client was giving her. Suddenly she was thankful for John's large size.

John pulled the thankless man off her, and shoved him, "You are lucky you didn't get jail time. If it were any other lawyer you would be behind bars as someone's bitch," he added with venom "Get your ass out of here before I have you arrested for assault."

He left but continued to shout at her before he got in the waiting limousine. "You bitch, I'll make you pay. I do not clean up garbage!" His yells were cut off by the chauffer shutting the door and rolling his eyes as if this was an everyday occurrence.

John turned back to Charlie, "You all right? Jesus, what a bastard!"

She took a few deep breaths and nodded.

He bent down and picked up her briefcase that she dropped in the assault and handed it to her with a look of concern. "Sure you are." He said in a voice that didn't believe her as his eyes roamed over her face. "Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee...or a shot of whiskey."

This brought a smile to her lips. "Whiskey."

"No problem. I know of a seedy bar around the corner that lawyers go to." He chuckled as he took her hand.

They sat in the corner by themselves and by the third glass of whiskey, Charlie began to feel better. They stayed until six o'clock talking about various things at work, cases, and John made sure not to bring up the incident that had happened outside the courthouse. Then her phone rang. She pulled it out and looked at it.

"Work?"

She shook her head and flipped it open, "Conner?" She saw John tilt his head in surprise out of the corner of her eye when she addressed the man on the other end of the phone.

"My father is in town. I'm sure he would love to see you. I know this is short notice, but could you meet me at Dente's at eight o'clock. I would really appreciate it."

She looked at her watch, it was just after six. She wanted to see both of them, "Yes I can. I'll try to be on time."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I think so."

There was a pause, "Where are you? It sounds like a bar?"

She laughed, "Perceptive."

"Are you with someone?"

Her eyes darted to John who was watching her closely. A slow smile splayed on her face, "Yes."

"Man or woman?"

"Jealous?" John tilted his head in puzzlement at her comment.

"Always baby."

She laughed to cover the thrill she felt over his confession, "Isn't it a sin to tell a lie?"

"I'm not lying." He said deeply. "If he touches you I'll kill him."

Again she laughed, “Now would it be like that if I’m leaving him here to go out with you?”

John finally caught on and grinned.

“Hmmm. I don’t know honey, after kissing you last night I’m feeling a little possessive.”

“And you said you didn’t lie.” She teased. Conner wasn’t possessive with women because he could have anyone he wanted, but listening to that deep husky voice on the phone certainly made her understand why. She was heating up just hearing it. God only knows how he was in the bedroom when he got a woman alone. Images were flying about in her head when he spoke again.

Now, did you want me to come get you or send a car?”

“Are you afraid I’m too drunk to drive?” His laughter that followed was refreshing.

“I could only imagine how adorable you are when you’re drunk, but I’m sure the pretty head you have on your shoulders will prevent you from doing something stupid because I may not be such a gentleman around you if you’re inebriated. In other words the soft gloves are off. I’ll see you at eight.” He hung up.

“You’re blushing.” John said as she put her phone away.

“Be quiet.” She said causing him to chuckle.

“First or second date.”

“Second.”

His brows went up in surprise, “Interesting.”

She started gathering her things, “Stay out of it mister.”

“I’ll try. If he hurts you though, I may have a thing or two to say.”

She shot him a warning stare and gathered her briefcase, “I’ve got to get going so I can be there at eight.”

“I’ll give you a ride.”

“thank you.”

Conner had to hand it to his father. For a man approaching his seventies he was still as sharp as a tack and had an impeccable memory.

“I’ll be damned!” Theo stood and enclosed both of Charlie’s hands in his, “this can’t be the same grease smudged mechanic!” He looked at Conner who was pulling a chair out for her and gave him a look loaded with questions.

“The one and only.” She answered. “Minus the grease.”

He leaned down and kissed both of her cheeks before releasing her, “You have grown in to a beautiful young woman, no wonder Conner thought to bring you. He’s probably hoping you’ll help change my mind.”

She sat down and Conner took the seat closest to her laying his arm across the back of her chair. “Change your mind about what?”

“Father, son spat.” He interrupted saying no more seeing the warning look from Conner, “Did you go to Harvard and become a lawyer?”

“I did.”

“She got Ryan off with a slap on the wrist.” Interjected Conner with a hint of pride.

“That was you?” his eyes glinted, “I guess I owe you some thanks.”

She smiled. “He’s a good person Mr. Blackwell.” She grinned deviously, “Besides, you may not when you see our bill.”

“Theo,” He corrected chuckling at her jest, “And are you sure we’re talking about Ryan?”

She laughed, “Yes, wrong place wrong time. That’s all.”

“Sure it was.” Theo added with a tone that said the opposite. He turned his attention to his son, “So I take it that’s where you two re-met.”

Conner nodded, “love at first sight.” He added with humour.

Theo laughed, “Really?” He knew Conner was teasing but

the barely visible blush hitting Charlie's cheeks told him something different. *It figures*, he thought empathetically, *the poor girl never had a chance.*

"How did your day in court go?" Conner turned the attention on Charlie interested in how her court case went. After all she ditched him last night to prepare for it, although he knew she used it as an excuse. He might have been put off if she didn't respond to him as she did with the kiss they shared, but now he knew better. He should've known she wasn't the type of woman to jump in bed with him after a few hours, although he sorely wished she was, because he woke up with a hard-on for her from the night before. It made him wonder if he should've tried harder to persuade her. They could've wrecked the place with what he had in mind for her. Every time she showed those glorious legs of hers, he could only imagine them wrapped about his hips as he drove into her. He sighed as he felt himself grow hard again. This was getting to be a problem.

Charlie really didn't want to talk about it, but she also didn't want to be rude, "Victorious."

"There wasn't a doubt."

The waiter showed up at that time and poured some wine for them.

"Leave the bottle," Theo said, "This is a celebration." Then he turned back to her, "It's really nice to see you again."

"You too. In fact, you haven't changed a bit. How's the ranch?"

"I rarely visit. I have good staff on it though. Maybe someday we can go there again Charlie."

She knew that Theo didn't make false promises and felt a swell of appreciation for the man at the mention of it. The three years she had spent on the ranch were peaceful and Paul Blue always made her feel like family. Fact is, she really missed it, "I would love that."

“Have you seen Paul?”

“Not for almost a year. He does phone me every month or so. He’s in Italy.”

Theo looked at Conner with a new light in his eyes, “You don’t say. Maybe you should go see him dear.”

“She works too much.” Conner said quickly trying to get his father off the subject knowing where it was heading.

“Nonsense.” He turned back to Charlie, “I’ve just finished insisting that Conner take the Yacht and cruise the Mediterranean for a few weeks. You should think about going. You could stop and see Paul. Conner shot his father a butt-out look but Theo ignored it.

To Conner’s relief Charlie came to the rescue.

“I appreciate the invitation, but I’m new to the firm and to take a leave of absence wouldn’t sit right with them.” Of course she was appalled at the invitation. Did Theo Blackwell actually think she was sleeping with Conner? Or even worse, he knew his son well enough to know that any woman would swoon at the chance to spend two weeks in the Mediterranean with him, did that mean she fit into his category of conquered women?

“Too bad.” Theo said with obvious disappointment.

Conner and Charlie were both relieved that the subject turned to business, and for the next hour she listened in fascination while drinking the wine that Theo insisted on pouring into her glass. It was obvious to her that Theo thought highly of Conner and his capabilities. She was more than aware of the Blackwell’s reputation for running several multi-billion dollar companies but sitting there listening to the two of them, you would think that they were just your average father son enjoying a football game.

Finally when it came time to leave, she had difficulty standing up. She was drunk and by the twinkle of laughter in Theo’s eyes, he knew it. Conner had to place his arm around her

waist and pull her tight to him to support her. She should have been humiliated but his strong arm around her made her forget everything. Maybe it was the wine, or the whiskey. She found herself smiling stupidly. “When did you get so tall?” She heard herself say as he helped her in the limo causing him to chuckle. “Why my head barely reaches your shoulders Conner, are you wearing shoes?” She looked at her feet, “where are my shoes?” not realizing it was dark in the interior of the car, she couldn’t see her feet.

“On your feet.” He said with amusement settling close to her.

Theo took the seat opposite of the couple watching them intently.

“I see four feet.” She swung her legs straight out in front of her.

“How much did you have to drink after your court case?” Yes, they shared several bottles of wine, but women don’t usually get inebriated on three glasses of wine. He had watched her carefully, and didn’t miss the fact that his father kept her glass full.

“Yes.” She answered looking at him, not quite sure of the question he asked. Theo laughed.

“Charlie, how much did you have to drink earlier?” she was utterly adorable. Her eyes were no longer focusing and there was a rosy glow on her cheeks.

She lifted her fingers and started to count causing both men to laugh. She finally settled on four fingers.

“Of wine?”

“Whiskey.”

“Whiskey? Good God! Charlie, you *are* drunk.” Conner said with astonishment, “Why on earth would you be drinking whiskey?” He looked at his father.

She leaned over and looked him in the eye the best she

could, “Hard day at the office.”

He released a small chuckle and shook his head at her before looking at his father, “Thanks.”

“Glad to help out.” Theo said without missing a beat. Truthfully, he just wanted Charlie to relax a little, but obviously he didn’t take into account that she had been drinking earlier. Although, he didn’t particularly like drunk women, Charlie was an exception. She was completely delightful.

The car pulled up in front of her building and both men got out of the car to help Charlie. The door man Phil quickly opened the door.

“Miss Murphy, are you okay?” he shot a look of disapproval at the two handsome men escorting her almost blaming them for her condition. Charlie was always so sweet and cordial to him, treating him like an acquaintance more than hired help. She was the only one out of all of the tenants in the building that would stop and ask about his day. She knew the name of his wife and three grown children, how long he’d worked as a doorman, if he liked his job, and how much he truly loved his wife.

Conner waved his hand, “Rough day at the office.” This caused Charlie to burst into a fit of giggles after she told the doorman she was ‘never better’.

When they were in the elevator Charlie actually fell asleep against him. Conner bent over and tossed her easily over his shoulder, “Look for her card key in her bag.” He said to his father who still had an amused smile on his face.

Theo found it when the elevator door opened. They walked down the hall together, when a door opened and out stepped the elderly Mrs. Grindel and her faithful poodle. Conner looked at her, gave her one of his most charming smiles as if carrying a limp, passed out woman over his shoulder was the most common thing on the planet, “Good night for a walk, Mrs. Grindel?” She let out a horrified gasp and hurried off down the hall.

“Friend of hers?” Theo said.

“Funny story.” Conner offered trying not to laugh.

“I think I’d like to hear it,” He inserted the card into the door that Conner indicated and opened the door for them.

Conner found the bedroom easily enough, he’d been in plenty of apartments. He kneeled on the bed and gently laid her on it. He removed her shoes, wrap and handbag. Then he lifted her and unzipped her dress. Temptation told him to continue, but honour told him not to. He pulled the covers up over her. He turned around to see his father leaning against the doorframe.

“She’s quite lovely.” Theo said. “It’s hard to believe she turned into such a beauty.”

“She was always a beauty.” Conner corrected.

Really? Theo studied his son’s expression not missing the tone of his voice, “Are you staying?”

“I don’t think it’s right.” He answered

“Right?”

Conner just looked at him with a closed expression.

It suddenly dawned on Theo that Conner hadn’t slept with her yet, “Oh, well, don’t you *think* you should stay here and make sure she’s all right. I’d hate to think that she tried to make it to the bathroom or something and injured herself.” He stood away from the doorframe and turned to leave to cover the knowing smile that appeared on his face. Conner had undressed the woman like they were intimate, touched her and talked to her in the same manner, yet they weren’t. He knew then that his son cared about her more than he would like to admit. Who could blame him? Charlie was lovely inside and out. Imagine the grandchildren he and his wife could enjoy from these two, they would be gorgeous.

“You think so?” He turned and glanced over his shoulder at her.

“God knows,” Theo added nonchalantly while inside his calculating mind was busy at work, “I’ve had to do it with my sons when they’d come home loaded. It’s about time you learned how it’s done.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He didn’t need much convincing because for some reason, he wasn’t ready to leave her side.

“I am. I’ll call you tomorrow to see how she’s feeling. Don’t come to work, it’s Saturday.” He shot a warning look over his shoulder before he shut the door.

“Sure thing dad.” Conner said to the empty room. Walking back to her bedroom he stared down at the sleeping angel for a moment with his expression unreadable. Then, he turned and went back out to the living room. He looked at the couch which looked comfortable but not as inviting as her bed. Sighing, he removed his jacket, loosened his tie, unbuttoned the first few buttons on his shirt and plopped himself on it, stretching his large long form along the cushions. This would be a long night, especially with the luscious little treat in the next room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Charlie moaned as the atom bomb was exploding in her head. She lifted herself up and looked around. Relieved to find herself in her room and, looking down, just about fully dressed. She forced herself out of bed to the bathroom for some aspirin. After that, she got in the shower and allowed the water to pour over her for a while, steaming up the mirror. Throwing on her light blue satin robe, she thought to make herself some coffee to cure the rest of her hangover, however, when she reached the kitchen she stopped. There was Conner reading the paper and sipping already made coffee at the table. He looked up over the

paper and smiled, "How's the head?"

She felt a twinge of delight seeing him there. Obviously he stayed because of her condition. "A train wreck would feel better." she answered while walking by him to remove a coffee mug from the cupboard. She poured herself a cup and sat opposite him.

Conner folded the paper and looked at her with an amused smile, "Not much of a drinker, are you?" Although his voice was steady, he wanted to jump up and kiss her like he did the night before last. Her hair was still wet and streamed over her thin robe almost to her breasts and her eyes were slightly bloodshot, just increasing the lovely contrast of her emerald coloured eyes. In a nutshell, she was positively delicious despite the look of a hangover. Then there were the images in his mind of her soaping up, nude in the shower. He near came out of his seat when he heard her turn the water on.

"I'm not much of a drinker." She took a sip of coffee while settling her eyes on his. "And as for my fridge I try and eat healthy."

His brows went up, "Healthy? Charlie you'd starve to death on that."

She chuckled despite the throbbing in her skull.

His expression became solemn, "And as for your rowdy night, does it have something to do with this?" He turned the paper around and showed a picture of her being attacked by her client outside the courthouse.

She stared at it in stunned silence. The headline read, *Shipping heir attacks own female attorney.* Then her eyes slowly sought his, "Maybe."

"You weren't kidding about a rough day at the office." Inside he was raging. The picture was very clear. She was terrified and the man would have hurt her if the other man in the photo hadn't interfered. He had read the article three times and

in fact the papers attested to her skills of getting the man off with community service even though he was a repeat offender. He was angry that he had dared touch her. "You should have told me."

She shrugged, "I didn't want to talk about it. John pulled him off me."

"And what about next time?" He saw her eyes widen at that suggestion. Obviously she didn't even think that this guy might hold true to his threat. "And who's John?"

"What do you mean next time?"

"The man uttered threats Charlie."

"So?" She said trying not to sound afraid.

He straightened, "Maybe I should hire..."

"Don't say it." She narrowed her gaze him.

"...a bodyguard." He finished.

"I don't need a bodyguard. And what makes you think you should do this?" If she needed protection she would hire her own.

"I have them."

"That's not what I meant and I'm not worth a hundred billion." She snapped.

He smiled completely unaffected by her temper, "I know what you meant. What about your brother, does he still work in the military? Maybe we should call him and see if he could stay with you for a while."

She shook her head, "He's involved in special forces somewhere in the middle east I haven't heard from him in eighteen months."

"If you won't let me hire protection then maybe you should stay with me."

"Conner, that's ridiculous. Lawyers have been threatened before." She felt her heart flutter at his offer.

"Not *my* lawyer." He said with a hint of possessiveness.

“Now, again, who’s John?”

Now she was sure her heart was beating a hundred times a minute, “He’s my legal assistant and if I didn’t know better, you sound Jealous—again.”

“Just curious.” He lied wondering if John meant more to her than just an assistant. The picture in the paper showed a man about Conner’s size, and handsome, frozen in a pose of grabbing Charlie’s client’s scruff while protecting her. Truthfully, he was jealous. He was jealous at the fact her legal assistant protected her and he didn’t and it didn’t help that the man was handsome. He easily determined that it was him that Charlie was at the bar with last night. To make sure he asked, “So, this bar you went to afterwards. Was it your legal assistant that treated you to the whiskey?” He watched her eyes narrow slightly and a slow smile spread across her lovely face in awareness.

“Conner, You *are* Jealous.” She said incredulously.

He tried shrugging it off, “Just checking to see if I have competition.”

She looked unconvinced, “Competition? Conner, it would be easier for me to part the red sea than demand that you drop all of your other women for me. Yet, you are jealous over one man? Isn’t that a double standard?”

“That’s ridiculous.” He said looking at her over the rim of his coffee cup as he took a drink. “Because parting the red sea is impossible unless you’re Moses.” He said breaking into a grin.

She released a frustrated breath. How he could joke about his exploits and act like he should be the only one in her life, “Every week, there’s a photo of you in some tabloid with a different woman, usually a model, heiress, actress, or some other air head...”

His grin widened, “Airhead? Now who’s jealous?”

She inhaled deeply trying to tame her rising temper, “My

point is, you can't expect me to take your intentions seriously."

"Why not?" He said dropping his grin.

"Because I'm just the flavour of the week." She admitted.

He looked surprised, "Do you really believe that?" that statement took him back. Charlie was like no one he'd ever met before. She certainly didn't fall into that category or even near it.

"Yes." She admitted.

"Charlie, I have more respect for you than that."

"Two weeks?"

"I'm not amused Charlie." He finally frowned at her.

She stared back studying his expression thoroughly. Then she sighed heavily and nodded, "Before you get angry with me, let me be honest with you. I'm crazy about you. I always have been since the first day I met you. I let you know that from that night on the porch swing, but I know you are not a one woman man Conner, and unfortunately I'm greedy. I want you all to myself. Every time I get around you, my knees get weak, my heart pounds in my chest and I have trouble catching my breath. I'm sure-no let me finish please-I'm sure you hear that often from all of the woman that swoon at your feet, but I refuse to have my heart broken. Now if you want something from me, you have to give equally in return. That is my stipulation." When she was finished he spent the next few minutes just staring at her without saying a word. She stared back. It took a lot of courage to do what she just did, knowing that she probably just scared the pants off of him and if he was smart, he'd grab his coat and high tail it out of there like he was on fire. She watched him set his coffee cup down and straighten back in his chair while he continued to stare at her like she hadn't said a word. She refused to speak again, worried that her voice would crack. All the while angst was growing in her gut, knotting into a thick twisted rope wondering if he would just do that and leave. The silence was horrible. When he did speak it wasn't at all what she expected.

“I bet you are really good in the courtroom.”

Furious she started to get up with the intention of going into her room until he left. She had just poured her heart out to him and he was joking about it.

“Charlie, sit down.” He said firmly seeing her expression. Did she have any idea of how sexy she looked when she was angry? Truth of it was, no woman had spoken to him like that, or even laid out their intentions in such a way. Charlie was right, he was used to a particular type of woman, not anywhere near Charlie’s intelligence or honesty for that matter. Frankly, she was turning him on. Actually it shouldn’t have surprised him at all. Everything about this woman turned him on.

She looked at him and slowly sat back down. His voice was very calm, but it had a tone that dared her to refuse his request. Normally she would have, but there seemed to be something else there, and she was curious on what he had to say.

“I can’t promise anything permanent.”

“I never asked you to.”

“But you want me all to yourself.”

“Yes.” He looked over her head momentarily thinking, before he returned his gaze back to her.

“So, you’re saying that if I want you. I can’t date other women?”

She tilted her head at him keeping her expression straight. It was exactly what she wanted. “Would you normally?”

“I might.” He doubted it, he was too busy being obsessed with her.

“Are they aware of this?”

“Yes. I don’t lie to them about my habits. Besides Charlie, the women I date aren’t after commitments.” When they did mention marriage or some term of a relationship, Conner made it clear that he wasn’t interested. He knew he would grow bored, and as far as he was concerned, marriage was sacred. If his

father taught him anything, marriage to his mother was because of love, not convenience. Conner had never been in love. He may have come close to it, but something had always turned him off the woman in the end.

“Habits? Conner, you’re a playboy.”

“I like women.” He admitted.

“I don’t doubt that.” She added with a bit of aversion causing him to finally smile.

“I think I can abstain Charlie.” He saw her eyes brighten. *It wouldn’t be that difficult at all*, he confessed to himself while studying her from across the table.

“You would?” her heart was pounding heavily in her chest. She knew he wouldn’t agree to that unless he meant it.

“You are very persuasive, to say the least. Not only that, I haven’t forgotten that kiss five years ago either, contrary to what you think.” It also didn’t help that she had her back facing the window and the bright light of the sun cast a halo through her coppery hair. When she reached up and pushed an abundant amount of it back over her shoulder in such an innocent feminine gesture exposing the creamy skin at her nape, he near groaned.

“I only ask that you are honest with me Conner.” She tried to sound serious despite the rising blush.

“Does that mean we can go to bed together now?” He added in a jest, but let his eyes go to her mouth then her breasts that were clearly outlined against the thin fabric.

“Nice try.” There went her knees again with that scorching look.

He folded his arms across his chest and gave her a handsome smile, “Since we’re being honest, I want my hands on you. All over you.” He said thickly watching her blush. Another enticing trait of hers was that naïve vulnerability. “And you with wet hair and that thin little robe are driving me nuts. By the way, you still have great legs.”

She swallowed hard, “Be patient. I want to get to know you first. Okay?”

He stared at her for a moment, “All right, Charlie. I’ll do as you ask.” His lashes lowered slightly along with his voice, “For now.” First chance he got, he was going to violate her every which way a man could do to a woman. If he was any less a gentleman, he would have done it last night.

She smiled, “thank you.”

“Now back to my main concern.” He pushed the paper across the table again.

“I won’t be dissuaded because of some spoiled heir’s threats.” She instantly defended ignoring the paper and waving a frustrated hand.

Conner leaned on the table so he could see his concerned determination, “Charlie, this family does not make empty threats.” He thrust a finger on the black and white photograph, “I know for a fact from the first few calls I made this morning after reading this article, that you are not the first person he’s threatened. There have been at least a half dozen incidents with devastating results. His family is from Greece, and they have their own set of laws. He lives in the states because he’s wanted on several charges of rape, and one suspicion of murder.” He saw her lovely mouth fall open.

“I wasn’t privy to that information.”

“No, but I have my ways. Now you know why I’m concerned. You should come stay with me for a few days if you won’t let me hire anyone to protect you. Maybe my father has it right in his head about taking the cruise with me. Then we can figure something else out.”

“Conner, I can’t just not show up for work.”

“It’s been dealt with.”

“What on earth does that mean?”

“I called Edward Wyncot this morning. He’s very

concerned about your well being. You have your vacation for as long as you need it until this blows over. He said your job will be waiting when you return just like you left it.”

“You called my *boss*?” Her eyes widened as her face flushed with ire. “How could you interfere in my life in such a way!”

He expected the spark of anger, but not the fury, “Charlie calm down and listen for a moment. I had to. I informed him of his client. He knew nothing of what I found out. It was his decision, not mine.” *Jesus did she know how hot she looked? She was a sexy as hell.*

She stood up abruptly, “I can’t believe you thought to interfere. Conner you would be furious if I did that to you.”

“I certainly would, but this is about you.” He said tenderly, completely out of his character, “I’ve just found you again. If you think I’m letting some deject remove you from my life, you’re out of your mind.” He stood and moved around the table toward her, placing his hands on her arms and staring down at her.

Whatever anger Charlie had faded with his words. Did he really mean what he said? It was obvious he was concerned for her, but he loved women. He never denied it, ever. No wonder he had no problem getting them if he treated them all like he made her feel in that moment.

“Charlie?”

She looked up at him, “I really don’t like interference Conner. I’ve been on my own for a long time.”

That statement pulled at his heart. A woman like her should always have someone. “I’m not sorry. That little bastard Makis Antoniadis is not going to get his hands on you again. If that means I have to toss you over my shoulder again and take you home I will. As far as I’m concerned, I came into your life right when you needed me.” He gave her a reassuring smile,

“Now are you going to come willingly or do I have to open a bottle of wine?”

“Not funny.” She fumed then rubbed her forehead, “I just started this job a few months ago.”

“Like I said, he was understanding.”

“Of course he was.” She gave him a look of disbelief. “A billionaire asked for a personal favour. He probably would have bowed down at your feet if you asked him.”

He grinned, “First of all, my father’s a billionaire, not me. Secondly Chester Wyncott knows my father because they travel in the same circles. So this isn’t out of the blue.”

She rolled her eyes, “Same thing on both counts.”

He leaned down and kissed her gently. “Go get dressed.” He patted her hip.

That gentle brush of his mouth across hers was a small gesture, but it stole her defences. “I have to finish a few things up at work first-don’t give me that look Conner, there’s cases that need to be farmed out.” She said with determination.

“All right, I’ll take you.”

She stared at him a minute, thought about arguing, then decided that it would be pointless before turning around and heading back into her room. He wouldn’t change his mind no matter what she said. Chastising herself the whole time she was getting dressed and running a brush through her hair over his willingness to control her life, she couldn’t help but feel that familiar thrill go through her. How many woman has he invited to stay with him? She set her brush down and looked at herself, *probably a hundred*. She sighed and tossed her hair over her left shoulder before gathering some of her personal things and putting them in a bag. Then she went and packed a few clothes. *I’ll only stay for a few days*, she told herself unconvincingly, *and I’m not crawling into his bed*, she told herself with even less conviction.

When she finally came out of her room there were two men standing in her foyer the size of professional wrestlers.

Conner introduced them, "This is Tanner, and Dan McKeddy. They are two of my most trusted bodyguards."

"You are brothers?"

"Yes, ma'am." came a southern drawl from Tanner.

She couldn't help but smile, "Nice to meet you."

"We'll take your luggage." Dan stepped spoke with the same drawl as he stepped forward and took her bags.

"We'll meet you downstairs," Conner said closing the door behind them.

"They look like ex-marines."

"They're actually ex-military and very capable Charlie. I don't hire anyone but the best." He embraced her, "Are you feeling better?"

She stared up at him, "From what? The hangover, or you stepping on my toes."

He smirked, "Either."

She sighed, "A little."

"Good."

"You did tell me that you weren't going to hire bodyguards."

He smirked, "If you moved in with me. Not only that, the McKeddys work for me already. So technically I didn't hire them."

"Conner Blackwell, you are a sneaky son of a gun." She said angling a sly smile at him.

"You have no idea." He answered. Then he took her completely by surprise when he kissed her and before she could recover he had taken her hand and led her out the door.

Conner made himself completely at home in her office like he'd been there a million times. He removed his suit jacket and tossed it over the back of a large leather chair beside one of the two full length windows in her office, loosened his tie and sat

down reading a magazine he picked up in reception.

Marianne came in carrying a stack of files and hid her face while she mouthed the words, "Is that Conner?"

Charlie nodded while flicking a glance at Conner to make sure he didn't see them, and took the stack while Marianne mouthed the word 'Wow'. Even with the lazy pose he had now as he read the magazine was a force to be reckoned with. Her eyes went back to Marianne and she shook her head to indicate for her not to even go there.

While she was sorting out which case should go to whom, there was constant travellers in and out of her office to introduce themselves to him. Apparently word travels fast. At one point three of the four senior partners were shaking hands with him. Getting two of them together was almost impossible. Then Brice strutted through the door like the only rooster in a hen house, and Charlie refrained from rolling her eyes at the egotistical stiff. All the buffoon did was drop names constantly. At one point she looked up at Conner and he was giving her an amused smirk while the two talked. Then she actually did roll her eyes causing him to stifle a chuckle behind a fake cough. All the while Charlie was thinking it would be more interesting to watch paint peel than listen to the man and from the glancing looks Conner was giving her, he was thinking much of the same thing. However, one thing occurred to her while watching people talk to him and his responses. Conner was as charming as hell. No wonder people swooned at his feet all of the time. He paid everyone equal respect no matter who they were. She couldn't help but feel a sense of pride while watching him.

Marianne was even doting on him, bringing him coffee and fresh muffins which he politely thanked her for.

"Traitor." Charlie mumbled at her when she came to get some of the files.

"Give me a break, he's very charismatic." She whispered

back, “And as hot as hell.” She added with a wink before setting coffee and a bran muffin down next to her and leaving with a stack of files.

Not to long after that Conner walked behind her desk and leaned back against the ledge so he could face her, crossing his long legs at the ankles, “Just about done angel?”

She looked up at him, “Yes.” Didn’t anything he do look aversive? Him leaning lazily against her desk was so darn sexy.

“Are you procrastinating?”

“Yes.” She was. John could easily finish these off for her, but he had enough to do and she felt responsible for leaving her job without any notice.

He chuckled, reached down and took her hand, “come here.” He drew her up so she was standing in front of him. Then he set his legs apart and coaxed her toward him.

“Conner, I’ve still got...”

“No, you don’t. Time for a bit of a break. You have been going at this for hours.” He placed her hands around his waist and pulled her close kissing her. It wasn’t like the kiss in her apartment this morning, it was more like the kiss that he gave her after their first dinner date together and just like then she fell hook, line and sinker into him.

He pulled back and looked at her, “I love this little beige skirt.”

She didn’t realize that his hand had slid confidently over her backside and down her thigh to finger the slit in her skirt.

“Every time you move, that sexy thigh shows.” He added huskily.

To get his meaning across, his fingers brushed across her upper thigh causing the flesh to tingle. “And you still have unbelievable legs.”

“Still?” she breathed tilting her face up toward his. She remembered that he mentioned her legs at breakfast earlier, but

it never really dawned on her that it was a long standing compliment because she was distracted by the heated look he'd given her to go along with it.

"Uh-huh. Something I noticed about you six years ago." He said huskily as his fingertips moved up and down her thigh. "I actually thought you were wearing hose, but now after touching you I realize that your legs are bare and just flawless."

"Conner, we're in my office." She managed to breathe out thankful that he was still holding her or she might have collapsed.

He smiled at the strain in her voice, "Are you saying we should go home to bed?"

She blinked twice, "Again, nice try." Oh god she just about said yes.

He gave her a sexy heart stopping grin, "Sooner or later angel, I will have my way with you." He brushed his mouth over hers then shifted his mouth to her earlobe and murmured, "Preferably sooner. And more than one way."

She smiled trying to ignore the hot blood pumping in her ears at his words, "later." Then she kissed his chin, "Much later. Now let me finish up. Give me twenty minutes."

"Ten."

"Fifteen." She countered with a gorgeous smile.

"Sold." He said causing her to laugh. He released her and went back to take a seat and resumed reading the magazine. However, he never turned the page since he got there, he never even read one article because his eyes remained on her while she flipped open files, answered e-mails and penned notes. She was breathtaking. When she crossed her legs, one of her thighs was revealed through the opening in the skirt. He just couldn't resist walking over and touching her.

His penthouse had three bedrooms and his father was in one of them. He would love to broach the subject about her staying

with him in his room, but he knew it would be a lost cause. Even though she was independent, she was old fashioned and because of the presence of his father, would want her own room. What he wouldn't give to sleep next to her tonight. Looking at her the way she was now, he'd sell his bloody soul. She was sitting erect in her chair scribbling in a file. One of her legs was slightly under her chair while the other was in front of it. Both bare from the knees down. Those legs alone could set the bed on fire never mind the rest of her.

Although she was passed out the night before, it still stirred him that she was in another room and he couldn't touch her. It was easy enough to crawl in next to her and her never finding out, but he wasn't a leech and was going to start being one no matter how attractive she was.

"There. All done." She closed the last file and turned to him. "Happy?"

His eyes came up from her legs in time to meet hers "Immensely." He answered with a grin, "Now it's my turn. I have to swing by my office."

"Why didn't you just go, when I was here?" She asked.

"I told you why. I'm not letting you out of my sight." He fixed his tie while looking at her, "I won't be half as long as you. I promise."

"Liar." She teased

It wasn't a lie. He was there for a few hours when his father showed up and pretty much shoved him out of his own office.

Prior to that, Charlie was amazed at the hush that fell over the place when she walked hand in hand with Conner first through the lobby then the top floor of his building. She turned and looked over her shoulder to see at least a dozen curious faces peek out of office doors and around corners after they'd walked by. Conner walked steadily as if all the self-confidence in the

world rained down on him. She almost felt insignificant next to him as people practically jumped out of his way after a curious stare or two at her. One thing Charlie wasn't, was insecure. She'd learned at an early age to be herself and she was proud of the accomplishments she had, but Conner's own self confidence made hers seem minute.

"Conner, my legs aren't as long as yours. Slow down." She scolded him in exasperation. It was obvious that he was in his own world when he entered what she would refer to as business mode.

He did slow, and flashed an apologetic look over his shoulder and tightened his hold on her hand. A few times he stopped and talked to several people on the way. His tight grip on her hand never let up. She smiled to herself. He had an uncanny way of making her feel like the only one who deserved his attention. To her complete astonishment, he introduced her to the people he stopped to talk to, not as an acquaintance, or a friend, but actually his girlfriend. She was so surprised, that she didn't protest or correct him. Or did she want to? Then other thoughts started to creep into her mind. Did he introduce all women like that? Even the flavour of the week?

She was familiar with his widely publicized affairs and his reputation as the billionaire playboy. She wasn't one to buy gossip magazines ever, but when she saw him on the cover she did. In fact over the last five years she bought quite a few. As a teenager she could never get him out of her mind after that night on the porch. Even throughout college she thought of him often. She actually thought she'd never see him again and resigned herself to carrying on with her life. Besides, he dated rich women, extravagant women, and women that were completely unlike her. Time and time again she thought that he was just placating the desires of a young woman when he kissed her all those years ago, but now she began to wonder. He made her feel

special in the few days that she'd become reacquainted with him. If that's the way all women felt then no wonder he never had a problem getting them.

Then, he led her down another long hall, but this one was decorated a little differently. It was obvious that they were getting closer to his offices by the expensive paintings and sculptures.

The hallway widened to a large room that housed half a dozen desks that she concluded were his secretaries. Again the furniture and artwork was very modern and stylish. In fact it spoke volumes to how wealthy the Blackwells were.

One woman in particular, was probably about Marianne's age and by the position of her office, was his personal assistant. Except her hair might have been a little greyer than Marianne's, and she wore spectacles that were perched on the end of her nose when Conner introduced her. The look itself said enough. She was protective of Conner and eyed her like a schoolmarm eyes an unruly child.

"You're the lawyer." It wasn't a question.

Charlie noticed that the woman's scrutinizing stare was not as cool as her voice. In fact, she could have sworn she saw a glimmer of warmth in her eyes for a second. Her statement alone made her know that Conner discussed her with him. To what extent? She wondered. Then she saw the woman's eyes turn on Conner and the warmth in them increased. She obviously thought the world of him.

"I'm the lawyer." Charlie answered with a genuine smile causing the woman to look back at her.

She looked her up and down with an unreadable expression, "Makes sense then." The woman said turning away.

Only Charlie noticed the twitch at the corner of the woman's mouth as she tried to hide her smile.

Conner asked the woman to get several people on the

phone, pull his appointments for the next two weeks and reschedule them before he turned and pulled her through the large double chestnut doors to his office. Only then did he release his grip on her hand.

His office was a huge marble floored corner office. Not only that, three quarters of it was all windows and overlooked Chicago. Then there was a glass wall, with glass doors that led to a boardroom. She noticed a large curtain that hung on either side that he could pull for privacy.

She walked over to look out at the view, “Conner, this is beautiful.”

He grinned and picked up the phone and began dialling, “I think so.” He said without looking up.

When he began talking, Charlie walked around the room looking at the intricate sculptures and artwork. She’d actually recognized a few pieces...very expensive pieces. It was more than enough to amuse herself for the brief stay in his office, but if she turned around she would have seen Conner’s pale eyes follow her while he carried on a conversation over the phone.

He was a master at multi tasking and at that moment was grateful for this talent. She had a beautiful walk. Then again, he always thought she did. Everything about her was captivating, and he was, completely. He wanted her so much he ached. Not another woman could get that out of him so quickly. Yet Charlie wasn’t like his other women, she never was and she never would be. His eyes guided over her shapely form as her slender fingers caressed a marble statue sitting on a pedestal. Oh how he wished that was him! Those soft fingertips caressing him would bring him to his knees in front of her.

Conner hung up as Nancy walked in, “Your appointments are all cleared except for the art auction tonight. You have to go Conner because it’s for one of your charities, so don’t even think about getting out of it. Here are your tickets. I took the liberty of

getting a third for Mrs. Murphy, knowing you, you never thought of it.”

“Thank you.” He said without taking his eyes off of Charlie letting a grin draw across his handsome face as Nancy continued to scold him.

“Now I’m making the suggestion that you get her a decent dress, because it is black tie, and you certainly can’t expect her to go with some old thing out of her closet.”

Charlie swung around and looked at the woman. Conner shot her an amused look, “Yes Nance.”

“It had better be a decent gown too. The woman must look better than the man she’s going with, and Conner, you are a force to be reckoned with.” She said wagging her finger down his expensively clad form, “So I’ve taken time out of my busy schedule to make an appointment at Solas. They are expecting you both at, “ She glanced at her watch, “Three thirty, which is in an hour and forty five minutes. That gives you time to take her to lunch. Now your Tuxedo has been dry cleaned and I’ve already had one of those steroid monsters deliver it to your penthouse along with your father’s. Will you need me for anything else, or could I possibly try and catch up on the inhuman amount of work you’ve left me to do?”

Conner smiled, “I think you’re finished with me.”

She nodded, and turned to an open mouthed Charlie, “Good day Mrs. Murphy.” She left shutting the doors closed behind her.

Charlie looked at Conner who was close to laughing, “Wow.”

“She’s the best.”

“I don’t doubt it. She acts like your mother. I think I like her. Despite the ‘old thing out of my closet’ phrase.”

“She meant I needed to treat you to a glorious night out, Charlie. Including making sure that you feel like the woman I

think you are.” He explained with amusement.

“Oh.” She blushed.

“It’s all right, I’ve known the woman forever, I can speak Nancy.”

She laughed.

Just then Theo came in unannounced, “son, you have about ten minutes to get out of here before I fire you.”

“yes sir. Come on Charlie, we’re being kicked out.” He held out his hand.

His face brightened when he saw her, “Charlie! I didn’t see you standing there. Conner phoned me this morning and filled me in on everything. I’ve already had the housekeeper make up the guest bedroom for you. I’m really glad you’ll be staying with us for a few days while the Yacht is made ready. That boring penthouse could use the presence of a beautiful woman for a few days.” He placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek causing her to blush lightly.

It occurred to her then, that Conner had already taken it upon himself that she would stay with him and accept all of his conditions. Which is exactly what she *had* done. She inwardly cursed at herself for thinking that she might have had a choice. He was going to do what he wanted anyway. But should she be upset with him? He was being protective of her. Could any other woman say the same? Also, she couldn’t help but be relieved at Theo mentioning the guest bedroom. That meant that her earlier worry of Theo thinking that she was sleeping with Conner was unfounded. For the first time this morning, she started feeling a little more relaxed. Until she remember what he had said, “Yacht?” she turned her attention to Conner.

“I did mention it.” He said casually.

“When?”

“This morning.”

“This *morning*?” She gave him a look of exasperation.

“Conner, I had a hangover the size of Australia pounding in my skull. I don’t remember that. Not only that, you were throwing a list of demands my way like a hostage negotiator.”

“Regardless, I’ve made up my mind.” He said in a tone that was more of a command than a request.

Charlie’s beseeching eyes went to Theo who looked oddly amused over the whole thing.

Immediately he held his hands up, “Don’t look at me Charlie, Conner’s got his own way about him.”

“Conner, I think we need to talk.” She said in exasperation.

She may have looked at his father with helplessness in her eyes, but when they swung back to him, he saw defiance in their jade depths. “Talk then. I’m not changing my mind.” He said placing his hands on his narrow hips in determination as he stared down at her.

It was a stance that suited him perfectly and she was sure that anyone who’d seen it before wouldn’t even consider arguing with him. However, she wasn’t anyone.

“I’ll give you two a minute.” Theo turned and left. Nobody noticed the smile spreading across his face.

Charlie folded her arms under her breasts and stared at him until Theo shut the door behind him.

The standoff lasted about two minutes before a slow smile spread across his masculine lips and he gradually relaxed his stance while running his eyes heatedly over her form. “You are awfully sexy like that.” He stated thickly while walking up to her.

“Don’t try and soothe me Conner.” Oh God, but it was working, “Since when can you tell me what and where I’m going. I can relent the few days at your place with you and your father, but this is gone too far.”

“My father is making me go regardless. I would feel much better if you were with me, and then I don’t have to worry about

you.” He explained while rubbing her upper arms tenderly.

“Why is it so important to you that I’m safe? It’s not like we were close five years ago, we barely knew one another...”

“I knew enough.” He interrupted.

“Take one of your other dozen women.” She said glaring at him. She didn’t like losing her independence and this whole thing with her client caused her to turn to Conner for help. By rights she really shouldn’t fault him. He was being a gentleman.

“No.”

“No, meaning you don’t want to drive them insane by controlling their lives, just me?”

He laughed, “No, meaning I don’t want to take another woman.” He took her arm and pulled her into his embrace, “Listen Charlie, let’s look at this in a different way. I am finally being forced to take time off since I met you in a dirty garage six years ago, at the same time, you have a sociopath after you...”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m positive.” He said with a stern look, “Now listen. I’m not a big believer in fate, but let’s take advantage of this. If anything, we’ll have a good time as friends,” He lied, “and then we can return to our jobs of endless, thankless hours.” *Then I can finally have you to myself, so I can seduce you properly*, he thought. In retrospect she was correct, if he’d asked any of his other acquaintances they’d jump at the chance to spend two weeks of champagne, seeing the sights and making love on the Mediterranean, but not Charlie. But he didn’t get to be a head of his father’s biggest company because he gave up easily. He would have her.

She laid her head against his chest with his hand applying constant pressure on the back of her neck and found herself smiling. And why did he have to smell so good? Two weeks in the Mediterranean with just Conner Blackwell and no one else did sound incredibly romantic.

That evening a high polished dark grey stretched Limousine pulled up in front of the Elysian Hotel. The place was already packed for the charity event.

Several hours earlier, Conner escorted her to Solas and sat by admiring her as she tried on a multitude of dresses for the event until his eyes settled on a strapless, yet elegant pale green number that set off her figure with genuine class. "That one." He said standing up from the seat he was given.

"You think so?" she twirled around in front of the mirror.

He walked up behind her and placed his hands on her hips while meeting her eyes in the mirror, "Hell yes." He grinned.

"Oh well, tell me how you really feel." She grinned at his reflection.

He chuckled, "Honey, I'd make you blush a dozen ways to Sunday if I did."

"Possibly." She answered with a slight smile, "Now release me, before you wrinkle my dress." God, everytime he touched her, her knees would weaken.

He chuckled again and did as she asked, "Get changed. We'll take it."

"Yes sir." She teased walking into the back.

Conner near groaned. How the hell was he not going to be able to touch that woman the way he really wanted to while under the ever watchful eyes of the paparazzi?

Even now she sat beside him and one of those gorgeous legs of hers appeared through the slit in the gown as she crossed them. He really wanted to move his palm down the length of it. His eyes went to her face and she was looking at the front entrance of the hotel and the crowd around it. Obviously she had no idea how incredibly sexy she was. He wanted to touch her so bad that the palm of his hand actually itched.

Thankfully the car slid to a stop and the driver opened the

door or he was going to flatten her out on that long leather seat and really wrinkle her dress.

Conner stepped out to a multitude of camera flashes and held his hand out for Charlie, who was actually a little hesitant. He gave her a drop dead gorgeous smile and whispered, “Just give them one of those beautiful seductive smiles you own and you’ll have them in the palm of your hand just like me.”

That worked. She did smile as she accepted his hand and stepped out of the limo. “I never thought you were this popular.” She murmured as she stepped up beside him.

“Yeah, I hide it,” he teased causing her to laugh just as another wave of flash bulbs assaulted them.

The night started out with an amazing dinner followed by an auction then dancing. Charlie thought that if there was a heaven on earth, she was living it right now. She was in love with this man and he was making her fall more deeply into it. What the hell was she going to do? This couldn’t last. Nothing that felt this good did. She knew that Conner was a master at seduction because she was already seduced and he’d hardly done a thing to provoke it. When he got her alone on his father’s yacht she knew she would succumb to his charm and end up in bed with him. It was inevitable. When he’d kissed her all those years ago, she never forgot it. It haunted her nights, and ruined her for other men. She’d dated, but she’d never let them get beyond some basic petting. It just didn’t feel right to her. Certainly not like this!

It was after two in the morning when they got back to his penthouse. Conner already knew his father, who declined to join them for an evening out, would be in bed, but also knew that Charlie wouldn’t invite him into her room. Actually he couldn’t blame her. She was brought up in a completely different environment than what his past women were. Even though every cell he owned ached to have her, he would respect her wish.

He also knew that his father was purposely giving them time together. It wasn't hard to see that he adored her too.

Two days later, they took the gulfstream IV to Miami where his father's seventy-five meter Benetti was docked.

She was wearing a pink halter top and white capris and matching sandals. Conner gave her a sexy grin when she emerged for breakfast this morning. Obviously she won his approval. It was a good choice considering the heat she walked into when she stepped out of the airport. When she was younger, she wasn't much of a fashion follower, but in her profession, she was now.

Terrance and Dan walked behind them carrying the luggage.

"Which boat is your family's?" It seemed like there were thousands of them as they walked down the plank to the dock all big beautiful and disgustingly expensive.

"The big one." He answered with amusement.

"Conner there are a lot of big ones, which one is it?" she turned and looked at him.

He nodded to a direction over her shoulder, "The biggest one."

Her jaw fell open in awe as her gaze followed his. "Is that a helicopter?"

"yes." He said and took her arm smiling.

"Well," She mumbled while taking in the size of the enormous yacht, "I guess there's a slim chance of it sinking."

He chuckled and led her up the gang plank where the captain met them, "Mr. Blackwell, Miss Murphy, welcome aboard sir."

"Hello Peter." He shook the man's hand

"We will be underway before four o'clock as you requested."

Conner nodded his thanks. Then he began to show Charlie around the yacht. It took almost an hour of touring

before he reached the staterooms which were no less than fit for royalty.

“So angel. What will it take for you to stay in my room, with me?” He watched her tilt her beautiful head at him. What pleased him most is that she didn’t show as much apprehension as she usually did when he used sexual innuendos. Instead she actually smiled a little.

“Do most woman just hop in your bed, no questions asked?” she was sure that her knees just turned to jelly.

“More like skip happily.” He said with a glitter of amusement.

She laughed, “Sure they do.”

“They line up and take turns.”

“Oh, you are soooo conceited and...yuck at the mental image you just gave me.” But she still had her smile.

“It would make the trip much more enjoyable angel.” His hand came up and caressed her jaw.

Charlie knew damned well she was going to end up in bed with him. Her resistance was crumbling, but she didn’t want him to have that extra edge over her. She definitely didn’t want him to think she was as eager as his past women. Now, how the hell could she possibly stick to that when she wanted him right now? He was leaning against the door to his stateroom with a grin on his face that was dripping sexy. She did her best to keep her composure and gave him an equally devastating grin, “Let me ask you something?” She stepped up to him with her hands clasped behind her back. Her breasts just barely brushing his chest. Her face became sultry and her lips formed a soft moue.

“Anything.” He near groaned. My God, when she put that gorgeous face of hers to a purpose it was earth shattering.

“Does that wicked charm of yours work on everyone?”

“yes.” He said deeply hearing a slight crack in his voice.

She leaned up and brought her lips to a hover in front of

his, "Not everyone." She whispered, before she turned and walked away flashing him a stunning smile over her shoulder.

Conner released a breath, one he didn't even know he was holding as he watched the sway of her backside disappear around the corner, and then thumped his head back against his door twice with an image of her tight little ass in his mind. What he wouldn't give to see her naked and writhing beneath him. Then Tanner and Dan showed up with their luggage. He reluctantly directed hers into the stateroom next to his.

That night they ate under the stars, danced with the slight breeze of the ocean caressing them and he still went to bed alone. Conner was fit to be tied. He fed her excellent food, they drank champagne, he kissed her, told her how much he adored her, and she still managed to refuse him. He began to doubt his own charm. He lay awake most of the night thinking of how to approach the subject again. First of all, he knew he affected her. She reacted and responded to his kisses, his caresses, but then why did she refuse him? His calculating mind started sifting through everything about her. She was independent, intelligent including crafty. He shoved aside the fact that she was so beautiful that he grew hard with just a mere look from those beautiful emerald eyes of hers and decided to concentrate on other factors.

He was able to get her to come stay in his penthouse for a few days, go on this cruise with him, but he couldn't get her into his bed. Then it finally occurred to him. In both occasions he basically told her what to do. Every time he suggested they have sex, she backed down, got nervous and refused. Tomorrow, he wouldn't give her a chance to refuse him. Smiling, he finally fell asleep.

The next day Conner rose and dressed in a white and red flowered Hawaiian shirt that he left unbuttoned and a pair of white shorts. He slept in longer than he expected because of his

lost hours the night before. When he saw Charlie, in a yellow bikini top that covered her perfect breasts and a green and yellow sarong he immediately wanted to throw her over his shoulder and take her back to his room. Her hair was unbound and she was sitting outside eating a piece of toast and drinking orange juice. He watched her tip her head up toward the sun and he swore his heart melted at the alluring sight. The woman should've been a model, not a lawyer. One of her legs was bent up on the chair in front of her so that she could rest her wrist on the knee with her glass of juice. The other was propped up on the chair opposite of her, and he could get a clear view of it's magnificent shape. He was thankful of the tinted glass that led out to the aft of the ship, because he was sure his mouth had been hanging open for a full minute. He clamped his jaw and stepped out into the sunlight. Actually he could have stood there and watched her for hours.

“Hi, sleepy head.” She smiled at him, lowering her sunglasses to wink at him. Although she actually did it to see his magnificent six pack and expansive chest before she slid them back up her nose to shield her eyes.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead, “At least one of us slept.”

She laughed and poured him a glass of orange juice, “Hmmm, maybe I need to open a bottle of wine for you.” She gave him a knowing grin.

He reached over and stroked her hair, “Maybe I need to open a can of strawberry blonde instead.” He said huskily.

“Hmm you got it bad Conner.” She said with amusement and flashing him a seductive glance while buttering a piece of toast for him and handed it to him, “Eat up.”

He took a bite and tossed it back on the plate, “I would rather drink up.” He reached over and grabbed her causing her to squeal. She tried to jump away but he seized her and swung her

into his arms kissing her soundly. He sat on one of the long cushioned benches and pulled with him while stretching one of his legs along the cushions and putting the other on the deck. He pulled her back against this chest, "I think we should work on your tan." He looped his hands under her breasts and held her tight. She leaned her head back so it came just under his chin.

"My tan will have your arm marks across my stomach."

"I'm branding you."

"Very funny."

He kissed the top of her head before he laid his head back and relaxed.

Sometime later, Conner awoke. He must've fallen asleep. He opened his eyes and noticed that his Steward placed an umbrella over them to protect them from the sun and tilted it to block the view of the windows. He should give his steward a raise he thought with a smile. Obviously he was incredibly tired because he didn't even remember shutting his eyes. Not only that, who the hell in their right mind would have fallen asleep with such a gorgeous woman on top of them?

Apparently he wasn't the only one. He lifted his head and looked down at Charlie. She had somehow turned around and lay belly down on top of him with her arms folded under her and pressed against his chest. Her face was tilted up toward him with her lush lips slightly parted, and she was sound asleep. He suddenly realized that she must not have gotten any sleep the night before either. A sensual smile pulled at his lips with that piece of knowledge as he continued to watch her. Her position couldn't be that comfortable, but then again, she must be flexible because she didn't even stir. He dared not to think about that in this compromising position. Her hips were firmly pressed against his and her gorgeous legs were stretched out along the bench. His hands began to rub down the length of her spine and she began to stir.

Charlie felt the soft caresses and lifted her head to see Conner staring down at her.

“I fell asleep.”

“Me too.” He said softly. Then he placed his hands on either side of her and easily lifted her up so her face was level with his before he slowly, gently lowered her so her lips came in contact with his.

Her hands slid to either side of his jaw as his slid around her and held her tight. The kiss went from passionate to wild abandon. He revelled the sensation of her warm bare belly pressed against his. The softness of her skin was mouth-watering. Conner reached down and cupped her perfect bottom to pull her hips tighter against his arousal. She moaned and dropped her leg over his hip letting her toes touch the deck. He traced a path down her curvaceous thigh and back up to her tight bottom. His tongue slid between her lips and caressed and fought with hers and within seconds she was his to control. His fingers easily found the ties on her bikini bottoms and he slowly pulled the string and slipped his hand inside and over her bare flesh caressing smooth soft round perfection. His other hand managed to undo the ties on her top just as effortlessly and he reached his hand in between them and caressed one of her lovely formed breasts. She moaned again, then suddenly her head lifted and she stared down at him with bewilderment intermixed with passion in her eyes.

“Conner...I..”

He kissed her again cutting off her words. He wasn't giving her a chance to protest, to refuse him. He ached so badly for her, he could think of nothing else but to have her. His hands increased their caresses causing her to instinctively press her hips into him, causing him to groan against her lips this time. He finally released her and took her head in his hands and pulled her off him, “Charlie, we have to finish this in my room.” He

quickly retied her top and bottom without even looking.

“I don’t know Conner.” She said unsure.

He took her hand, “there’s not going to be an argument this time.” He kissed her, and rested his forehead on hers, “If I don’t have some sort of release in the next few minutes, I’m going to go insane. I want you so bad, I can taste it.” He stood and pulled her with him.

Charlie didn’t argue. She couldn’t after the feelings that raged through her and followed him without resistance.

He pulled her through his door and pushed her back against the wall pressing his body to hers and quickly untying the strings on her bikini again while capturing her mouth with his.

She reached up and pushed the shirt off of his shoulders and caressed the muscles on his back. He grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the wall pushing his hardness against her. “Charlie, you are so beautiful.” He murmured against the skin at her neck.

“I can’t-I...” Charlie moaned.

“Yes you can,” He rasped against her neck. In a swift movement, he cupped her bottom and lifted her to him, turned and tumbled on to the bed diagonally with her underneath his hard male body. His hands renewed their caresses over her until she was making the sexiest noises from the back of her throat. He quickly left her to remove his shorts and then before she regained her senses, was on top of her again. He cupped her breasts in his hands, “You are so perfect.” He groaned against the mounds. His tongue circled around her nipple causing her to arch against him before he took it in his mouth causing her to openly gasp. He reached down between them and found her most intimate spot. He knew that she may be protesting, but she was moist and it told him that she wanted him as much as he did her. As soon as he used his experience knowledge in that area she started to beg him. It was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard.

“As you wish angel,” he breathed moving in position. He was surprised at the husky passion of his own voice. In the midst of all his desire he knew that he’d never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her. She had no idea how her responses made him feel. He bent his head and captured her mouth with his and she eagerly responded while he probed for entrance. Then he lifted her hips swiftly entering her. Then he froze as if stung and his eyes shot open, “Charlie?”

“I-It’s okay Conner.” She said softly.

“Oh God, why didn’t you tell me?” He breathed deeply into her neck. He lifted his head and stared at her, just to find her looking back at him, her gorgeous green eyes watery with unshed tears, “I’m sorry, it’ll pass,” He took a deep breath as a shudder of pleasure went through him, “I can’t stop, you’re just so tight...Christ!”

She grabbed his head and brought his lips to hers urging him to continue. It had hurt, but she had that same aching need to get closer to him and it overruled everything else.

His mouth claimed hers possessively as he withdrew and slowly pushed back into her. This time her painful gasp was captured by his mouth. His hands renewed their caresses coaxing her to relax as he withdrew and plunged into her again, “Angel, honey, lift your knees.” He reached down and pulled one of her thighs up to his hip and she raised the other causing him to sink deeper into her. He groaned, “Jesus, you feel so good.” He raised himself up above her to watch her responses carefully, and renewed his slow controlled thrusts until she reacted by reaching down and digging her fingers into his firm buttocks. Then he continued to increase his movements until she was lifting her hips to meet him. It wasn’t too long after that when he felt the familiar tightening around him and increased the force and speed until she lifted her head back and cried her release just as he roared his own. He lay there for a minute trying to

understand everything. He had never felt such closeness to a woman, or had such a passionate experience making love to one. He lifted his head and stared down at her just to find her looking back at him. “You should have said something.”

She flushed, “How?”

His hand came up and tenderly brushed a few strands of hair off of her face. “Conner, I’m a virgin.”

She smiled, “And you would have run screaming in the other direction like you did all those years ago.”

He shook his head, “You think so?”

She shrugged sheepishly, “You’re used to someone with experience....I thought you would not want someone who wasn’t. They were your words, remember?”

“You’re wrong angel.” He kissed her lightly on the lips, “It just made me realize how special to me you really are. Please tell me I didn’t hurt you. Lie, if you have to.” He said with profound concern.

“It wasn’t bad.” She said, “It was briefly painful. I expected much worse.” Then she smiled, “You were right though, it passed.”

“I’m really glad to hear you say that.” Conner kissed her soundly again, “I’ll be right back, get under the covers.” He got off her and went to the bathroom and she did as he asked. Within a few minutes he was back, under the covers and pulled her up against him. “I think we should stay here for the next few days.”

“That good?” she turned toward him and smiled.

“Amazing.” He kissed the top of her head. *Incredible*, he thought to himself as his hand caressed the smooth contour of her hip. “I think this changes things between us.”

“Hmm, like staterooms.” She offered.

“No, not just rooms.”

“Sleeping patterns?” she offered with a sly smile.

“No.” he laughed knowing that neither one of them got

any sleep the night before.

She lifted her head and looked at him.

He smiled, reached up and brushed her long hair off her shoulder, “You should move in with me.”

“I don’t think so Conner.” At first she was clearly surprised at his offer, but then she knew better than to agree with it.

“Why?” He shifted himself to get a better look at her expression by propping up on his elbow.

“You’ll grow bored of me and my heart will get broken.” *It’ll get broken anyway*, she thought.

He snorted “Not a chance.”

She sighed, “Conner, you are not a one woman man. You have always made that clear-no-let me finish,” she said when he opened his mouth to say something, “I’m not that foolish teenager anymore. I know this, and I don’t expect anything from you. So, let’s just enjoy this time we have together and let me not worry about a future with you.”

“It’s not what you think Charlie.” He protested, “Yes, I have had a *few* relationships,” he grinned with the emphasis on ‘few’, “But I’ve never been with anyone like you in my life. I won’t lie and tell you that this fairytale will last forever, who knows. What I do know is that you fire my blood like no one else I’ve ever met. I’m crazy about you and the thought of not having you with me after this is all over is unbearable.”

She shook her head denying his words, “I think you feel obligated because I was a virgin, besides the fact that I’m being stalked by a sociopath as you put it, and things would have been different if I wasn’t in either case I think you would feel less protective..” she added.

“Maybe it has something to do with it. I’ll be truthful and say it really got me thinking that you allowed me to have what no other man could have from you, and the thought of another man

touching you makes me angry, jealous and maybe a little crazy,” He smiled at her, “But I mean what I say right now. Not only that,” He gave her a sexy grin, “The things I can teach you.”

She took a deep breath keeping her eyes on his, “Then, how about we look at this again when our trip around the Mediterranean is over...”

“You’ll think about it?”

“I’ll think about it,” she agreed, “But I think when you and I go our separate ways after this trip is over, you’ll feel different.”

“I won’t.” He said with conviction. Charlie didn’t know that he’d never asked another woman to move in with him before in his life. Furthermore, he never went out of his way as much as he did with her. Although he played a gentlemen around his past relationships, however brief they were, he never thought about them beyond that. Charlie was different. He was thinking about her all of the time. He felt good around her, better than he ever did with anyone. She was refreshing, unselfish, honest and intelligent. There were no feminine games or manipulation from her. He didn’t have to be concerned with keeping her happy because she always was. Hell, he knew she’d be happy under the belly of an antique car. Characteristics like that can’t be learned.

He reached over and pulled her to him kissing her passionately. She responded without hesitation and he rolled her onto her back.

They ate supper in their room that night and he made love to her again knocking all the dishes on the floor. Then he nudged her awake at three in the morning to ravish her again. They slept until noon the next day.

On the fourth day, they docked in Rome and spent the day sight-seeing. To complete strangers they behaved as newlyweds and Charlie was blissfully happy.

The day after, they travelled inland to Firenze finding out that Mr. Blue lived there and took several hours to track him

down. He was ecstatic to see them.

He lived in a quaint villa near the banks of the River Arno and Charlie instantly fell in love with the country. It was beyond beautiful.

Conner made a silent promise to buy a house there so he could take her back whenever she felt like it. That thought actually caught him by surprise. Not because he thought about doing it, but about how right it felt and how easily it came to him.

“So,” Mr. Blue said after he told his housekeeper to fetch them all an ice cold beer. “You two huh?”

Conner grinned, “Well Leo, you can’t blame me. She had me six years ago.”

“Keep quiet Conner.” She said blushing.

Mr Blue burst into laughter.

“So are those wedding bells I hear?”

“Good god man!” Conner shot back.

He howled with laughter again. “I should have known.”

“I even know better.” Charlie offered with a slanted smile. Conner’s reaction didn’t bother her. She wasn’t disillusioned in the least. She always thought of herself as being a practical person and Conner was about as ready for marriage as people were ready to revert back to the horse and carriage.

“Touché.” He replied with a smile. Then he turned his attention back to Conner, “How’s my ranch?”

“Dad says they have a champ this year. Foster’s Revenge.”

“Is that right? I knew that filly would come through.”

For the next few hours they caught up on things and by dark were on their way back to the yacht.

Conner noticed that Charlie was unusually quiet and he wondered if it had something to do with the subject of marriage that he reacted so quickly to. His eyes glanced off her a few times. The last he wanted to do was upset her, but he also knew that she didn’t know a man like she did him and there were a lot

of things he had to take into consideration over that. She may be more sensitive to issues that he wouldn't expect such as this one.

It had nothing to do with her. He had his beliefs and if he were to marry, Charlie would be the closest person he'd consider, but he was only thirty-one and didn't feel like settling down yet. Part of him wanted to ask her about it, but that was just one thing you never discussed unless you were serious about it so he let it be.

At the same time, he was serious when he told her that he wanted her to move in with him. That was a first in his books, and he still wasn't apprehensive about it so that must have said something for how he felt about her. The thought of having her next to him at night from now on was something he was looking forward to. If she didn't agree to moving in with him, he'd damn well make sure that she had a problem turning her down. He wasn't one to take no for an answer.

Two weeks after they set off the yacht docked back in Miami and they took the private jet back to Chicago. To Charlie it was possibly the most amazing experience of her life. Conner's reputation was definitely well earned. He was an amazing lover and was patient in every aspect when teaching her what he liked. She didn't have to teach him a darn thing. He knew exactly what to do to her to make her moan.

"So," Conner said as the plane was coasting down the runway to his awaiting care, "Have you made up your mind about our living together?"

She stared up at him, "I don't know Conner."

"So you have thought about it."

"More than you know, but after all of this." She waved her hand around the interior of the jet, "I feel like I was swept off my feet."

He lifted his brows.

“In other words,” she clarified, “Just give me a few days until the haze settles.”

He smiled, “Haze? Well, well, I must be a superior lover to daze a woman like you.”

She chuckled, “Modesty is certainly not in your character.”

“God forbid.” He bent over and kissed the top of her head before pulling her into his embrace, “Two days.”

“Two?”

“Two. Then I’m coming for you.” He said as he erected and set his eyes on her. “I mean it.”

She felt a thrill go through her at those words. Maybe it was because he sounded completely serious when he said them.

As it was she was so busy at work that she never called him. He actually never called her either. She felt a little empty over that. Did that mean he changed his mind? She quickly pushed that thought from her mind because maybe he was just as busy as she was. At least she hoped he was.

Regardless of her schedule tomorrow, she would make sure that she would the next night. Dan Mckeddy had taken up residence in her apartment at Conner’s insistence so she knew that he was serious about her and protecting her. Neither one of them had an incident with Makis Antoniadis during their trip abroad but Conner said he’d rather be safe than sorry so she reluctantly agreed.

Truth of the matter was, that she’d already made up her mind about moving in with him, especially when they were in the middle of a conference meeting and she found herself absently chewing on a pencil while John tried unsuccessfully to get her attention several times.

“Jesus boss, do you want us to give you a minute?”

She adjusted her eyes to him from the far window to see his expression of amusement. She smiled slowly, “Don’t start on

me.” There was no use denying where her mind was, after all she did go on a two week trip with him and with the tabloids that were laid out on her desk that got back, it was obvious that her staff knew. She smiled as she brushed them aside. Funny thing she didn’t even remember seeing a photographer at some of the places where those pictures were taken. How Conner managed such invasion of privacy, she’d never know because even the little of what she was dealing with bothered her. At least there was nothing grossly intimate. Just a few photos with him kissing her cheek or holding her hand. There was one with them at a quaint café in Rome where he’d leaned over and kissed her softly on the forehead and she picked it up to look at it. It was a very nice photo. Maybe she’d keep the clipping. Conner was such a devastatingly handsome man, and here he was making sure that she was the center of his attention.

“Since you brought it up.” Linda interjected with an expression matching John’s, “How was your trip with the gorgeous billionaire?”

She gave her a mock warning look, “I didn’t bring it up and you two are nosey.”

“Hell yes we are.” John admitted honestly, “Rumour has it that he rarely sees the same woman twice, but you ended up getting a Mediterranean trip out of it—“

“And an offer of cohabitation.” She finished with a grin causing her two coworkers to gape.

“Holy hell.” John said.

“I don’t believe it!” Added Linda, “Congrats.”

“I never said yes.”

“Are you insane?” Linda countered.

“Hey, leave her be, she’s playing hard to get. Good ploy.”

“No I’m not.” She explained, “I just don’t know if I’m ready for that kind of commitment.”

“It shocks the hell out of me that he is.” John said, “if he

offered it to you, he must be serious.”

Charlie looked at him thoughtfully, “I’m scared.”

“You?” Linda said in surprise, “I’ve never heard that word come out of your mouth. You take the bull by the horns every time.”

“This is different.”

“Ah,” said John realizing what she meant, “You’re worried your heart will get broken. That’s completely different territory for you isn’t it?”

“Perceptive.” She said, “Enough talk about my personal life. I think we should get back to work.”

“Uh uh, let’s talk about this.” John added, “I think you need to do what your feelings tell you.”

“I agree.” Linda said.

“You two are trouble.”

“You shouldn’t go through life not taking chances with your heart honey.” He continued like she never said anything, “Conner has a reputation and I’d be the first one to warn you off him, but he’s got it bad if he wants you to move in with him.”

“He told me I had two days and he was coming to get me.”

He chuckled, “See?”

“I just think it has to do with this death threat. We’ve known each other for years and he feels protective.”

“Then why doesn’t he just hire someone to protect you? This is different Charlie.”

Was it? It was true that Dan was staying with her, but that was decided before he insisted she live with him.

Just then Marianne came in the room, “Charlie, Conner’s on line three.”

Her heart leapt and this time she couldn’t keep her feelings from her expression. She broke into a grin causing the other two to laugh.

“He said hurry up and don’t keep him waiting or he’s going

to die of a broken heart.” She said with an amused smile.

“Oh gosh.” She flushed getting to her feet trying to ignore the teasing of her team. She gave Marianne a mock glare while walking past her. She gave her one of innocence.

“I told you before he was charming.” She defended herself with unmistakable humour in her eyes.

Conner was grinning in the phone when she answered it. “My god, I’m already hot for you and I only hear your voice.”

“Good lord Conner, you’ll have my whole team gossiping about me now after what you told Marianne.”

“Who cares?” he chuckled, “Besides that John will know you belong to me.”

“Ridiculous. I have no interest in him.” She found it odd that he’d bring that up again. She already told him that he was just an acquaintance, one of her staff. Conner was so confident in himself that other men seemed withered next to him, yet he just confessed that jealousy again. Another warm rush went through her.

“Keep saying that.” He said firmly. “And remember that it’s only my hands that get to touch that gorgeous body of yours. I know what makes you whisper my name so sexily and—“

“Conner!” she said appalled, “Can you quit trying to make me blush? Need I remind you, I *am* at work.”

“Just remember.” He said smiling again, “Anyway, I’m calling to ask what time the movers can come over.”

“I never said yes.”

“Or no.” he finished.

“Didn’t this time put anything in perspective for you?”

“Yes, I have oodles of perspective on exactly what I’m going to do to you when I get you alone and in bed again.”

She flushed, “I can’t talk about this here.”

“I love the humility you possess. By the way, have you

noticed that I'm chasing you? I think that says something. My father is beside himself with joy about our living arrangement too, so do us a favour and don't break his heart."

"Oh you drive a hard bargain." She laughed again. "Resorting to blackmail seems beneath you."

"I'm a master negotiator. If you don't say yes I'll be over at your place tonight using my body to convince you—or I could just show up there and—"

"Okay—okay." She laughed, "I give up." His deep chuckle followed and she swore her insides liquefied at that sound.

"Excellent! Now, how late are you working? Should we have dinner to celebrate?"

"It will be late." She said unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. He heard it.

"I'll send over a key today and would really appreciate it if you come see me tonight."

She really wanted to, more than she wanted her next breath, "I'll see how tired I am—" she paused before continuing bravely, "—after all Conner, you have a way of putting a woman into a coma."

He bellowed with laughter. "Christ I miss you."

Her whole body felt that statement and his laughter was like some instant aphrodisiac to her nerves that seemed to come alive all at once.

"All right. Tomorrow, you move in with me. Tonight, if you can handle it, come see me. I'll send you a key card."

She agreed and hung up. It took her a few minutes to recover from that conversation. He already had her half turned on. It was completely amazing what he could do to her over the phone. She sat back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling. Moving in with him was something she really wanted to do, but she was honest with John when she told him she was scared. Well, she was more like terrified. Conner seemed so out of reach

for so many years and now that she'd had him, she was terrified of losing him. It was true that she fell in love with him when she was eighteen. She knew she did. Nothing felt so earth moving before in her life as it was when she was with him. Everything about this felt so right, yet she was afraid that it would fall to pieces.

As it was, she didn't get out of work until eleven. Dan was waiting for her and drove her to Conner's penthouse. Hopefully he was still awake when she got there. She knew he worked too much too, and didn't want to disturb his well needed rest. Normally she would call ahead but maybe it would be a nice surprise just to sneak in bed next to him.

Conner rolled over and groaned at the warm naked body pressed next to his, "Charlie." He felt himself harden as she caressed him. Then suddenly an odd feeling overcame him. Something was wrong.

"Who's Charlie darling?" came a familiar French accent.

"Oh Jesus!" He sat up straight. "Francine!"

And if things couldn't get worse the bedroom light came on and Charlie stood that with the most horrified look of betrayal on her face.

"It isn't what it looks like." Conner was trying to untangle himself from the covers and Francine.

Her face took on an expression of blatant disbelief before she turned and walked out of the room.

"Fuck!" Conner jumped up from the bed and grabbed his robe as he ran out the door just as Charlie was leaving his penthouse.

"Charlie wait!" He called.

She stopped and turned to him slowly. Tears were streaming down her face.

"Angel, it's not what you think. She must've had a key

card...”

“Are you done?”

He grabbed her shoulders, “Please, listen. I never broke my promise. She crawled into my bed. I thought she was you...” He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, for the expression on her face nearly ripped his heart out.

She slapped him, “You thought she was me!”

He released her, “I...”

“Shut up Conner. No more excuses.” The elevator doors opened then and she stepped in, turned around and faced him. She raised her chin up and looked him in the eye, so he could see the full extent of his actions on her face. “I told you my heart would get broken.” The tears began to fall.

Conner couldn’t say anything to change her mind. He knew it looked bad, worse than bad. It was devastating and if roles were reversed he would feel the same way. He put his hands on either side of the elevator and stared at her in defeat as the doors closed severing their eye contact. “God baby, I’m so sorry.” He breathed to the closed doors.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Charlie.” Marianne came into her office first thing in the morning, “Conner is on line three.”

“Hang up on him.” She said without looking up from the file she was reading on her desk and writing notes from it. She’d just barely sat down. She had already sent Dan packing from her place when she got back there the night before.

“He’s called nine times this morning.”

Charlie put her pen down and looked up at her, “Tell him I am busy Marianne.”

Marianne just stared at her for a moment. She didn’t know what happened between them, but yesterday, nothing

could affect Charlie's golden smile. Now, the woman was acting as if her heart was broken. It wasn't obvious, she just poured herself into her work, and although she wasn't rude, she didn't crack a smile and her voice was flat. In fact, she fit in with the rest of the lawyers around there. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." She returned to her work.

Marianne shook her head and left the office. She sat down at her desk and took the phone off of hold, "Mr. Blackwell, I'm sorry, Mrs. Murphy is rather indisposed."

"Of course."

She was about to hang up when she heard her name through the earpiece.

"Yes Mr. Blackwell?"

"How is she?"

There was a pause. Marianne wondered how much she should tell him. She didn't know what had happened but she knew it had to be devastating to affect Charlie so horribly. However, she also knew how he looked at her, touched her, and left no question of how much he adored her. Marianne was no naïve little thing like Charlie was and whatever Conner felt for her, was definitely genuine. Whatever had happened couldn't be more than just a misunderstanding. Whatever Charlie was hurting over could only lead to one thing. Another woman. But she trusted her own instincts and her own eyes for that matter. There was no way on the planet that Conner Blackwell would cheat on Charlie. "She looks like hell." She heard him curse.

"Is she eating right?"

"No, not really. I have to force her to take a break short of me quitting if she doesn't, just to eat." She heard him breathe deeply at the news

"Mr. Blackwell, it isn't my place, but whatever happened between you two has to be cleared up. At this rate she'll work herself to death. I'm worried about her. So apologize so we can

have our Charlie back.”

“I’ve tried.”

There was a long pause on his end, “Don’t worry Marianne, I’ll figure something out. I’m not letting her go.”

“She likes emeralds.”

“pardon?”

Marianne smiled into the phone, “The engagement ring.”

“Oh.” He chuckled, “I’ll take that into consideration, but one step at a time. I need to get her to speak to me first.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Make sure she eats.”

“I will do my best.”

Conner hung up the phone, leaned back in his seat and ran his hand through his hair. He turned his face into his palm and rested his elbow on the arm of his chair. Just then Nancy walked in. He didn’t even hear her.

Nancy took in the scene before her and scowled. She loved Conner, but she knew it was only a matter of time when a woman would come and steal his heart. He wasn’t one to talk about his relationships, but she’d seen his expression when he came into work this morning. It looked like he’d been hit by a truck. Without even looking at her, he told her to cancel his appointments and shut the door to his office.

“Got under your skin did she.” Nancy said as she set a cup of coffee on his desk causing him to turn his head and look at her. She noticed the circles under his eyes and the look of despair on his face.

“A bit...yes.” He managed to say with the same steady calm he was known for despite the conflict in his expression.

“Go get her then Conner, and quit this damn moping.” She crossed her arms and stared down her nose at him.

“I can’t.”

“I suppose whatever you did was entirely unforgivable,

but that woman loves you. Find a way.”

“It was unforgivable.” He sighed in defeat. “But it was a misunderstood unforgivable.”

“Conner, put on that face that you use to take over a multimillion dollar company, and use that to go after this woman. She’ll forgive you in time. Especially if you tell her that you love her.” She turned around and walked out.

Conner watched her go. Did he? If he did, it certainly explained a lot. He was an utter mess. Hurting Charlie was destroying him. Nancy was right. He had to fix things.

First he called his father and had a long conversation. His father was a brilliant man and he had to give him credit with what he had to say. Next he paged his secretary. “Nancy, get Francine LeBlanc on the phone for me. She’s staying at the Hilton.”

“Conner I didn’t mean you chase...”

“Do it.”

“Fine.” She said sharply.

Conner’s mind went back to last night. He returned to his penthouse after Charlie left as Francine was getting dressed.

“I’ll stay if you wish darling.” She cooed in her French accent.

“You could have called.” He snapped.

“Why?”

“I told her I was faithful.”

“You told her what?” Francine was stunned, “Whatever for?”

“I like her Francine...a lot.”

“Oh.” She finished buttoning up her blouse. Then looked up at him tossing her auburn hair over her shoulder, “I take it, she doesn’t like to share.”

“She doesn’t appreciate finding another woman in my...our bed.” He corrected, “She’s going to be living with me.”

“Oh dear, that does complicate this doesn’t it. I’ll be on my way then.” She said not being the least bit sorry. She walked by him and paused, tipping up and planted a brief kiss on his cheek.

“My key card, Francine.” He held out his hand completely unaffected by the small gesture.

She gave him a bit of a pout as she dug in her purse and gave it to him. “I’ll have it back in a week.” She said with a smile as she walked out of the room.

“No you won’t.” he said as he heard the door shut behind him as she left. It was no wonder he wanted Charlie over these women. She had so much more to give besides a tumble between the sheets.

Linda and Charlie walked into Dene’s, a popular restaurant. It took Linda several hours to convince her boss to go out for lunch. Little did she know John, Marianne and she were trying to figure out how to get her through this and held a discussion about her prior to lunch today. Linda felt guilty because she really didn’t like talking about someone as respectable as Charlie behind her back, but this called for drastic measure. Linda was more soft spoken than the other two so she was elected to take Charlie to lunch in hopes that she’d relent and she did. Only she didn’t expect things to backfire.

Charlie stilled, when she spotted Conner and another woman, the same woman from two nights ago. Hurt and rage hit her at once. How could he? She should have stayed at the office. How could she expect to get away from him and his women?

“Oh,” Linda saw exactly what Charlie had just noticed, “We should go somewhere else.”

Charlie took a deep breath, “I’m not running from him Linda.”

The hostess came up at that moment and Linda requested a seat far away from the other couple, who had not noticed them

yet.

Linda made Charlie take the seat with her back to Conner, “Don’t look at him if he upsets you Charlie.” She nodded and sat down. “He hasn’t even noticed you.” Just then the waiter came by and filled their glasses with water and handed them menus.

“Suddenly I’m not very hungry.” she said flipping closed the menu.

Linda stared at her for a moment, “Charlie, you look like shit. You have to eat something, besides this is on me.” She set the menu down and leaned toward her, “Do you want to talk about what happened.”

Charlie almost said something but changed her mind at the last minute, “No.” What she wanted to do was turn around and watch him and the other woman. It felt like a large hand wrapped around her heart and started to squeeze. It certainly didn’t take long for him to find a replacement and to top it off, the woman was beyond beautiful. Not only that, he didn’t seem to be suffering at all. She felt like hell, and hadn’t much sleep over the past few days. She even contemplated that he was telling the truth when he told her nothing happened, but it was ridiculous. The image of him embracing the woman when she turned on the light of their bedroom was too clear in her mind and they were both naked. She swallowed hard trying to control the tears that threatened to fall.

Linda could see that the man’s presence affected Charlie. The waiter came back and she ordered salad for the both of them, and Charlie didn’t even seem to notice. “Honey, are you all right?”

Charlie slowly focused on her, “I’m fine.”

Linda knew she wasn’t. Charlie was a rock with her emotions and besides the slight blush a few days ago when she told them Conner wanted her to move in with him, she’d never seen her out of sorts. This must’ve been devastating for her and

she knew that a man with Conner's charm would be quite easy to fall in love with. She was sure that many woman have. Only Charlie was special, and it angered her that he had hurt her.

Linda's eyes darted over her shoulder just as the woman was handing something to Conner, "She just gave him something."

"Probably her phone number." Although she was curious.

"No, it looks like a business sized envelope." Linda's eyes went back to Charlie. "I have a feeling she's the reason you've been so miserable." Even though they talked about helping Charlie, none of them knew what had happened, except the obvious. She had a broken heart.

Charlie nodded, but still wouldn't say anything.

"the man has a lot of friends Charlie. He's allowed to..."

"Sleep with them." Charlie finished, "I don't want to hear anymore about this okay?"

Linda clamped her mouth shut. Suddenly she felt very angry. Charlie was one of the nicest people she had ever met, and multi-billionaire or not, he shouldn't have hurt her. "Sorry Charlie."

She shrugged in response.

Linda's eyes darted past her again and she perked up. "Oh, they're leaving." Even though Charlie said she didn't want to hear anymore about it, she saw that she had her undivided attention when she told her what he was doing.

Unfortunately they had a window seat and Charlie was forced to watch Conner plant a kiss on the woman's cheek before he helped her into a cab. They were both smiling. Obviously he wasn't affected by her absence at all. She was just another conquest.

Linda reached across the table and covered her hand with hers, "at least he didn't leave with her Charlie."

"It wouldn't make a difference, we're through." She felt a tear escape and slip down her cheek.

Once she went back to the office, things didn't get any better. It was hard to concentrate on anything. She had to give it to Linda and John, they were the best legal team she could ask for. They managed to cover for her effectively in a meeting she had with her boss over the progress of one of the cases, but she felt completely inadequate. She couldn't remember much of what was done and how far along they were even though she was a part of it all.

"Hey," John said putting his arm around her shoulders once the boardroom cleared, "Don't worry about it. We all have that first heartbreak." Inside he wanted to go over to strangle Conner with his bare hands.

First and last, thought Charlie. She'd never go through this again. Her heart couldn't take it.

Again when she reached her apartment she was exhausted. When she came off the elevator she stopped. There were flowers everywhere around her door of all types and colors. It was actually beautiful but she stepped past them knowing they were all from Conner, and opened her door.

Once inside she called Phil, the doorman, and asked him not to let anyone carrying flowers or anything else for her upstairs.

"No problem Miss Murphy."

She hung up, tossed her bag on the couch and removed her coat. That's when she was grabbed from behind.

Conner had just exited his Limousine and made his way into Charlie's building with a stride of purpose. He was going to convince her to come back to him, if he had to drag her out by the hair. "Good evening Phil." He said to the doorman as he walked past. He remembered his name when Charlie said it. It looked as though he was going to say something, but he didn't wait around to see what and kept walking. Conner had attitude and poise of a man that wasn't denied anything he wanted. He kept his expression confident and his walk steady as he headed for the

elevator. When he got in he pressed the button of her floor and saw that Phil had given him one final glance before he returned to his duties.

Phil watched him go wondering if Miss Murphy meant not to let in her new billionaire boyfriend too. He doubted it. It seemed if the man acted like he had every right to be there so he wasn't going to stop him. He doubted very much that many people tried. Well, maybe he should call her. He reached for the phone. No answer. Maybe she was in the shower; after all she'd just gotten home from work. He hung up.

Conner stepped off the elevator and met Mrs. Grindel heading out with her poodle. "Good evening."

She stopped and stared up at him, "Miss Charlie is a nice lady. She looked after Duchess when I was ill. I'd thank you not to corrupt her virtue."

He practically had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing, "Of course. I assure you my intentions are honourable."

That got her attention. She straightened slightly, nodded seeming satisfied, and walked regally past him.

He watched her go while grinning. Then he turned back to the door that had a pile of flowers in front of it and frowned. It looked like she just stepped by them. Well, he couldn't blame her. flowers certainly wouldn't win her back and he didn't expect them too. He was just trying to let her know that he wasn't going to give up. He actually thought about having some jewellery sent to the office but chances were she'd send it back.

He walked up to the door and knocked. No answer. "Charlie." He called knocking again.

Still no answer.

She was probably in there purposely ignoring him. He glanced down the hall toward the elevator. It had only been three days and everything was still too fresh. His father told him to give it a few weeks but it was eating away at him like a cancer.

His gut hurt and he hadn't been sleeping. For a man who had no problem walking in and out of women's lives like a revolving door, he just couldn't leave Charlie be. He missed her.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the key that she neglected to take from Dan and placed it in the lock. He knew this was unethical, but he needed to talk to her. Before he turned it and opened the door, he noticed something odd. He focused on an area beside the lock. There were splinters of wood there as if someone forced the lock. He was sure that wasn't there before. Dan would have noticed it. Panic went through him. "Charlie!"

He quickly turned the key and bolted in the apartment. It was dark, but he knew where the light switches were. "Charlie!"

A noise caught his attention and he saw someone exiting out the dining room window.

He grabbed his phone while running over to the window and looking out. He called Dan who just so happened to be driving the car today, "There's someone coming down the fire escape in the back ally from Charlie's window, get him." He said looking at the dark figure go down the ladder.

"Yes sir." Came the response along with the sound of feet hitting the pavement.

He hung up and ran into the bedroom nearly tripping over an overturned chair, "Charlie!"

No answer.

He noticed that the lamp on her bedside table was knocked over. He went around the side of the bed and the sight that met him was gut wrenching.

Charlie was face down on the floor, topless and still. Her skirt had been hiked up and her underwear pulled down. Her back was beginning to show a multitude of bruising and blood poured out of a cut on her lip and her nose. Quickly he checked for a pulse. She still had one and it was strong. He grabbed the coverlet of the bed and covered her before dialling for an

ambulance.

He carefully wrapped her in the blanket as he turned her over, “Charlie—honey can you hear me?”

A small moan escaped her. Relief flooded through him. He sat down on the floor and pulled her on to his lap cradling her, “I should have never let you send Dan away.” Conner had never come so close to weeping as he did in that moment. If only he came a few minutes earlier.

Charlie awoke in the hospital to bright lights and a splitting headache several hours later. Immediately Conner’s face came across her vision followed by his concerned voice.

“How are you doing?” he brushed his fingers down her cheek.

It took her a minute to focus. Every bit of her hurt especially her lip. “What—where am I?”

“You should have never sent Dan away.” He scolded.

“Oh god.” She brought her hand up to her forehead remembering, “Did—I mean—“ she choked up and couldn’t finish. Tears leaked from her eyes.

“No.’ he said softly feeling like a jerk for reprimanding her. “It seems I interrupted him.”

She sobbed and he bent over and held her. “We got him though Charlie. You’re safe now.” It was tearing his heart out seeing her so vulnerable. “Come on honey, you’re safe.”

She cried harder and clung to him, “I was so terrified.”

“Dan caught him coming down the fire escape. Needless to say he needed medical attention before they hauled him away in cuffs.”

“Thanks.” She sniffed into his shoulder.

“Anytime.” He said softly.

“I need to get out of here.” She didn’t like the hospital. It was a place where her father died and she associated bad

memories with it, “Conner, I want to leave.”

“The doctor wants to keep you overnight for observation—” he paused pulling back from her so he could meet her eyes, “—look, we need to talk.”

She looked up at him and shook her head slightly, “I can’t handle anything else right now Conner. Please, can we just leave this be.” She knew he wanted to discuss that incident of him with the other woman, but it was too fresh and the hurt was still raw with her. Even having him there hurt her despite the fact of needing him at that moment. She had to admit, that she wouldn’t have wanted anyone else there to wake up to. Just seeing him made her feel better about the assault but she couldn’t rely on him.

Reluctantly he nodded. He was desperate to tell her, convince her, of the truth, but she was right. This wasn’t the time. “Baby, you scared the hell out of me.” It was said full of emotion. Something that Conner could never have been accused of letting show before.

Her expression softened at that confession. It wasn’t necessarily what he said, it was the tone in which he said it. She actually felt it through to her very soul because he’d meant every word with feeling. For a brief instant she nearly gave in.

At that moment John came bursting in the door and Conner stepped back as Charlie renewed her weeping seeing him. He gathered her in his arms and that’s when Conner grabbed his coat and left. She had told him that John was only a friend, but seeing him hold her was too much.

“Are you okay?” John said releasing her, “Christ we were frantic with worry when we found out.”

“I’m fine. I guess he didn’t get too far thanks to Conner.”

“It’s nice to know the billionaire playboy has some uses.” She frowned so he changed the subject, “Well you look like hell.” He said scanning the swollen nose, cut lip and a bruise on her left

cheek.

“Thanks. I knew I could always count on you to be truthful with me.”

He smiled and ran a finger down her nose, “Linda’s parking the car. Conner phoned us an hour ago but the traffic was insane.”

“Conner did?” that took her back.

“Yes, he figured you’d need some friends.” He answered.

She looked around the room and saw that he was gone. Her heart sank. He phoned John even though he was jealous over their relationship. In his way he really did care about her. Still, she couldn’t go back no matter how sorry he was and even if he saved her life. She could never trust him again.

“He said they finally got that little bastard.”

“One of Conner’s bodyguards got him.” She admitted. Then bit her lip and looked up at the ceiling trying not to cry again, “I sent him away a few days ago. Conner wanted him to stay and protect me. It was stupid.”

“You were hurt.” John said pulling up a chair beside the bed and sitting down. “People do dumb things when they hurt, even you.”

She nodded and her eyes went to him, “I’m surprised he called you. He’s jealous of you, you know?”

Despite the situation John burst into disbelieving laughter, “Me? Jesus, he’s got to have it bad.”

“That’s ridiculous. He wouldn’t have slept with another woman if he loved me.” She said softly.

“So that’s it.” John said dropping his laughter, “Linda never said anything. You have to give it to her, she’s some confidant. I know you told her something that day you went out to lunch together, but I couldn’t get it out of her.” He winked. “I tried *everything*.”

She smiled at his undertone, “You are a dog.” She could

only imagine what he'd done to try and get a confession. John was a nice looking man and women liked him. Maybe not as much as Conner, but he really didn't have a problem finding a date when he wanted one.

"I am that." He leaned forward and took her hand, "do we need to have another stress relief visit to the bar?"

"Oh lord, you are a bad influence. I hope Linda can straighten you out. Last time I did that, I had a hangover that lasted three days."

"From a few shots of whiskey? You are a weak drunk." He teased glad that she was bouncing back from that horrible assault.

"Weak?" she said with wide eyes, "I had shared two bottles of wine with Mr. Blackwell senior after I left there. I'm surprised I didn't die from alcohol poisoning."

"Wow, I take it back."

She looked past him for a moment, "Conner slept on the couch that night to make sure I was okay."

"So," John said seeing her expression, "How long have you been in love with that lunk head?"

She gave him a weak smile this time, "I know it's obvious, isn't it? I met him when I was eighteen. I didn't tell anyone that except Marianne."

"Wow," he said a little taken back, "So this isn't some whirl wind romance. This has history."

"It was a silly shared kiss, six years ago."

"It couldn't have been that silly Charlie." His eyes went to her mouth doubting very much Conner thought that too. She had an incredible mouth.

Charlie never had anyone to talk about her personal issues since she was a young girl. This sudden release brought a gush of tears and John was up beside her again and holding her. "Hey, you know what you tell me won't leave this room, right?"

John was a good man and she did trust him, so after the gate to her emotions opened she continued to talk. She told him about her childhood, being orphaned, her brothers and of course, Conner. John listened intently and didn't interrupt her while she talked.

Linda came to the door at one point but John looked past Charlie and gave a subtle shake of his head. Immediately she understood and left to get herself a cup of coffee.

"I know he cares John, but I know nothing of relationships." She continued. "I don't know what's normal or not."

"You're not alone. Neither do I and I've probably had a few more relationships than you." He said with a sly smile.

She had to admit that his sense of humour really did help.

"As for your previous statement about him caring—I have to admit that although I don't like that he hurt you, but the pained look on his face when I showed up was genuine."

She wiped her tears away with her hands, "God, I'm so messed up."

"I have to admit, it's nice to see this human side of you. We all thought you were virtually invincible."

"Well now you know my kryptonite."

"I do." He grinned, "A tall Irishman by the name of Conner Blackwell."

"You're are a pest."

He chuckled, "Look, come stay with me for a few days. I have a spare bedroom in my apartment. It isn't much, but my boss is a viper that works me too much, so it's not like I'm there much."

This time she laughed, "You are a good friend."

"Well, as long as you don't mind my humble livings, you're always welcome."

"I think I'll take you up on it John, I don't think I can go back there."

“No problem. You can stay as long as you want.” He got up and kissed her on the forehead.

Several weeks went by and Charlie settled back into her routine. She'd lost weight but Marianne was pushing fattening donuts every chance she got. She even started bringing her in dishes that she made at home. Conner hadn't contacted her again. Some days she would just stare at her phone wishing it would ring just to see if he was doing well.

“Really Marianne.” She said when she presented her with a stunning quiche.

“you don't eat.” She scolded.

“I do, just not constantly.” She said wide-eyed.

“Now you may be my boss, but I don't want to lose you. You're going to waste away because of a broken heart. If you don't eat I'm going to quit.”

She looked up at her. The days seemed to crawl by, but she'd renewed her confidence in herself where her job was concerned and in the past six cases, she didn't lose one, although it wasn't all her so she did thank Linda and John for their excellent work.

“You wouldn't dare.” She said with a feigned look of fear then smiled.

“I would.” She returned smiling, “Now would you mind letting me get back to work.”

“By all means.” She set something on her desk that was wrapped, “I feel silly about this, but I figured its been long enough and you seem to be recovering well. I got it when you were away in the Mediterranean. If I offend you I'm apologizing now.” She turned and left.

Puzzled, Charlie picked up the item and unwrapped it. It was a framed picture of her with Conner at that Charity event

they went to. He was in the middle of assisting her out of the car and she was laughing.

She sat back in her seat and stared at it. The look on his face was what drew her attention. Even from the perspective of the photo his expression was unmistakable. He looked like he was in complete adulation. He had a wide handsome smile of admiration and his eyes were definitely on her. Leave it to Marianne to jar her heart again.

She set the photo on her desk and stared at the closed door of her office. How she even got the picture in the first place amazed her. It was obviously shot by one of the paparazzi at the event and it looked real enough. She couldn't possibly bear to throw it out and obviously Marianne knew that.

She glanced at the phone again and wondered how he was doing. Not one minute went by when she didn't think about him. Once she got back in her routine after the assault she reflected heavily on what he'd done for her. She wasn't angry at him anymore, just plain hurt. How could she expect a man like Conner to stay monogamous? He was filthy rich and dripping in sex appeal after all, she fell in love with him over a kiss. Maybe he just couldn't help himself. That woman he was with was stunning. Yet he seemed so sincere about his feelings toward her. And why would he tell her to come over when he was going to have another woman there? Was she so stunning that he forgot himself? On the other hand, she basically told him that she wasn't going to be there because of how tired she was. She probably wouldn't have been but he was so darn convincing over the phone.

Her phone buzzed at that moment making her jump.

"Charlie, there's Mr. Blackwell on line one—and before you get upset, it's senior not junior."

Theo? Why would he be calling her? She reached for the receiver, "Theo?"

“Charlie, how wonderful to hear your voice.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine, why would you ask? Well, I guess I normally don’t phone my son’s girlfriends but I was just wondering if you would come to my wife’s and I’s anniversary next weekend.”

“Theo—“ she meant to correct him but he interrupted her.

“Now, I know that Conner has been out of the country for the past few weeks and can’t make it, but I’d love to have you there.”

Out of the country. Had he? She couldn’t lie to herself and say that she hadn’t thought about him still. Usually every minute during the time she was awake until she went to bed. “There’s something I need to tell you—“

He continued as if he hadn’t said anything, “My wife’s health has unfortunately taken a turn for the worse and Conner is going to make it home the week after.”

That got her attention, “She’s not well?”

“We didn’t want to stress Conner out, well especially with the way he’s been working these past few weeks. So he doesn’t know.”

She felt her heart beat heavily in her chest. Obviously Conner never told them that they had broken up. Then there was his other statement about Conner working too much. Was it because of her, or was that normal with him? She wanted to know but she didn’t want to ask because Theo didn’t know about them and it would most likely upset Dorothy by the sounds of it. What he said next just confirmed it.

“I’ve talked non-stop about you and Dorothy is already in love with you. She feels she already knows you.”

She near groaned out loud. How could she possibly tell him that Conner and she were not together? It would most possibly upset her and if she wasn’t well, it may cause her further illness.

“Anyway, if you can make it, that would be something else.

She's already making up a room." He added.

Now she couldn't even use the busy schedule excuse. It sounded like they had their hearts set on her being there. Well if she did agree, she'd have to make sure she told them the truth when she got there. What's the harm in seeing Theo again if Conner was out of the country and not going to be there? He'd been good to her even when she was a small town mechanic.

"So what do you say? I'll send a car to your building. You can be here by supertime."

She paused briefly. If Conner wasn't able to make it, then at least she wouldn't run into him. Also, she could use some time away because she'd been working like crazy too. "I'll be packed and ready." She said trying to sound excited and gave him the address of John's building where she was staying.

"Great!" After that they said their goodbyes.

At his house in the Hamptons Theodore Blackwell hung up the phone staring down at it thoughtfully.

"Thanks dad." Conner said standing behind him with his hands thrust in the pockets of his slacks.

Theo turned to him and gave him a reassuring smile. "Yeah well, your mother has her heart set on grandchildren."

He grinned, "Don't jump to far ahead. I still have to get her to forgive me."

"She'll forgive you son. You're a smart man and anyone who has half a brain can see you're in love with her. You just need to get her to see that."

Was it that obvious? Is that what this was? The restless nights, the inability to concentrate, the change in his eating habits, and his recent ability to put in eighteen hour days just to put her out of his mind? He'd never been in love before so this made sense. Nancy mentioned it, but the wounds were still fresh in what was happening between them and he was busy obsessing on how to get her to forgive him to focus on what she'd said.

His father actually came up with the idea when he phoned him last month. He knew Charlie wouldn't like this, to be deceived, but he was willing to take the risk.

He couldn't take the fact that she'd moved in with John. What she didn't know is that he'd had her watched after that assault, and it hit him hard when she moved in with her legal assistant. Thankfully Dan was able to pick the lock of John's apartment. He couldn't take it anymore and had to see if they were sleeping together. To his ultimate relief her things were in a separate bedroom and it looked as though that bed was slept in.

He stood beside it looking down at it for a moment almost smiling that she had not made it. Actually those little things like that meant she wasn't perfect, but to him, they made her that way. He reached down and picked up her pillow and held it to his face to smell it. Christ, she still smelled amazing.

"Boss?" Dan called from the other room.

"A minute." Dan was keeping watch but he wasn't ready to leave quite yet. He placed the pillow back on the bed and took another look around the room. It looked as though she was living out of a suitcase because nothing was in the closet or the dresser. She had several suitcases on a chair beside the bed and it gave him enormous relief. Now he knew that she moved in there because she couldn't go home and he didn't blame her. He'd also learned that she went right back to work the next day. He admired the strength that she had. Still, the fact that she was living with John bothered the hell out of him.

John checked his watch as he exited the courthouse. He'd filed the injunction and had about twenty minutes to eat before he got back to the office for a meeting.

As he came down the stairs he saw a stretched limousine sitting at the curb with the driver standing beside the back door. Now it wasn't odd to see limos in Chicago, but it was odd for a

driver to have his attention on him. Then he said his name.

“John Steadman.”

That caused him to pause and look at him. He was a big man and by the looks of his physique, not your normal driver. In fact he looked more like a professional bodyguard. “Yes?”

“My employer would like to offer you a ride wherever you need to go. He just wants a moment of your time.”

John glanced at the blackened window of the Limousine, “Actually I have twenty minutes to get back to work.”

“That’ll be enough.” He said opening the door.

John bent down to look in the car and saw the familiar face of Conner Blackwell lean forward into his view. “Ah hell. If I talk to you she’ll cut my balls off.”

“No she won’t.” he said firmly. “Because you don’t need to tell her.”

John contemplated that. “Well, I guess I owe you for calling us when she got hurt.” He said after a moment.

“I’ll take that. Get in.”

John sat across from Conner as Dan shut the door. A moment later the Limo pulled away from the curb.

After a minute it became obvious to Conner that he was staring at another alpha male by the way John returned his gaze. He’d talked to him on the phone and saw him in passing when leaving the hospital, but now he got to face the man and speak to him. It must’ve been about five minutes of studying him before he finally spoke, “At last we meet.” He said with a slight hint of humour in his tone, but his expression didn’t reflect it.

John let a smile cross his face. For a second he thought this might end up in a pissing match with the prolonged pause of them just staring at one another, but again Conner surprised him. Even though they saw each other a few weeks back at the hospital, they never spoke to one another and they were both distracted by Charlie’s welfare. “What is this about? I won’t

betray Charlie's confidence."

"I don't expect you to." He said easily. He would think less of him if he did. His whole reason for tracking him down and talking to him was to make sure that there was nothing between them. He'd known enough people in his line of work to spot a liar, and this man was nothing like that. Charlie respected him and he could see why.

"That's good." John said, "Now why this ride? Obviously you want something."

"I want to know if she's doing okay."

"She's coping."

"She's living with you."

An awareness came across John's face, "So that's it."

"I don't like it John." He said bluntly.

"Well, that's not for you to say." He returned, not the least bit intimidated.

"I suppose." He agreed.

John studied him for a moment and Conner cocked an ebony brow in question, "I was just wondering." He said softly in response, "If this is where you threaten my life." He was sure that people who had money like he did could have just about anything done. John's family had money too, but it didn't touch the Blackwell's fortune.

An emotionless smile spread across his handsome face, "I could, yes, but I won't."

"Because of Charlie."

"Well, yes, and because I'd rather beat the shit out of you myself if you touch her."

"I haven't." he said honestly. He could have played this cat and mouse game forever, but decided against it. Charlie's heartbroken face kept popping in his mind. She was an intelligent woman, and she wouldn't fall in love with a bastard.

"I didn't think so, but I had to be sure that you're not

sleeping with her.”

It was a statement that caused John to burst into laughter. “You actually thought that? Jesus Conner. She’s too damn hung up on you to notice the rest of the male race.”

He grinned arrogantly. It wasn’t so much as what John said, it was the wave of relief that went through him that caused him to do that.

“I wouldn’t get too cocky. She still has a broken heart.” He narrowed his eyes, “I should beat the *shit* out of you for hurting her.”

“It wasn’t intentional.” Was all Conner would say undisturbed by the other man’s threat.

John was sure he never explained himself to many people in his life. So his answer wasn’t surprising, “It’s not my business.” He finally said after a minute. He knew Charlie’s perception of things, but it wasn’t like him to get in the middle of a relationship. If Conner could get Charlie to forgive him, he had a lot of work ahead of him. “so that’s what this was about. You wanted to see if I touched her.”

“I had to.” He admitted.

“No, I haven’t. No one has but you.” He answered truthfully. Although he already knew that Conner figured that out on his own. He said as much. How, he didn’t know. Maybe the man was really conceited in his talents where women lay, regardless, he was right. Even if Charlie was on the rebound, John wasn’t that type of man if she did offer herself. Not only that, she wasn’t his type. Linda was more his type and he’d already proven that several nights ago when he near busted the bed in her apartment.

Charlie was already on the plane for a good half an hour and they still hadn’t taxied down the runway yet or even closed the door. She had to give it to Theo, he sure travelled in class. She’d

never been on a private jet before and it was all very flattering and overwhelming that he thought so highly of her. It was making her stomach hurt knowing she was going there to tell Conner's parents the truth. She really hoped that his mother took the news well. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Conner's parents. At that moment the pilot came out saw her and smiled. She stood up thinking that there was something wrong with the plane. "Is there a delay?"

The pilot nodded, "Yes ma'am, a few more minutes." He turned and went back into the cockpit without a further explanation.

Charlie knew that sometimes airports got backed up so she sat did up her seatbelt when she suddenly heard a noise. Looking up she saw Conner enter the plane, followed by the stewardess who was busy closing the door. After not seeing him since the hospital, his presence was startling. He wore a navy blue double breasted suit with a matching tie and as usual, completely devastating. She was so stunned at seeing him that it took her for a moment to recover. Then she got angry. This was all a ploy! Charlie undid her seatbelt, "Oh no. This is *not* going to happen." She snapped and stood up.

"Sit down Charlie." Conner said walking toward her.

"I will not, I want off. If your father told me this would be a matchmaking flight I wouldn't have come."

"It was my idea, not my father's. I was supposed to meet you at the house in the Hampton's but I needed to get you alone and this was the best way." He turned to the stewardess, "Could you excuse us for a moment?"

"Of course Mr. Blackwell." She gave an apprehensive smile at Charlie as she walked by.

"I'm not listening to anything you say Conner. You've made it clear that you can't remain faithful to me..."

"I have been." He added abruptly.

“So when you were entangled, nude in bed with the redhead, the same redhead I saw you having lunch with at Dene’s on Wednesday, I might add, that you were what? Examining her for fleas!” He actually winced at that.

He didn’t realize that she saw him with her the next day. It certainly damaged this whole thing further. It was like they were having a friendly lunch after a lusty night. “It’s not what it seems.” He said softly, “Please sit down.”

“Let me off of here. There’s no way in hell you could charm your way out of this.”

“Charlie, think about it. Why the hell would I be in bed with another woman, when I know you were due to arrive home at any moment?”

“because you’re cruel, and hurtful.” She blurted. “Also, I gave you the impression that I wasn’t coming over.”

“So you think I took that as a reason to call up another acquaintance?” He said with his brows arched, “That’s ridiculous.”

She gestured at him, “Look at you Conner. Any woman would run over to please you.”

“*Look* at yourself Charlie. No woman can compete.” He countered firmly. “My God, I had the world when I had you. Do you think I would give that up for a roll in the sack with someone that can’t set me on fire the way you do?”

“I don’t know.” She said a little more weakly, because she didn’t know. She told John that she knew nothing about relationships, and she’d never been with another man so for all she knew the earth moved every time people made love.

Conner heard the faint doubt in her voice and decided it was time to explain, “Francine had a key. I never gave it to her, she must’ve taken it one night when she was over. I keep spares on the fridge. She crawled into bed next to me. I was half-asleep and thought it was you.”

“You could come up with a better story.” She said narrowing her gaze.

“I *didn't* sleep with her!”

For some reason she almost felt relief at his words, but resisted it, “I saw you wrapped in her arms Conner.” A tear slid down her cheek. “I told you, that you would break my heart.”

He reached into his breast pocket, “I have Francine’s boarding pass. Just look at the time her flight landed. She just arrived at our place only moments before you came home.” He put the emphasis on ‘our.’

She slapped it away, “Do you think that would sway me?”

“Charlie, the only woman I ever gave a key to was you. I do *not* give women access to my penthouse *ever*.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Charlie...” Just then the stewardess came back and asked them to put their seatbelts on.

“I want off.” She said.

“She’s staying, “ Conner argued, causing the stewardess to pause and look at the two. Then she turned and left.

“Well, I can see that every woman is loyal to you.”

“That’s enough.” He pushed her down onto the long couch that occupied one side of the plane and did up her seatbelt, “You are going to listen to me.” He sat down next to her doing up his own.

She crossed her arms across her chest and tilted her head at him, “Talk all you want.”

He tried to take her hands in his but she resisted. He finally clenched onto them with a tight hold that she couldn’t fight. “Charlie, I’m in love with you.”

She turned her head away.

“Listen to me. I never slept with Francine. I know it looked like I did, but if you look at her boarding pass, you can see that her plane landed forty-five minutes earlier. It takes forty

minutes to reach my place from the airport. She was in bed with me for less than a minute before you walked in. I spoke your name, and she said ‘Who’s Charlie?’ Please try and remember, you must’ve heard me. You turned the light on only seconds after that, so I know you heard something.”

Charlie stared at the far wall. Did she remember that? Everything happened so fast, and she was completely devastated with what she saw. Vaguely she did. She turned back to him, tears were streaming down her face.

Conner kissed both of her hands. She was no longer trying to pull them away from him. “You remember something, don’t you Charlie?” His hopeful eyes remained on hers and the vaguest amount of hope entered him.

“I think so.” She said honestly.

“Please don’t cry angel. You’re killing me.” His voice was thick with emotion when reached up and used his thumb to wipe away the tears from her cheek.

“I saw you at lunch with her.”

“I was trying to get her to tell you the truth. She refused, saying if you didn’t believe me, you didn’t deserve me, but she did give me her boarding pass.” He sighed and looked away for a moment, “It’s all I have besides my word.”

“She said that?”

“Honest to God, she did.” He didn’t tell her that Francine also added that Charlie’s loss was her gain. “The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you. I haven’t slept in weeks. I’m useless at work. I even sold my penthouse and moved to a different building so this wouldn’t happen again. For christsakes Charlie I asked my dad for advice because I was at a loss. Me, a full grown man, who never had problems with women in his life!”

She studied his expression. All of her instincts were screaming to believe him. She was always good at spotting a liar, but her emotions were clouding her judgement. Not only that,

while she looked at him, she could see the dark circles under his eyes. Maybe this was as he said it was, a complete misunderstanding. What if it wasn't? Could she look past his infidelity? How much did she love this man? Was it worth the suffering she had to endure being away from him?

"I swear to God, I haven't even looked at another woman since I met you." He added. He could see the indecisiveness in her eyes along with the conflicting emotions on her lovely face.

"It felt like I died that day." She confessed. "I don't know what's true and what isn't. I feel if I believe you, or if you are lying and I forgive you, that I can never get over this. I know I'm not like those other women you're used to...."

"Charlie look at me." She did, "I did not sleep with Francine. I love you." He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a little velvet box, "I didn't realize how much, until I thought I lost you." He opened the box revealing a large emerald encrusted engagement ring, "I'm not going to make the same mistake twice. I want to marry you."

Charlie was literally frozen in disbelief. She looked down at the ring and then back up at him. Everything in his expression and his eyes was sincere. It was then she realized that he was telling the truth. Conner would never use marriage as an excuse. She burst into tears and he held her tightly while she sobbed into his shoulder, "I'm sorry I hurt you. If I could take back that night, I'd give my right arm to take away your pain." He gathered her face in his hands, "Charlie, you never answered me."

All she could do was nod through the tears.

He smiled and kissed both of her cheeks, "Thank you." Before hauling her back into his arms.

EPILOGUE

Through the whole flight they talked about everything and Charlie realized that he never lied to her about that night. Maybe her heart was trying to tell her that all alone, but the visual evidence was so disturbing. Also, she remembered that he was gaping at the other woman in total shock before he turned his attention on her. It was that brief memory that told her everything. Then there was the “Who’s Charlie?” statement the redhead said just before she flicked on the light. She didn’t hear Conner’s question, but she certainly remembered her response.

When the plane landed he took her hand and kissed it, “You need to be prepared.”

“For what?” she said innocently.

God he loved that about her. “My father.”

“What? Why?”

“Because no other woman has made me fall so hard before. He’s going to ask you about grandchildren.”

Her eyes widened, “Oh Gosh!”

“Now, maybe we should get our story straight. Now, Charlie, I know you’re career is important to you, and we can certainly accommodate that. However, the sooner we have children the sooner my parents get off our case.”

She grinned, “You are as sly as a fox Conner, but I’m on to you.”

He gave her a look of mock innocence.

“Who is it that wants the children?”

“Well I wouldn’t be complaining if you get pregnant right away.” He said with a grin.

“Why don’t we just make sure I can handle your women first. This last one near did us in.”

He dropped his grin, “I wish that didn’t happen honey. It would have saved us both a lot of grief. If I have to spend the rest of my life proving to you that I can’t live without you, I will.”

And he did.



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