

CHAPTER ONE

CLAYTON

Christ! I hate small talk, look business is concluded, now piss off. Oh, how I wish to I could verbalise that thought.

Instead, I smile pleasantly at the four men surrounding me as they laugh like fucking hyenas at some inane joke their boss just made. Sighing inwardly, I look around the foyer of my building.

My building... Blake Tower... *Wow!*

I always get a surge of pleasure and accomplishment when I think of that. I remember the day when my father, Marcus Blake, brought me here twelve years ago like it was yesterday. He told me I had inspired him to buy it. Five years ago, I took full ownership due to his passing. Hell, I still miss him. I found myself rubbing my chest over the ache that has suddenly come on at the thought of him. None of my party notice my actions thank Christ. I can do without false pretences after my health.

The foyer is a hive of activity with workers and visitors, being six foot four gives me the advantage of having a clear view of the entire space. Natural stone marble for the flooring and pillars, the circular dark mahogany wood reception desk being the centre piece, the odd tree planted in large natural stone pots adding splashes of colour breaking up the simplicity but kept the lines clean. As is my habit I run a critical eye over the staff at the desk and the security guards, I take pride in what I see, smart business appearance with a genuine smile of welcome and farewell. My attention is diverted as I notice people coming in quickly shaking coats and umbrellas, shifting my gaze I look out of the glass frontage to see torrential rain coming down in sheets like a waterfall.

"Hell of a down pour" one of the group says leaning around his colleague to see what I am looking at, as the words leave his mouth a loud rumble of thunder can be heard, a few

startled shrieks permeate around the foyer causing more people to stop and look outside at the sudden storm.

A quick flash of movement in my peripheral vision catches my attention. One of the security guards' steps forward to open the side door for a woman. I frown wondering why he would do such a thing when the revolving doors are working perfectly. I can't see the woman's face because she has her hood up, however the security guard looks dazed, besotted wonder has come across his features as she talks to him. He points her in the direction of the reception desk. As she moves away his eyes follow her every move.

Fascinated, I study the woman in more detail, well what I could see of her. She's wearing a form fitting coat reaching to her calves, it shows off her ample chest... and boy she has some rack on her! She's wearing black boots, a style of which I've never seen before, the heels are high with a silver coating, running up the side of her leg are multiple buckles, I catch glimpses of them as she walks. My eyes travel up her slim body, I notice she is carrying a very large flat case, it's an art portfolio idiot, my brain so kindly informs me, hence the reason for coming in through the side door. She moves away from the reception desk. I spy the visitors pass in her hand, she's moving towards me and my group. Damn I still can't see her face, for some obscure reason this suddenly becomes very important to look at her face, to know her. She walks right passed me heading for the elevator, she doesn't even look nor do a double take in my direction which is typical of women's behaviour around me, not to be egotistical but I am good looking. Hell, all my family are handsome, it's in the genes. Usually, I find women's reaction to me a pain in the fucking ass and I ignore it and them, but now....

I stare at the back of her, willing her to take down her hood and turn around, I make it a mantra almost. She shifts slightly and looks behind her, she must sense me watching her, but I still can't see her face. God damn it, this is frustrating me.

The elevator pings its arrival, miraculously nobody else moves into the car with her, she leans over to her left and presses the floor button she needs then turns and faces

outward, letting go of her portfolio she raises her hands to her hood, relief sweeps through me, finally I will see her face, only the elevator doors begin to close.

I choke back on crying out 'No' like some pathetic fucking loser. Checking myself I quickly look at my visitors, good no-one has noticed I've been pre-occupied these last few minutes. As I turn back towards the closing doors a man runs up and sticks his hand out to stop them closing, thank you for small mercies. As the doors re-open to reveal my mystery woman her hands are at her hood. She lifts the hood off her head but she's looking down at the floor. Look up damn it, her hair is blonde, no wait that's not right, it is silvery blonde almost white, under the lights it shines like the moon. Abruptly she lifts her head and looks directly at me.

Holy fucking hell... she is beautiful. Big eyes, I can't determine the colour, but I swear they shimmer. High cheek bones, delicate fair skin, full lips. I feel the full impact of her stare, the floor feels as if it's tilting, all surrounding sounds are muted by the loud thundering of my heart, I'm struggling to breathe. It's as if she's stripped me naked right to my very soul. My body is reacting to her even my cock twitches and hardens, she is calling to me. The doors close breaking whatever spell she has cast on me. I exhale loudly, I feel dizzy, disorientated. No woman has ever affected me like that before. In that precise moment I know two things for sure: I have to know who she is and then claim her as mine.

With those things in mind, I bring the small talk to an end and see my visitors out of the building, heading straight to the reception desk and the visitors signing in book.

"Mr Blake, how may I be of help" the young receptionist asks breathlessly, smiling widely and fluttering her eye lashes. I bite my tongue to hold back the 'I'm not interested love' retort that is on the verge of coming out of me.

"Give me a minute" I scan the register. Damn, there are five signatures within a few minutes of each other "There was a woman who's just signed in, dark coat with the hood up, which one is her sign in?" I say tapping the book.

She takes the book and types into the computer “Skye Darcy visiting Scott Smith of Phoenix PR on the twenty third floor sir” she says smiling back at me.

Yes, thank God for super-efficient staff. I smile warmly at the receptionist, not fair of me I know, but you’ve got to keep them sweet “Thank you Lucy, you’ve been brilliant, keep up the good work”

Poor thing practically glows from the praise. Hell, I didn’t care that I just further cemented her crush on me but if it means that I get her working for me for another six months it’s worth it. One of the many important lessons I learnt from my father, was to know all of your employee names, even the cleaning crew and if you can their spouse and children’s names too. Give recognition for a job well done no matter how small, frivolous and irrelevant it may seem and regardless of their position it shows you notice and recognise that individual plays an important role. The workforce in return pays you back with loyalty.

Heading back to the elevator I mentally shake myself and give myself a talking to “Right back to business, focus on the meeting coming up later this afternoon” only I know I’m kidding myself because the first thing I’ll do back at my desk is to do a search on my mysterious woman Skye Darcy. I stop short, I’m thinking of her as mine already, really! “Ah fuck, I’m in trouble” I mutter to myself, with a resigned sigh I step in to the elevator.

SKYE

“The meeting was a complete utter waste of my fucking time” I growl into the phone to Macy my PA and friend as I stand in the corridor waiting for the elevator.

“Whoa! It must have been if it’s got you swearing and you don’t swear” she says with a slight quiver of a laugh.

“Put it this way” I snap “it’s two hours of my life I am never getting back, the guy is a total moron, an egotistical nit wit. He even had the audacity to say he was doing me a favour, me!” my voice is rising, and I don’t care I’m on a roll. Venting

my anger at Macy, who I know doesn't deserve it "The bloody prat is delusional, he introduced himself to a colleague of his as my new agent" I pause for breath.

"You did correct him, didn't you?"

I can detect Macy's pique making me feel justified in my anger. I start to pace the length of the corridor trying to work off some of the irritation I've been feeling throughout the meeting.

"Of course I did! And you know what he said?" I didn't wait for an answer "He said oh, it's a minor detail, once we've thrashed out T&C's it's a moot point"

"Bastard!" spits Macy, that makes me feel even better at being angry.

"My sentiments exactly, get hold of Simon, let him know I am on the warpath because I want to know who in the hell talked him into sending me on this, this..." I struggle to find the right words my brain isn't working quickly enough to articulate because I'm feeling that angry "waste of time, energy, pathetic excuse for a meeting" I know I'm exasperated because I'm wildly gesturing with my free arm, hey look at me the human windmill "I tell you, I'm going to cut his balls off and serve them to him on a platter" I growl.

I sigh heavily as I turn to pace back. I notice a man midway down leaning against the wall, opposite the elevator, watching me. I didn't pay any attention to him as I stride past. I stab at the down button for the elevator, I realise I'd been so wrapped up and bitching to Macy, I hadn't done it earlier. Macy is saying she wouldn't be able to get hold of Simon for another hour due to various meetings then asks if I'm heading back. I really should but I want to get rid of this aggression I'm carrying, it isn't right to go back and lay in to people because of some jumped up arsehole, I need to work out, then I have an even better idea.

"No, I'm going to work out, do me a favour and ring Phillippe, see if he's free, tell him I'll go to wherever he is. I can get to him within the hour" the elevator pings "the lift, sorry elevator has arrived, call me in five minutes I should be back on the ground floor" as we say goodbye I retrieve my portfolio

from against the wall and step into the elevator. I'm back in America its elevator not lift, I remind myself.

The man, who'd been leaning against the wall, straightens and enters the elevator and I get my first good look at him or rather I pay attention to him. Holy hell and Hades on a cracker the guy is an Adonis. Believe me, as an artist I've drawn many a fine specimen of the male species, but this guy is something else. He's tall with really broad shoulders and he's well over six feet tall had to be at least six three or four, even with my killer heels on I only come up to his shoulder. Dark brown wavy shoulder length hair and the most amazing dark blue eyes that dance with amusement I have ever seen, they are surrounded by long thick dark lashes the kind most females will kill to have along with that luscious hair. My fingers twitch just at the thought of running my fingers through it. He has a strong straight nose, good cheek bones and a strong jaw line. He is very and I mean very easy on the eye, good looking not pretty boy but bad boy rugged. Oh! my lord, his mouth, full sculpted lips a slight smile playing on them, his tongue darts out and licks along his lower lip. I suddenly feel very warm, heat flooding my body along with a giddy feeling in my stomach and muscles between my legs that I had long forgotten about clench.

What the... I hadn't had sex for... jeez, it can't be that long surely. My last proper relationship had been over for nearly six years, I had been out on dates none lasting past the third and definitely no sex. Since I my brutal attack when I was eighteen as a result, I went off sex. I'd never been sexually adventurous or promiscuous before it happened, so these feelings this complete stranger is invoking confuses the hell out of me and it's rather unsettling.

The elevator stops to let on more people. Craftily I move to a position that will allow me to study him inconspicuously. I notice the reaction of the women getting in the car have toward him. All openly gape, suddenly collecting themselves then smiling in what they obviously think is their most alluring come hither and get me look. Huh, well what do you know he's ignoring each and every one of them; I realise

belatedly he's looking directly at me. *Humph!* so much for my position of inconspicuous ogling. A few of the women give me a quizzical look when they realise it's me who has the focus of his attention. I put my head down and close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose I give myself a stern talking to. He's a man, a good looking, no he's gorgeous and sex on legs my inner goddess shouts, breathe. Two deep calming breaths, I lift my head and open my eyes looking straight ahead and watch the lights count down the floor levels. I can feel his gaze upon me the whole time. I suddenly remember the feeling of being watched I had when I arrived in the building and to getting in the elevator, was that him? I wonder, the one I had briefly glimpsed just before the doors had closed.

I'm used to male scrutiny and often told I'm beautiful, but I never pay it any mind, I just thought they were being polite. I know I didn't give off any vibes to encourage such attention in fact I went out of my way to dissuade it at every opportunity. So why is he so fervent in his attention, maybe I've got something on my face and he's too polite or trying to work up the courage to say something, scrap the courage, he looks like the kind of guy who didn't need it. My money is on if he wants something, he takes it with confidence. Just to make sure and with the former thought in mind I turn to pick up my portfolio and take a furtive look in the mirror that surrounds the walls of the elevator. Nope nothing on my face, sneaking a quick look at his reflection his gaze catches mine, a lazy smile spreads across his face and he winks. Holy cow, he just winked at me! I blush like a silly smitten teenager and my body floods with heat... again! Oh, get a grip of yourself, I scold which is mentally followed up by a slap to the back of my head from my inner goddess. I busy myself by rummaging for my phone in my bag – I cannot believe how flustered I've become – and getting ready for when the doors open as the elevator approached the ground floor.

I step out as soon as the doors open, my cell phone rings startling me. I don't recognise the number and normally I wouldn't answer however on this occasion I do because I've a sneaking suspicion the Adonis is going to talk to me. "Chicken"

my inner goddess says disdainfully. “Bite me” I sass back mentally pulling my tongue out, childish I know, but it’s in retaliation for the head slap. I’m sure as hell not about to make polite small talk with a complete stranger, no matter how sexy and good looking, not with the mood I’m in.

I answer the phone with a cautious “Hello” and I am greeted by a smooth luscious French accent “Bonjour ma belle deesse, comment vas-tu”

Phillipee just the man I need, my face splits with a wide grin at the sound of my old friend’s voice.

CLAYTON

“Can this woman become even more adorable” I think to myself stepping out of the elevator behind her and listening as she converses fluently in French to whoever is on the other end.

She stops by one of the pillars, I move around the other side so that I can discretely watch and listen, lucky for me I am also fluent in French, hoping to learn something new about her.

True, I had spent an hour online searching for information on her. I found her website she’s an artist and English. I don’t know much about art but the work on display was breath taking. She is seriously talented, and she specialises in the Fantasy and Sci Fi genre. From the look of things her work is in high demand, following links I discovered she also owns an art auction house in London, England and along with other artists work she sells her own paintings through it. By all accounts she is one shrewd cookie, feisty too going by the way she was talking earlier in the corridor.

I focus on her voice just as I did when I was in the corridor. It’s husky and low, the kind of voice that would be in high demand if she worked on an adult chat line. Hell, I would spend a fortune just to listen to her talk. I quickly shut down that fantasy of listening to her talk dirty however just listening to her dulcet tones sends a stream of shivers down my spine. She laughs, a deep throaty chuckle, my body reacts. Fucking

hell how can a laugh make me hard? I can't believe the effect she is having on me, and I haven't even spoken to her.

I move so I can get a better look at her, my attention snaps back to what she is saying when I hear her mention Premier Fitness and Health Centre, that's my gym. By the sound of it she's arranging to meet someone called Phillippee there, a thrill surges through me as I realise who she's talking to. It's my personal trainer and she's going for a workout. My mind starts to race through what I must do for the rest of the day just to see if I can get to the gym earlier so I can see her again. Shit! I'm turning into such a sap over a woman I don't even know, but you want to know her my mind whispers back.

Her attention snaps to the entrance, I follow her gaze to a tall man with short, cropped crew cut blonde hair walking towards her. He is well built in a sharp suit, boyfriend I wonder, a surge of jealousy sweeps through me taking me by surprise. I fight the urge to block his path and beat my chest, mark my territory and property. Shit where the fuck did that come from, get a grip of yourself. The man stops in front of her, without a word to him and continuing her phone conversation she hands him the portfolio and visitors pass then points to the reception desk, he nods to which she gives him the thumbs up sign. Lackey, I decide and let out a breath in a fast gust. As he comes back to her, she ends the conversation and asks if he knew where the gym is he nods yes, she gives him instructions of where to take her and when, she is going to be at the gym for four thirty, so I am right he is a lackey. I watch them as they exit the building his hand although not touching her is at the small of her back, just seeing that makes me want to rip his arms off and beat him to a pulp with the bloody stumps.

"Jeez Blake get a grip of yourself" I admonish for what feels like the thousandth time in, I look at my watch, Christ has it only been two hours from when I first laid eyes on her.

Shaking my head in disbelief at how I am behaving I get back in the elevator. Oh, if only my mother and brothers can see me now, the very thought is like someone pouring ice cold water over me, they will be merciless in tormenting me. As for my mother she will have the wedding booked and chosen

names for our children in a blink of an eye. Just that thought alone should be enough to put my focus back on work, only it didn't. Damn it!

Walking towards my office my cell phone rings, the call display shows it's my mother. Christ that woman is psychic "Hey Mom, I was just thinking about you" I answer to which she giggles with her girly laugh.

"All good I hope"

"Absolutely" I lie "what can I do for you?"

"Liar" she retorts laughing, see psychic what did I tell you? "I need an escort for tonight and I want you to take me if you are free?"

My mother the typical beautiful socialite at sixty-two is not short of admirers, God knows me and my brothers have fended off our fair-share of fortune hunters that seem to crawl out of the woodwork. The fact that she is asking me to escort her somewhere means it's to an event that will probably have a fair few of these, shall we say questionable characters in attendance. I sigh. I couldn't say no to her.

"Okay, when, where and dress code".

Turns out it's an art gallery opening, and it means I can still make it to the gym. Maybe, Skye will be at the opening, the sudden thought has me hopeful at the prospect of a potentially dull evening could turn out to be quite enjoyable.

SKYE

I flop down onto the sofa with a moan, my head hitting the soft cushion, I close my eyes with a deep relaxing sigh. I'm so going to pay for my work out with Phillipee in the morning. Oh! my bruises are going to have bruises. I never learn, the guy is a black belt fourth Dan or whatever, three times world champion in mixed martial arts but he is an excellent punch bag to work off frustrations, aggression and general pissed off-ness.

I've known Phillipee for over four years, first meeting him in France whilst I was there working on a commission. I turned up at the gym looking for someone to teach me self-defence, since my attack I'd been trying out various martial art

classes but none of it seemed to stick, until Phillipee introduced me to his fighting and defence style and for whatever reason it clicked with me, and I love it. Phillipee moved to America not long after I finished the commission and whenever I can I fly to whichever state he is working in for a lesson, this is one of my few extravagancies, but I don't care if it means I can defend myself effectively and cause as much harm in a few moves as possible, so be it.

I was thrilled when I found out that Paul, my bodyguard, knew the same style and now I practice regularly with him, although he goes easy on me. Even threatening to sack him doesn't work on getting him to hit harder. Paul is ex-military and a good southern boy, whose mother brought him up right and his manners are impeccable, after nearly four years of working for me, he still calls me Miss Darcy. He often says you don't hit a woman unless she is firing at you with a machine gun. I've offered to fire a rocket launcher at him to which he just laughs and shakes his head. Phillipee on the other hand has no hesitation in hitting back hard.

Whenever I am in the States I try to get in as many sessions as I can with Phillipee, having said that it's almost two years since I've been in New York. Lucky for me Phillipee moved here six months ago, I know that when I or Macy ring he'll do whatever he can to accommodate as he likes to work out with me as well.

"Mon Cheri I will rearrange my whole diary for you just so I can fight someone so short and fierce"

I let out a snort as I remember what he said to me when I thanked him for getting me in at such short notice. I don't take offense because I know all the clients he can fight properly with are all male and as tall if not bigger than him and he's just over six foot.

My cell buzzes and rings with Macy's ring tone, keeping my eyes closed I fumble the phone out of my bag.

"Yeah" it comes out as a raspy croak, I clear my throat and try again.

“Don’t you go falling asleep on me lady” Macy says in her school ma’am voice “I’ll be round in half an hour with Shelley, so get yourself in the shower, now”

“What, why?” is all I can splutter, dread starting to creep in the pit of my stomach, I’m looking forward to having a night in doing nothing.

“Mr Smythe rang this afternoon, well whilst you were at the gym. He’s invited you to the grand opening of his new gallery” I can tell by her tone she isn’t taking any prisoners, well me specifically “He’ll be coming to pick you up at eight. Now before you go all “How could you” on me you are only in New York for two weeks and not back until September, you’ll be away for three months, and you need to establish contacts for when you open the new auction house”.

“I know and you are right” I say with a resigned sigh heaving myself off the sofa and head for the bathroom.

“I am?” Macy says with uncertainty. I smile to myself, I’ve just taken the wind out of her sails, she obviously expected a fight about accepting the invite, before I can say anything else she reaffirms “I am” again positively smug.

My smile broadens as I picture her face going from a scowl to a self-satisfied aren’t I clever, pleased as punch grin. Macy is a god send of a find; she’d been a PA for a CEO of a large corporation when I met her five years ago. I was working on site doing a commission and we hit it off straight away, her boss treated her like shit, and I told her so. Six months later she quit, fed up with his sexual advances. I offered her a job and we haven’t looked back since. She organises me with military precision and doesn’t take any crap off anyone, she protects me from a lot of day-to-day noise so I can concentrate on doing my job. I switch on the shower.

“Okay, I’ll see you in half an hour, let yourself in” I hang up.

I look longingly and forlornly at my bathtub. Oh! to have a nice long soak. I sigh inwardly and strip out of my gym clothes and step into the shower. I’ve spared no expense in my bathroom, it’s all white marble with gold and bronze veins threading through the tiles, the shower could easily fit four

people and it has six power heads. The hot water pounds my body, massaging away the aches I'm beginning to feel.

I reach for the shampoo at the same time reminding myself to make an appointment to get my hair cut. My hair is long, naturally curly and a silvery blonde, who am I kidding, it is practically white. It had been a dark blonde before the attack; afterwards, sections of my hair turned white. The doctors said it was a result of the shock of what happened to me, and my hair lost its pigmentation, it was rare, but it happens, since then over the years these patches appeared to have spread now the majority of my hair is white with blonde highlights, most people would describe it as platinum blonde. Some women pay a fortune to have my hair colour. I'm tempted to dye it, colour yet to be determined although I'm leaning toward a nice deep fire red. The only thing putting me off going ahead is the thought of the upkeep and having my roots done once a month, too much hassle considering I rarely visit the hairdressers, but it desperately needs cutting, it's getting too long, dry my hair is at my hips, wet it's past my bum.

Stepping out of the shower I hear Macy and Shelley shout "Hello".

"I'll be ten minutes" I shout back giving me time to sort out my hair and clean my teeth, make up can wait.

Entering my living room wrapped in my favourite big comfy bathrobe, last year's Christmas present from Simon, Shelley is laying out three cocktail dresses across the sofa.

Shelley Mason fellow Brit and best friend, we met at Art College in London and instantly hit it off becoming best friends fast, after a few weeks we decided to share an apartment along with Simon, then about a year later I got an offer to study in New York. Shelley and Simon jumped at the chance to come with me. Shelley has established herself as a successful fashion designer. Three years ago, I backed her financially to set up her own studio and now she is fending for herself as she puts it. I keep on at her to put on a show for fashion week all I get back is maybe next year.

Bringing myself back to the present and looking at the three fabulous dresses I ask “So what’s the dress code for tonight”

“Smart casual” Macy’s voice drifts from the kitchen. I can hear cupboards opening and closing then the pop of a cork.

“So what’s wrong with wearing jeans?” I ask just to be awkward as she comes in carrying wine glasses and a bottle of wine.

“Oh Skye, you never change and please don’t” Shelley laughs and hugging me in a way of hello. I hug her back. God, I love my friend, she is my sister in body and soul.

Macy pours out the wine and hands a glass to me “Cheers” I say and take a big gulp, Macy holds a glass out to Shelley who looks at it uncertainly.

“Err, no thanks, I better not”

“That’s not like you to refuse wine, what’s the matter, you pregnant or something” Macy says laughing. A stricken look crosses Shelley’s face then she blushes crimson.

“Oh my god!” I gasp “you are, aren’t you?”

Shelley blushes even more and looks down at the floor, taking a deep breath, she looks back up with pure unadulterated joy on her face, tears shining in her eyes and nods. Macy and I shriek at the same time making her jump and wince at the noise, we descend on her firing questions.

“How long have you known?”

“When is it due?”

“Do you know what you are having?”

“Oh my god! What was Phil’s reaction?”

Laughing and disentangling herself from our group hugging she says “Phil is over the moon”

They have been together forever, she met him not long after we moved to New York “Due date is yet to be confirmed I have my appointment on Friday as in tomorrow, although I reckon, I’m about six weeks, we found out yesterday, well I did a test yesterday because the last couple of days I’ve been feeling really rough and being sick”.

“So, was it planned?” Macy says wiggling her eyebrows.

“Macy, only you can make having a baby sound smutty” I admonish mockingly turning to Shelley I say “So was it?” and wiggle my eyebrows.

“Yes, and before you ask it was a lot of fun” Shelley replies with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Oh, I bet it was” Macy hip bumps her “That man of yours is mighty fine” she drags out the word fine finishing with an appreciative hum on the end “This causes for a proper toast, let me get you a soda first” Macy says disappearing back into the kitchen.

“Are you okay with this?” Shelley asks tentatively, gesturing her hands around her abdomen.

“Of course I am, why wouldn’t I be? All I want is for you and Phil is to be happy” I hug her gently, I know she is being cautious around me because I can’t have children due to what the attack did to me and her being sensitive to my feelings made my love for her grow stronger, a thought suddenly strikes me “I’m going to be an aunty” I pull back smiling wickedly “When it’s older I can feed it full of sugar, teach it loads of stuff that will drive you bat shit crazy and hand it back to you when its hyper as hell, what’s not to love about that?” making sure to school my facial expression to one of innocence, Shelley bursts out laughing.

“Somehow I don’t doubt any of that for a minute” she pauses takes my hands and squeezes “When ‘it’ is born would you be Godmother?”

Tears suddenly spring to my eyes and a lump the size of a golf ball in my throat makes it hard for me to speak “I will be honoured” comes out in a hoarse whisper.

“Okay time for a toast” Macy says, we break apart to pick up our glasses.

I raise my glass and face my friend “To Shelley and Phil may you have a fabulous pregnancy, bloom with health, love and joy, to you Shelley my best friend, sister and mother of my god child” we salute her and clink glasses and take a drink.

“Not to be a party pooper but you madam” Macy gives me a meaningful look “have to get ready for tonight”.

An hour later I'm ready. With the help of my friends my hair has been dried and put up in a messy pile on top of my head, I remember to ask Macy to arrange a haircut appointment, which leads to the three of us agreeing to have a spar day on Saturday and since we are all attending a charity benefit that night it seems the perfect excuse to go and get pampered.

The dress is beautiful, as all of Shelley's creations are. I decide on the LBD number. The dress fits like a glove, Shelley refuses to put me in anything but fitted garments "Show off your voluptuous figure" she says. My retort is always "That's just a polite way to say I've got big tits". Her come back is "Women pay a fortune to have boobs your size".

The dress is silk with a layer of lace over the top and off the shoulder, it's fitted to my hips then the skirt flares out ending just above my knees. Although I'm not big on clothes I am on shoes, so I have the perfect pair of killer heels to wear. I keep my makeup minimal, mascara, smoky grey eyeliner to enhance my eyes and nude lip gloss. My lips could be described as full or bee stung, again I'm told women pay good money for lips like mine, so I'm conscious not to draw too much attention to them. With my slim figure, hair, tits, and lips I am a walking talking Barbie doll. I've even had it said to my face by women who for some reason feel it necessary to put me down and I know it's definitely said behind my back. It used to get me down but with the help of Shelley and Simon, I've learnt to accept myself inside and out and the jealous bitches can go fuck themselves.

When we first met, the three of us were screwed up in some way and carrying baggage, over the years we have helped each other get over the problems and self-esteem issues. Even to this day we keep the pact we made eight years ago. Once a month we get together, no matter where we are in the world, we spend a couple of hours listening and talking with each other about anything that is causing concern, thank heavens for Skype and face time. That doesn't mean we don't talk about our issues or concern at any other time we do, this allocated time means we can give it proper focus with those we trust and who

are non-judgemental. In a way I find this time a soul cleansing, character building, affirmation of the positives in my life.

“You look stunning” Shelley says standing behind me and looking at my reflection in the mirror and pulling me out of my thoughts “Mr Smythe is here, ready?” she gives my shoulders a squeeze as I nod “Come on then”

Mr Stephen Smythe, I guess him to be in his late fifties to early sixties, is the epitome of the distinguished gentleman, who enjoys the lifestyle that his wealth provides, and it shows on his waistline. He is a flamboyant character and extremely camp. I got to know him through the multitude of Simon’s gay friends quite a few years ago. He is very familiar with my work and never misses an opportunity to badger me about selling through his galleries. I’d politely turned him down, now he’s opened up in New York and come September when I’m going to be here on a more permanent basis, I can envision it becoming more and more difficult to decline, hmm mental note to self to talk to Macy about putting together a plan of action to head that one off.

“My darling Miss Darcy what a vision you are” Mr Smythe croons in his effeminate voice bringing his dainty hands up to his face, for a large man he has surprisingly small hands.

“Thank you Mr Smythe and I must say you look quite dashing yourself” I say smiling warmly, for all his faults I couldn’t help but like him. Simon told me he could be a really vicious and bitchy queen when in a mood.

“Shall we?” he says gesturing grandly with a sweeping arm toward the door.

I wave bye to the girls and tell them to lock up as I head out the door.

CLAYTON

Looking around the cavernous room that is the art gallery, I sigh heavily, there are only a few pieces I would actually label and call art. My three-year old twin nephews can produce better pieces than the crap that’s on display here.

The place is reasonably full, there's more people here than I expected. Scanning the faces again, disappointment hits me just as hard as the last time I looked, Skye isn't here. We arrived half an hour ago and already I'm bored shitless out of my skull and sick to death of being pawed and mauled over by the women who know me. Thank God I haven't fucked any of them and I have no intention of doing so. My mother however is in her element, surrounded by pretentious art luvvies. I pull myself up short, Skye is an artist and potentially I'm in a room full of her friends and acquaintances. Fuck! I need to make more of an effort if I want to get to know her.

What are you thinking, my brain shouts, you're talking as if you're going to be wining and dining her, being boyfriend material, you don't have time for this shit. My internal voice is practically screaming now. You made a right prat of yourself this afternoon rushing to the gym just to get another look at her. Instead, you glimpse the back of her climbing into an SUV then to cap it off you question Phillipée about her, who no doubt now thinks you're some crazy axe wielding stalker. Dude for all you know the guy could have called her and said, "Hey, not to cause you any concern or scare the shit out of you but watch out for a good looking, tall, dark haired and insanely rich guy, by the way the operative word is insane, he's got a thing for you and he's stalking you".

"Clayton are you alright darling?" my mother asks snapping me out of my mental tirade, concern marring her beautiful features "You seem distracted and out of sorts. Are coming down with something?"

"No, I'm fine Mom. Just thinking about tomorrow and work, nothing to worry about" I give her my brightest and most charming smile leaning in to give her a kiss on her forehead "Sorry if I am spoiling your evening"

"Nonsense, I'm the one who should be apologising. Dragging you to an event like this and I know you hate them" she murmurs quietly so those surrounding us wouldn't hear.

"How come you..." I stop mid question as a surge of activity and excited voices near the entrance catches my and everyone else's attention.

“Oh, how wonderful, Mr Smythe has finally arrived” one of the luvvies gushes “I do hope he is okay. I believe a car tyre blew out on the way here, that’s why he is so late. I must go and find out” at that he daintily scuttles off.

I look back to the entrance to see a rather large man, immaculately dressed come in through the door. He steps aside and turns to face the person behind him, raising the crook of his arm out for them to take.

The vision walking in steals my breath away. My heart stops. My sole focus is on her, everyone else in the room disappears. Skye, she’s here my brain gibbers. I gulp air, suddenly remembering I need to breathe. My heart restarts going so fast it gives me palpitations. I must’ve swayed on my feet as my mother grabs my arm.

“Clayton!” mother calls out in alarm “Do you need to sit down? Are you sure you’re not feeling ill? Let’s go home” my mother is freaking out.

“No, no I’m okay” I reassure her, I’m even better now Skye is here I add mentally.

I surreptitiously track her movement through the room as Mr Smythe leads her around introducing various people. Obviously, the room isn’t full of her friends and acquaintances as I’d first thought. I listen to my mother’s running commentary about Mr Smythe and those that she knew who he was talking to, she did this right up to the point of him standing in front of us.

“My dear Mrs Blake, how wonderful to see you. I am so glad you could make it” Mr Smythe has the art of air kissing down to a pat “May I introduce this beautiful and exquisite creature and my guest of honour, Skye Darcy”.

Skye flushes and looks embarrassed by the way Mr Smythe introduces her, she shakes mother’s hand, both murmuring “Pleased to meet you”.

Mother without looking, reaches behind her and grabs my arm, pulling me forward “This is my son, Clayton Blake”.

Since I’m looking at Skye, I see her reaction as soon as she looks at me and I know she recognises me from the minute flare of her eyes widening, followed by a slight frown. I shake

Smythe's hand first as I reach for Skye's hand, my spine tingles and surprise, surprise my cock jumps to attention just at the thought of touching her "Calm down boy" I mentally tell my dick. Clasp her hand, it feels warm small and fragile, her grip is strong and confident. The skin-to-skin contact sends a jolt of electricity shooting straight up my arm and down to my cock surprising the shit out of me. I see Skye's eyes widen as well; did she feel the same thing?

"Have we met before?" she asks in her sexy, husky voice "you seem vaguely familiar, and I can't place where".

God I could listen to her for eternity, her voice does strange things to my body, a slow pleasant torture.

"No, we haven't met, although we have seen each other" I say. That got my mother's attention and before she can say anything I add "it was earlier today".

I see realisation flit across those beautiful pale green eyes as she remembered and murmurs "The elevator" a soft flush blooms in her cheeks, obviously remembering me winking at her. I did it in a moment of, oh I don't know, playfulness, rogue-ness, flirting, take your pick.

I clear my throat. "Yes, the elevator"

I look at my mother and see her calculated scheming expression that usually means trouble for me with her match making efforts, on this occasion I wouldn't mind her meddling. "Miss Darcy was at my building visiting one of the businesses there, we happened to be on the same floor waiting for the elevator to the ground floor".

Mother's eyes sparkle. Shit! I could kick myself. I knew I had given myself away because I've overdone the explanation, volunteering too much information. Normally I would've said "no we haven't met" and left it at that, but being the infatuated lust driven sap I am, I want Skye to remember me, so I just stuck a big red flashing sign arrowed straight at her for my mother to see I'm interested. Also, my mother will draw the conclusion I actively tracked Skye's whereabouts in the building down and lay in wait for her. Yep! I'm definitely in stalker territory.

“Come my dear, there are a few other people I wish to introduce you to” Smythe says taking Skye’s arm and leads her away.

“Well, she’s absolutely stunning and I can see why you tracked her down” see I told you my mother will know “did you know she was going to be here tonight?” mother asks giving me a sly look.

My eyebrows raise at my mother in disbelief “Seriously” I say a tad sarcastically “it was you who wanted me to escort you here tonight, otherwise I would be at home most probably working”

“Or thinking about a stunning creature called Skye Darcy” mother teases “Tell me, what does she do? And don’t try playing the ignorant and innocent card, I know you and you would have already done a search on her”.

I laugh out loud, causing a few people to look our way, with a thrill I notice Skye looking over.

“Yes Mom, you do know me, in fact too well” I say affectionately “she is an artist, I looked at her web site this afternoon. She works in the Fantasy and Sci-Fi genre by all accounts she is an extremely talented and a shrewd businesswoman, she is also extremely rich and highly successful. As you heard she is British and came to America to study art when she was nineteen and she travels extensively with her work that’s all I know” I neglect to add that I have someone on the case digging up more information on her. I look down at my mother she has an expression I can’t determine “What?”

Reaching up she cups my cheek, pure love shining from her eyes “Oh my poor boy, you’ve got her so bad, you just don’t know it yet”.

“Don’t be daft!” I scoff, dread starts to grip me. I’m a love them and leave them kind of guy, I’m well known for it “what makes you say that?” I add with growing alarm.

“You haven’t been able to take your eyes off her from the moment she set foot in the gallery” it was all said softly and as a statement. A large boulder feels as if it has suddenly taken up residence in my gut.

Luckily one of my mother's friends comes over to spirit her away leaving me to my thoughts. No matter how much I try to deny my mother's words my eyes are constantly drawn to Skye.

Half an hour later, I spy Skye on her own walking around looking at the paintings, she stops in front of a large canvass that is speckled with splodges of paint with a few squiggles and straight lines running through it, what utter crap!

Taking a deep breath, I walk up behind her saying "The brush strokes show a determined mind, and the aesthetically pleasing colours show an insight into the artist's character, don't you think?"

Skye startles and jumps at the sound of my voice stepping back into me. I place my hands on her waist to steady her. Fuck she feels good. I bite down on a groan that threatens to escape my throat. It takes all I have to keep my hands from roaming all over her body. I'm not quite successful as my fingers flex and kneed her tiny waist and the tops of her hips. Instead of moving out of my grip she leans slightly to one side and looks up at me, then quickly glances around to see who is near, then looks back up at me with a mischievous grin and glint in her eye.

"Bullshit! You just think it's a load of splodges, squiggles and straight lines and any three-year old can do better" she says in her sexy throaty voice with barely contained mirth.

"Busted" I say around a surprise bark of laughter that escapes me.

Skye moves and turns to face me, I let my hands drop. To stop myself reaching out to hold her again I put my hands in my trouser pockets.

"I do have three-year old twin nephews, to which you have just echoed my sentiments exactly that I had over an hour ago".

"So, what kind of art do you prefer Mr Blake?" is that a hint of a challenge I detect.

“Please call me Clayton, Mr Blake is so formal plus it makes me feel old” I place a hand over my heart and give a slight bow.

“Clayton” she whispers, her husky voice washes over me, sending my cock agonisingly harder. Her lips curl in a slight smile, fantasies of those full luscious lips wrapped around my cock immediately spring to mind. As I bring my head up, I look into her eyes and my breath catches. They are the most exquisite colour I’ve ever seen. At first glance you would be mistaken to say they are pale green. However, her eyes are more yellow and have a dark blue ring surrounding the outside of the iris.

“Your eyes” I breathe out in wonder; she frowns then raises an eyebrow at me.

“My eyes... well that’s a first to be told they are a work of art”.

“What?” I say in confusion, to my horror I realise I’ve spoken out loud. I can feel the blood rush to my face “sorry, err, what I meant to say, err, was” fuck I’m flustered. Me! Clayton Blake, billionaire, master of industry who puts the fear of God in everyone who works for him and does business with is reduced to a quivering wreck by the goddess who stands before him.

“What’s up? Cat gotcha tongue Clayton” she’s teasing me, and that mischievous grin is back. Her eyes sparkling with amusement. Did she know the effect she is having on me? Christ! I want to kiss her fucking senseless. Bringing my brain back online I try to remember what the question was she asked. Art that was it what art did I like? I open my mouth to answer when from behind me a loud effeminate English accented voice squeals.

“Skye! Oh my god honey, there you are”

My instincts would normally be to scowl and tell the person to fuck off, however in this instance I welcome in the interruption. I move so I can see who is coming towards us. The man is average height and very slim, his hair is his crowning glory as it’s artfully styled and held that much product it didn’t move. His suit is expensive, and he carries it well plus

he is blatantly gay given by the way he holds himself and walks. He descends on Skye giving her a huge hug.

“Okay Simon, let go I can’t breathe” Skye mumbles as she pat’s his back indicating she wants him to ease up.

Letting her go he says in a rush “I am so sorry about this afternoon. When Macy rang me, I got on to it straight away. I must confess I have no recollection of a Scott Smith. I do know Phoenix PR but not him, anyway I have put calls out so I should have answers for you tomorrow” he pauses for breath then notices me “Hellooo gorgeous” he says blatantly dragging his eyes up and down my body, imagining me naked no doubt.

“Behave” Skye admonishes and slaps his arm “Simon this is Clayton Blake, Clayton this is one of my best friends and PR guru Simon Hanson”.

Simon’s eyes widen “The Clayton Blake, as in billionaire business mogul, thirty years young free and very single, Clayton Blake”.

“The one and only” I grin extending my hand.

He takes it and with his other hand he fans himself saying to Skye “Well shag me sideways, I’ve found my sugar daddy for tonight, what are you doing?”

Skye looks at me nervously obviously trying to gage my reaction to her friend’s outrageous behaviour. I laugh heartily mainly to show her I’m not offended, and I find myself genuinely liking this guy.

“Unfortunately, this sugar daddy is spoken for tonight, so you’ll have to find another one”.

Right on cue mother appears at my elbow. I introduce her to Simon who charms her immediately by saying he can see where I got my good looks from.

“Are you ready to leave?” I ask her.

“Yes, if you don’t mind” I nod “We are going to be at the Bolton House Charity fund raiser on Saturday, will we have the pleasure of seeing you there?” mother directs the question to Skye however it’s Simon who answers.

“Yes, we have a table. I can’t wait. I just love all the glitz and glamour all in the name of a good cause”.

“Fabulous” mother practically squeals “I look forward to seeing you both there” she says air kissing with Simon, then surprising both me and Skye, hugs her goodbye. I nod and shake Simon’s hand then take Skye’s hand raising the back to my lips and kiss her soft skin. I hold my breath as I don’t trust what affect her scent will have on my body and brain. If just being in the same proximity has me hard and her voice sends my muscles into a quivering mess, I know I will be lost completely if I take in her scent.

“Till Saturday” I murmur holding her gaze as I step back. I see her skin flush pink across her cheekbones, down her throat and over her wonderful ample bosom. The sight gives me a satisfying thrill, I do have an effect on her.

SKYE

A loud groan escapes me as I slide deeper into the hot scented water, finally getting to soak in the bath I longed for hours earlier. I feel all my aching muscles slowly relax. Mentally I run a checklist of what I need to do tomorrow. Hair cut at eleven, good old Macy called a friend of hers after I left for the gallery and booked an appointment. Meeting at four, now that is going to be interesting as it’s in one of those high-end gentlemen’s pole dancing clubs, if everything goes as planned then it will be a commission I will start when I come back in September. I’ve had numerous conversations with the owner over the last few months so tomorrow is to view what space the paintings will take up, then I can give him a rough indication of price. Then seven thirty meeting with Simon, Shelley, Phil and whoever else turns up at Gino’s restaurant for a get together. At least I can get a good couple of hours drawing done in the morning. I don’t sleep much, probably due to all the travelling I do and crossing various time zones constantly has screwed up my internal clock.

With a contented sigh I slip down further into the hot water, my thoughts turn to the evening and Clayton Blake. God my body tightens just at the thought of him, normally I’m cautious and wary of new men I meet, but for some reason he

brought out the tease in me. A smile breaks out across my face as I remember how flustered he became when he mentioned my eyes. Huh! He didn't answer my question on the kind of art he preferred, mental note to self, ask him that when I see him on Saturday. A thrill jolts through me and butterflies take up residence in my stomach at the thought.

Bloody hell, I'm going to be a quivering wreck by Saturday if this keeps up, however I am proud of myself for being cool and calm around him especially when Smythe introduced me to his mother. I give myself a mental pat on the back at my cleverness for saying he seemed familiar, but I couldn't recall where I knew him from. Of course, I recognised him the minute I clapped eyes on him when I entered the gallery. I'm just thankful I didn't fall off my shoes at the surprise I had at seeing him there. For some reason it struck me that the gallery and the art it contained wasn't for him, a chuckle escapes me as he admitted as much when I called his bluff.

My thoughts drift to when I stepped back into him after he startled me. It was like hitting a brick wall, a deliciously hot brick wall. Just imagining what his chest and abs will be like has me squeezing my thighs together. I can still feel the heat of his big hands on my waist, the strong grip and his flexing fingers; jeez I wanted him to run his hands all over my body. His touch sent riotous tingling sensations all over my body and I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest; it beat so fast it made me lightheaded. My tits ache and nipples harden in agreement, and boy oh boy he smelt good! A lovely musky, mildly spicy all male scent, remembering the aroma makes my blood heat. Bloody hell! I'm turned on. No-one has ever had an effect on me like he does.

Would I have sex with him? My body gives a resounding yes. "Hell yes!" Comes from my inner goddess, but mentally was I ready? "Park the brain and thinking" my inner goddess snaps. Fair enough... let's see how things progress. He might not even want me. "Oh, he wants you alright sweet thing, you did see the look he gave you when he kissed your hand, that guy wants to eat you alive and fuck you senseless". The

heat in my whole body ramps up a thousand degrees as my imagination runs riot. Come on girl admit it, Clayton Blake is sex on legs, he oozes it. “Not only that” my inner goddess chides “he’s a billionaire”.

I shoot up out of the water “Christ I’d forgotten about that” my words echo around the bathroom making me jump, laughing at myself I settle back in the water. Clayton being rich doesn’t bother me, I’m extremely wealthy myself, not as rich as him of course but I’m a multi-millionaire in my own right. The difference with Clayton is he won’t be interested in me for my money, that’s one of the reasons why I’m wary of meeting new men, it’s determining and filtering out the fortune hunters. On the way home I asked Simon how he knew so much about Clayton.

“Darling, I’m in PR it is my job to know who the movers and shakers are; besides you’ve spent so little time in America over the last few years, plus it’s almost two years since you were last in New York I knew you wouldn’t have a clue who he is”

“And you knew who he was before you came over” I said a tad indignant recalling his spiel of Clayton being a billionaire, free and single.

“Of course, he definitely has a thing for you honey” he bumped my shoulder giving me a knowing wink.

I climb out of the bath, dry off and put on my bathrobe, I’m still wide awake. I head into the kitchen and make myself a drink of milky hot chocolate, in the living room I switch on the music centre and set the iPod on random. Rock music blares out. I turn the volume down then decide I want to listen to Evanescence, with Amy Lee’s voice filling the room I walk over to my drawing desk, as I sit down Paul enters the room.

“Hey, everything okay?”

“Yes ma’am, if you don’t need anything I’ll turn in”.

“I’m good thanks, goodnight” as he turns to go, I suddenly remember Sunday “Paul” I call out, silently he comes back into the room and waits patiently for me to speak, it

always amazes me how quiet he can move for a man his size, six one and built like a barn.

“Sunday, do you still have Jack?” Paul nods warily “it’s his birthday, isn’t it?” again a nod “What do you have planned?”

“I don’t have anything definite planned, thought I would see what he wanted to do” Paul answers, he seems embarrassed that he hasn’t got his soon to be seven-year-old, son’s day planned out meticulously, which is his usual style.

“Well, I was thinking, how about we have a birthday lunch or tea for him here. I’ll organise it all you have to do is turn up after whatever it is you decide to do and if he wants to bring some friends too that’s fine” I can’t fathom if I’ve overstepped the mark as Paul’s face is completely blank. “Anyway, have a think about it, the offer’s there, just let me know sometime tomorrow morning, that way it’ll give me time to get groceries and make a cake”.

Paul stands motionless for a few minutes, feeling a tad awkward under his scrutiny I distract myself by picking up my drink to break eye contact.

“You’d do that for Jack?” Paul says quietly, keeping my head down pretending to be busy with what’s on my desk I nod, it also means I don’t see or hear Paul as he approaches me. I nearly claw the ceiling when he touches my shoulder and says “Thank you” softly.

“Jeez, you scared the shit out of me!” I say swatting his arm “I swear to god I am going to make it compulsory for you to wear a bell”.

“Sorry ma’am” he chuckles not in the slightest “and thank you again, that would be great. I think a birthday tea will be much appreciated”.

“Sure, you don’t want it to be lunch” I ask double checking.

“Tea will be fine; besides you’ll be out late Saturday, or should I say early hours Sunday” he reminds me.

“Oh yeah” I screw my face up remembering the charity event “good point. Tea it is. Okay, so let me know what time tomorrow” he opens his mouth to say something, I raise my

hand to stop him and add “Once you’ve spoken to Jack and find out what he wants to do then it’ll give you an idea what time you will be back here, plus how many of his friends will be coming”.

Conceding to my points Paul nods and yes ma’am me again, saying goodnight he leaves to go to his quarters.

Paul has lived with me since he started working for me, almost four years ago. Travelling everywhere with me and Macy, he has seen me at my worst, which doesn’t happen often and thankfully he hasn’t run in the opposite direction screaming. Like Macy, he is another god send of a find. I’ve had other bodyguards before him but for whatever reason it didn’t work out. Usually, it was the amount of travelling I did that was cited as the reason for them leaving. Actually, I think it was more to do with the amount of time I spent out of the country when I was working on commissions in some cases it could be months in one country, so being away from family became an issue for many.

Macy didn’t have family, well she did, she just didn’t want anything to do with them and I’d never pried, I figured she would tell me whenever she was ready or wanted to and so far to date, she didn’t.

Paul Boyd had come recommended by my last bodyguard. They had been in the military together serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. I remembered the day I’d interviewed him; it is the only time I have seen him nervous. He’d been out of the military about nine months working as a bouncer for a club of ‘questionable activity’ that’s all he would give me when I asked why he was looking to leave. I admired that he remained true to his integrity rather than get pulled into the questionable activity. At the time of the interview, he had no contact with his son due to his ex-wife using the boy as a weapon to get her demands met during a nasty divorce battle. As part of the terms for his employment I got him to agree to allow my lawyer to resolve the divorce issues, all at my expense. At the time my reasons were purely selfish, this way I knew his mind will always be on the job, not that I class myself as high risk. However, due to my work I have quite a fan base which means

I have my share of nut jobs and stalkers, hence the bodyguard. Paul couldn't argue with my logic so reluctantly he agreed. In return I have an extremely loyal bodyguard. Whenever I am in the States, I make sure he has time with his son, the ex-wife can't refuse because if she does all the benefits she receives, again courtesy of me, disappear. When I'm travelling Paul face times or Skype's his son at least once a day. I've met his son a few times and he's a lovely polite kid and a softer image of his father. Paul has a rugged handsomeness about him, but the horrors of war have left their mark, and his features have a harshness that screams 'don't mess with me'.

Making a mental note to buy Jack a birthday present, I glance over at the wall clock, one o'clock. Oh well time to get some sleep. Switching everything off I take my cup into the kitchen rinse it out and put it in the machine. In my bedroom I switch my iPod to some calming meditation music and settle in to wait for sleep to claim me. My last thought and image are of Clayton Blake and how his eyes seared mine with promises of sin and decadence and how his lips felt as he kissed the back of my hand.

CHAPTER TWO

SKYE

In the mirror I watch Simon pass behind me as I put on my mascara. I can tell something is on his mind and he has news or information I won't like. He has a 'tell' when he's agitated, the clenching and unclenching of his hands, but he's putting on a front of calm. I refocus on my reflection and finish putting on my makeup. After a few more minutes I can't stand it anymore.

"Okay, spill" I say in my best don't mess with me tone as I can muster because I'm not really sure if I want to hear what he has to say, ignorance is bliss and all that.

"Oh Honey" he says with a heavy sigh, setting alarm bells ringing and dread settling in the pit of my stomach "I don't know how to tell you without it sounding scary as shit" he's distraught.

I know I have a wide-eyed look on my face because he winces at my reaction to what he's just said, and he knew he'd already started to scare me. I stand and go to him, giving him a hug.

"We've been besties for eight years you know you can tell me anything, just come out with it and we'll go from there. I'm a big girl and I'm wearing my big girl knickers. I can handle it" that got him to relax a little.

"Right, okay, give me a minute to collect my thoughts. I'll fix us a drink" with that he heads out of my bedroom.

I get dressed in my trademark jeans and t-shirt, memories of when we first met at Art College in London fill my mind. It was about a week after I started there. I'd already befriended Shelley and we regularly went into the cafeteria for lunch. Simon was standing alone with a tray of food looking lost and forlorn in the crowd of chatting groups surrounding him. I took pity on him and invited him to join us, for the rest of the hour the three of us didn't stop talking and laughing. It wasn't long after when we got an apartment together. Shelley and I guessed Simon was gay before he did, actually that's

wrong, Simon knew he was gay he just hadn't accepted it himself. I think it was mainly down to his Catholic upbringing and having a controlling father and an indifferent mother, it kind of messed with the guy's head. It wasn't until we moved to New York he came out and has never looked back since, plus he found his calling in PR. He is an absolute star at what he does, and he's established himself with a strong client base, including me.

Giving myself one final look in the mirror and fluffing out my hair, the stylist has done a fairly reasonable job, the poor thing nearly had a heart attack when he saw how long it was. Now my hair is waist length and all-natural cork-screw curls. I blow myself a kiss and head out to find Simon.

He's in the living room, pacing and doing a good job of wearing down the rug. On the table is a bottle of Southern Comfort, my favourite tippie, along with a glass that has a generous measure in it.

"Surely it can't be that bad if you are giving me the hard stuff".

Simon jerks around at the sound of my voice, blimey he is jumpy. I sit down and take the drink in one hit. The smooth liquor burning its way down my throat to my stomach "Okay, hit me with it".

He sits next to me and takes my hands and looks me in the eye, sighing and dropping his gaze to our joined hands he says "Oh Honey, I've screwed up big time" he sighs heavily again. I don't react just give him space to find the words he needs to continue "The meeting you had yesterday with Scott Smith" he pauses and looks at me, worry lines creasing his brow.

"Yes how can I forget that prat, he took two hours of my life I will never get back" I say pleased with myself as I remain calm, yesterday I was willing and ready to commit murder, I was that angry "Did Macy tell you he has this idea that he is signing me and he's already introducing himself as my new PR agent" I add although it comes out more forceful than I intend.

“Yeah, she did. The fucker is delusional” I nod my agreement “Anyway” Simon takes a deep breath before he continues “about six months ago I was out with friends, you were in France” he shakes his head “that’s by the by. It was one of those nights with lots of wine and boasting, my dad’s bigger than your dad kind of boasting only it was about clients. I happened to mention you, as you know you are my number one”.

“And most profitable” I chide with a smile.

“Yes that as well” he smiles back although it’s strained “well at the time I was mega busy and I was saying I didn’t think I could handle you when you came back to the States” I kept my face blank “Scott then pipes up that he would jump at the opportunity to represent you and would I arrange a meeting, well the alcohol was taking effect and” he pauses taking a deep breath saying the next bit in a rush “I accessed your diary and put in the meeting sending him a diary request” he looks at me with such remorse it takes all I’ve got not to laugh, considering I should be mad as hell at him because nobody but Macy puts things in my diary “I’m such a dick and I’m so sorry. I want to continue being your PR agent and I swear to God I’ll never do anything like that again” he looks at me with such pleading in his eyes he breaks my heart and I know I can’t be mad at him even though I’ve every right to be.

“Oh Simon, yes you are a dick” I say laughing “and I will let you keep your balls” his shoulders sag with relief “seriously though, I thought you were going to tell me you’d killed someone or lost a shit load of money” he lets out a shaky laugh “so have you set this Scott straight?” I raise an eyebrow to prompt him; he looks back at me rather sheepish.

“Well, that’s the thing Scott works for his uncle who is a big fish in the PR business and” he winces “if I tell him ‘Oh sorry I was drunk that night and I screwed up and Skye Darcy is remaining my client’ he can make things very difficult for me, so I was wondering...” with a half grimace and hopeful expression on his face, he lets the sentence hang, dutifully I pick up the thread.

“So, you want me to be the bad guy” I say resigned, he nods giving me puppy dog eyes “you owe me, big time for this” and I punch his shoulder to make my point.

“Ouch!” he yelps “am I forgiven?” he says hopefully rubbing his shoulder.

“Don’t know” then after a beat “just don’t do it again because if you do, I will definitely be serving you your balls on a platter”.

“You are the best” he grins widely and gives me a big hard hug. I grumble at him under my breath and feel my ribs crack “so how are you going to handle it”.

“Leave it with me. I’ll have to brainstorm with Macy for a plan of action” I look at my watch “come on time to go to Gino’s. Paul” I yell.

“Yes ma’am” Paul’s deep rumbling southern accent comes from behind me. His immediate response has my heart leaping into my mouth.

“Bells... now compulsory!” I scowl pointing at him.

Simon looks at us puzzled and mouths “Bells” to Paul with raised eyebrows.

Paul puts his head down and shakes it with a resigned sigh as he opens the door. I laugh, poor man although that does give me an idea for his Christmas present.

Gino’s is a lovely family run Italian restaurant. It was started by the current owner’s great grandfather who immigrated to the States after the Second World War. Simon often jokes it’s a front for the mob, but none of us has the nerve to ask. The restaurant is done out in a homely traditional Italian setting, simple wooden tables covered in red and white gingham tablecloths, decorated with scenic pictures of the Italian countryside. When we first moved to New York we stumbled across this restaurant during one of our many adventures in getting to know the neighbourhood and since then we frequent it as often as possible, normally at least once a week usually on a Friday, especially when I’m around.

On route we picked up Macy so the three of us walk into the welcoming warmth and hospitality of Gino himself, it’s

a family tradition to call the first-born son Gino. When he sees me, he greets me like a father would at the return of his much-loved prodigal son, in my case daughter. Well, it has been nearly two years since I last set foot in the place.

Gino always speaks in Italian to me; he doesn't care if no-one can follow the conversation as he knows I'll translate.

"Mia cara e stato trappo lungo, oh come ho perso te" he says giving me a bear hug making my spine crack, releasing me he bellows "Maria, Maria come see who is here!"

The whole restaurant goes quiet, all eyes turn towards us. Oh, I wish the floor would open and swallow me up. Maria is Gino's wife, she's a few inches shorter than me and rotund, her long greying dark hair scrapped back into a bun, as she walks from the back of the restaurant, she holds her arms open with a huge smile on her beautiful motherly face. I went to her, greeting her just as warmly. I feel myself filling up at the response they've given me. Maria starts to fuss saying how beautiful I am and that I'm too thin. I laugh and say that's why I've come because I missed her fabulous cooking so much, which was true. I head back to the others as Gino is showing them to our table. Shelley and Phil are already there along with two friends of Simon's, plus Pete and his catty bitch girlfriend from hell Caroline. Shit that's the evening ruined.

Simon leans down and whispers "Sorry honey, I didn't know they were coming. Come on sit in between Harry and Mark they'll keep the bitch in check".

"You have just redeemed yourself, all is forgiven" I whisper back.

CLAYTON

Why, oh why do I put up with my mothers' match making attempts I ask myself for the millionth time as I look at my 'date' across the table. She's dressed and made up to the nines, obviously expecting to be taken to some obscenely expensive restaurant that she can later boast to her friends about via social media.

Instead, I've brought her to Gino's, my favourite Italian restaurant. I love the family atmosphere and the genuine welcome they give you. It's a far cry from the obnoxious or simpering welcome at some of the posh restaurants I frequent. I can tell by her face she isn't impressed, well fuck her – hmm may be later. Suddenly thoughts of Skye come unbidden to mind, this has been happening on and off all day when I least expect it. I keep having fantasy after fantasy of getting her beneath me, each one being more graphic. My cock twitches at the direction of my thoughts and I shift in my seat trying to make room in my pants.

Clearing my throat, I look up from the menu I'm holding "So what are you going to have Pippa" I ask politely.

As I ask my question the door opens and a group of people walk in, I'm momentarily distracted as I watch Gino welcome them, the guy seems vaguely familiar. I look back at Pippa, as she is about to answer, Gino starts bellowing for his wife. Frowning I look at the group again and nearly fall off my chair, Skye steps into view and walks towards Maria with the most beautiful smile I have ever seen taking my breath away. Skye and Maria embrace, when they pull apart, I can see genuine affection shining in both faces. I only know the odd word and a couple of phrases in Italian so I couldn't follow what Maria is saying. However, Skye floors me even more when she laughs, her deep throaty sexy laugh and answers Maria in fluent flawless Italian.

I can't take my eyes off her and watch as she moves across the restaurant back to her friends. Her hair is down, a mass of corkscrew curls cascading down her back to her waist. Fuck I'd love to wrap my hands in it. She's wearing jeans, hipsters and I'm mesmerised as I watch her hips sway and her tight ass flex as she walks. She takes off her jacket to reveal a plain black v neck fitted t-shirt. I noticed yesterday she has big tits and I'll put money on the fact they're real. They suit her, she carries herself and them well. I stifle a groan as images of her naked and I'm sucking and fondling them come to mind, my cock throbs. Her waist is tiny and my hands tingle as I remember how she felt under them yesterday.

Appreciating her figure, which is more athletic than hourglass in build has me rock hard, no woman has ever gotten to me like she does. I continue to watch Skye as she greets each person at her table with a hug except one couple who she acknowledges with a strained smile, wonder what that's all about. Skye sits down between two men, smiling and laughing at whatever it is they've said. I have to fight an overwhelming urge to go over and join her table. I can feel my body preparing itself to stand, suddenly Skye looks up and straight at me and my heart does a funny flip flop. A slow shy smile breaks out across her beautiful lips, raising her hand she waves tentatively at me. Her action causes the rest of her party to turn around and stare. I wave back with enthusiasm and stupid grin on my face.

"So, you actually know her then" snaps my date, what's her name again, oh yeah Pippa, fucking stupid name.

"Yeah, I do" thankfully the waitress arrives to take our order and I bury my head in the menu, so I don't have to look at her.

The meal is a complete fucking disaster. The food is outstanding as it always is and I eat heartily, it's the company that's crap. I quickly discover my date has very little to say if it isn't about shopping, fashion and shoes or some reality TV show I've never even heard of she couldn't converse. She has done nothing of interest with her life and didn't work. She's a typical trust fund socialite looking for a rich man, so the majority of the time we are silent. Thanks Mom!

The only good thing is, I can watch Skye from where I sit. I have a clear unobstructed view of her. Skye's group seem to be having a riot of a time. I recognise the guy she came in with as Simon from last night, they're loud but not boisterous enough to annoy the other diners. I notice Gino and Maria sitting down and joining them whenever they could. At one point the whole group broke out in cheers and got up to hug and congratulate one couple, bottles of champagne were brought to the table, from what I could hear the toast indicated a baby and engagement for the couple.

As I order coffee, I see Skye get up, panic surges through me. I feel myself breaking out in a cold sweat, I don't want her to leave yet. An older woman gets up as well and they move towards my table, why is she coming to me? She's not idiot, my brain snaps, she has to pass you to go to the bathroom. I feel myself flush at my own egotism. As she approaches, I catch her eyes and hold them. I know I have my idiot goofy smile on my face, I can't help it. I stand and greet her.

"Skye how lovely to see you again so soon" my voice comes out low and seductive, pure proof to what this vision of beauty is doing to me.

"Clayton, a pleasant surprise" she replies in her low and sexy as fuck voice "how was your meal"

"Wonderful, it always is when I come here" I want her to know I'm a regular. The woman behind her shifts and clears her throat. Skye takes the hint and introduces her. I feel obliged to introduce my date which is the last thing I want to do.

"Well enjoy the rest of your evening, nice to meet you" Skye smiles at Pippa who does a piss poor job of being civil back. To me she says "and I guess I'll be seeing you tomorrow night"

"I look forward to it" and before I could stop myself, I pick up her hand and kiss the back of it. I see the high flush of her cheeks and it makes me feel like a giddy teenager. Screw it tomorrow night I am going to make my move on her. I step aside to allow her and her friend to pass. Sitting down, I see a spiteful almost hateful look on Pippa's face, and I realise she isn't a patch on Skye.

"So, who is the Barbie doll" Pippa spits out, her face screws up with disdain "and what's this about tomorrow night?"

Pippa has seriously pissed me off, so what comes out of my mouth next, let's just say hell will freeze over before I apologise to my mother for tearing a strip off one of her friend's daughters.

"Skye" I enunciate barely reigning in my anger "is an extremely talented artist and successful self-made business

woman, who is widely travelled and speaks at least two languages fluently to my knowledge and I suggest you could learn quite a bit from her and apply it to your life to make you a more interesting human being, because I think the brainless and plastic Barbie label is better suited to you” the look of shock on her face makes me feel justified “Tomorrow night is the Bolton House Charity fund raiser I am attending and so is Skye” I neglect to say separately, by now anger has replaced Pippa’s shock.

“I will not stay here and be insulted” hisses Pippa as she stands and throws her napkin on to the table then stalks out of the restaurant.

“Good riddance” I mutter under my breath. I pull out my cell phone and send a text to my mother explaining what has happened, the least I can do is forewarn her about the potential fallout heading her way.

SKYE

I can feel Macy’s curiosity and eyes burning a hole in the back of my head as I focus on washing my hands, with a sigh I give in and tell her “I met him last night at the gallery opening. He was there with his mother who happened to mention they will be attending the charity benefit tomorrow. She wanted to know if I would be going. Simon told her we had a table”

There is no way in hell I’m telling her or my best friends about the elevator incident that happened earlier that day as they’ll have a field day in teasing me. I turn around and pull out a couple of paper hand towels from the holder behind her.

“What, I didn’t say anything!” Macy says trying to look innocent.

“You don’t have to it’s written all over your face, plus I could feel your curiosity burning holes in the back of my head” I chuckle “You know curiosity will kill you one of these days” I say with mock stern chastisement making her laugh.

“I must say he is easy on the eye, very, very easy” she emphasises “I wouldn’t kick him out of bed in a hurry” she winks saucily.

“Macy, I’m shocked” I laugh as I throw the towels in the bin “however, touch him and I’ll rip your arms off”

“Ho, ho, ho!” Macy chuckles with amusement “Skye Darcy are you implying that the deliciously delectable Clayton Blake is the first man in god knows how long to have caught your attention and you plan to do something about it?”

“Maybe” I say mischievously over my shoulder as I open the door of the restroom to head back into the restaurant.

Walking through the door I see Clayton’s date stomping out the front door, he on the other hand is still seated and scowling at his phone as he texts rapidly, his fingers flying over the keys on his phone. As we pull level to his table and only God knows what possesses me to say it I ask, “What did you say that was so bad to make her walk out?”

Clayton’s head snaps up his scowl disappearing instantly to be replaced with a look I can only describe as chagrin. He looks back down at his phone and shifts in his seat, clears his throat and when he looks back up his face is set with determination, a crease forms between his eyebrows. His luscious, sculpted lips press into a thin line then he lets out a heavy exhale.

“She insulted you”.

I think my jaw hit the table. How can a complete stranger insult you when they don’t know you? Oh, wait a minute... yep... I do know this one.

“Barbie! By any chance?” I ask.

The look of shock and surprise on his face is classic and it makes me chuckle, I’m right in my assumption.

“So, what did you say in defence of our beautiful and brilliant Skye?” Macy says appraisingly.

Clayton’s eyes flicked to her then back at me, holding my gaze he says “Exactly that, she is beautiful and brilliant, plus she’s a highly accomplished businesswoman and the Barbie insult was better suited to her than Skye”.

This time my jaw hits the floor and I know my cheeks have gone purple with embarrassment because of the sudden heat flooding my body and face. I have no clue how to feel and think about what he's just said. It's bloody obvious he's done his homework on me. Macy on the other hand lets out a whoop of laughter and claps her hands.

"For such gallant and chivalrous actions towards our sensational Skye please come join our party and let us reward you with copious amounts of alcohol" Macy says taking my arm and moving me back towards our table gesturing to Clayton to follow.

My legs move woodenly, one foot in front of the other that's all I'm aware of along with Clayton's presence behind me as we walk back to our table. I'm in stunned shock. Simon being Simon, he never misses a trick, had been closely watching me and Macy with Clayton and has already got an additional chair, made Harry and Mark move next to each other meaning that Clayton will be sitting next to me by the time we get back to the table.

Clayton gallantly pulls out my chair and holds the back and moves it forward as I sit. I glance at Shelley who's grinning so widely her face is in danger of splitting in half. It's also apparent Simon has told everyone who Clayton is and of our meeting him last night.

I introduce him to everyone pointing out the couples. Harry and Mark both sigh and gaze at Clayton with open mouthed awe. Clayton handles their besotted attention well; it doesn't faze him one bit.

Now call me a bitch, but I take great delight in watching Caroline's reaction. I just wish I could've filmed it or took pictures of her green with envy sour face for prosperity. This is a woman who unbeknownst to anyone but herself tries to make my life a misery whenever I'm in proximity of her and she always takes every opportunity to belittle me in front of everyone, a feat she rarely achieves thanks to my friends thwarting her attempts and slapping her down with their own bitchy comebacks. My friends only tolerate her because of Pete.

Pete was an ex of mine; he was my first proper boyfriend when I was seventeen. We dated for all of three months and unfortunately, I also happened to lose my virginity to him. He'd been my cousin Alfie's best friend, but I had known him since I was sixteen. I try never to have regrets but if I was ever given the chance to go back and change something in my life that would make the list.

Pete moved to New York about six years ago and we bumped into each other in the street, literally. I hadn't seen Pete since we finished going out together and because he told me I was the only person he knew, he'd been in New York for three weeks, and I felt sorry for him I extended an invitation to join us at Gino's. He jumped at the chance and has been coming here ever since. God knows why because I don't even class us as friends, I even struggle to call us associates or acquaintances. Pete's been seeing Caroline for about five years, she seemed OK at first, but I think since she found out Pete and I had once been an item her animosity towards me just seems to increase each time she sees me. I'm just glad I don't have to see her too often.

I also happen to know she's not faithful to Pete. As far as I'm aware he and the rest of my friends don't know this. I haven't even told Shelley and Simon. I don't know why because we share everything, we have very few secrets. Admittedly there are things I haven't told them about my past and I'm sure it's the same for them but keeping the fact that Caroline has been unfaithful to Pete three times that I know of something inside me was saying to keep quiet, so I am... for now.

"Skye" Clayton's deep raspy voice brings me back to the present.

"Hmm, sorry what did you say?" I realise he or someone has asked me a question.

"Desert, what would you like?" he says with a smile playing on his sinful lips.

You covered in chocolate! I nearly blurt out. I mentally slap myself and feel my cheeks warm.

Clayton leans in close and whispers in my ear "Whatever it is you just thought of you can have later. For now,

choose from the menu” he taps the menu that has somehow miraculously appeared in front of me.

The combination of his body heat, scent, seductive voice, and the proximity of his mouth next to my ear nearly causes me to combust. I look at the menu my cheeks on fire, deep breathes I tell myself trying to calm my racing heart. I clench my hands into fists to stop the tell-tale sign of trembling. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Simon and Shelley frantically whispering and looking at me then Clayton. Oh god help me what are they plotting.

“I’ll have hot chocolate fudge cake with ice cream” I say to the waiter handing the menu to him. I’m thankful that it’s in a hard leather folder which means no-one will see my shaking hands although my fingers are cramping with gripping it so hard.

“Excellent choice” Clayton murmurs “Chocolate and ice cream, the fun you can have with those”.

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, the man and his voice ooze sinful toe-curling sex and for the first time in forever I feel myself getting wet.

“So, Clayton” Simon says leaning across the table “what multimillion dollar deal are you working on at the moment?”

For the remainder of the meal Clayton regales us with funny stories that happened in his private and business life. He is witty, charismatic, and eloquent putting everyone at ease. I also notice how he gets each of my friends to talk about themselves and tell him how they met me, interestingly he doesn’t ask Pete or Caroline.

At midnight Paul comes into the restaurant to take me home prompting me to call it a night. Settling the bill becomes a battle of wills with Gino and Maria, they insist no payment is necessary. To avoid insulting them and their hospitality I pull five, hundred dollar bills out from my pocket and put them on the table telling Gino to split the money between the staff, everyone else follows suit, except Caroline, who scowls at Pete when he put his money down. I know he won’t be as generous as the rest of us, his act of putting money on the table is more about saving face and not looking tight fisted.

Outside we say our goodbyes and finalise arrangements for tomorrow's pampering session. Simon and Macy are getting a lift home from Shelley and Phil, I've no idea where Pete and Caroline went, and I don't care. Paul pulls up to the curb in the SUV and remains in the car, engine running. I know even though it appears he's ignoring me and Clayton he is paying one hundred percent of his attention on us and our surroundings.

"Can I give you a lift home or wherever" I ask in the friendliest nonchalant manner I can muster.

"Thank you but no, my own chariot awaits" Clayton nods in the direction of a Bentley parked across the street and a suited man, bodyguard I guess, stands by the rear passenger door "I look forward to enjoying yours and your friends company tomorrow evening, if tonight is anything to go by it's going to be highly entertaining" he leans forward and kisses my forehead then picks up my hand and kisses the back, his eyes never leaving mine and by god they promise all sorts of enjoyable and decadent things that makes my heart pick up speed. Hell! I'm practically panting, and my body is tingling all over. Clayton opens the rear passenger door and helps me into the car.

"Home" I say to Paul as I watch Clayton with his tight butt flexing and lithe long legs stroll cross the street and get into his own car "oh be still my racing heart" I murmur.

CHAPTER THREE

SKYE

“I love being pampered” says Shelley as we – Macy, me and Simon – each sit in a reclining chair with a face pack on and a towel wrapped around our heads whilst a team of beauticians sit around us doing manicures and pedicures. A collective hum is all the answer she gets.

“So, tell me Skye” Simon says “What are you wearing tonight to ensnare the sex god Clayton even more” Shelley and Macy snigger.

“No idea, what am I wearing Shelley” I throw back.

“Your birthday suit” she says around a laugh.

“Jeans and t-shirt, it is then” I say smugly.

“Oh no, you’re not!” three voices chorus together loudly, each of them knew that given half the chance that’s exactly what I will turn up in.

I lift my head and address the beauticians “See what I have to put up with” I say trying to sound indignant and going for their sympathy instead they all grin back at me, not one look of sympathy.

We’ve been bantering and teasing, generally entertaining the staff for the last two hours. So far, I had been waxed, plucked, buffed and now I’m being polished. Conversation ceased as the beauticians set about the task of removing the face mask and giving us each a facial. Shelley and Macy are having their makeup for tonight done. I prefer to do my own, no disrespect to the makeup artists but I always feel like a painted doll when they’ve finished with me. Instead, I’m getting my hair done so I’m taken into the salon along with Simon when our facials are finished. Earlier I had a discussion with the stylist about what to do with my hair so as soon as I sit down, he sets to work.

“Honey” Simon leans across and takes my hand and I meet his gaze in the mirror, I frown because he looks deadly serious.

“What’s the matter?” the concern I feel is evident in my voice.

He shakes his head “Nothing for you to worry about, I just” he pauses “I just wanted to ask, all joking aside but do you like Clayton, I mean really like him?”.

I take a deep breath, okay moment of truth “Yeah I do” it came out quietly and it feels right saying it. I get a warm fuzzy feeling every time I think about him.

“Oh Honey, protect your heart. I care and worry about you, you know that right” Simon squeezes my hand again, he’s always had my best interest at heart and is very protective of and towards me, Simon is a brother to me “I did some research on him. I can see he’s into you in a big way and tonight I think he is going to make his move. He has a reputation as a womaniser. You know, love them and leave them”.

“I appreciate what you’re saying and you’re not the only one who has done their homework” I spent the morning researching Clayton online but that was more in response to his declaration to me being called Barbie by his date “I’ve also drawn that conclusion myself after seeing all those photo’s on the internet” I pause collecting my thoughts, there were hundreds of photos of him with different women, very few showed the same woman twice. I am under no illusions, he is man with a past “I do like him, what will be will be” I shrug “the way I look at it I have another nine days here then I’m out of the country and not back here for three months, so I’m going to let myself have some fun and you know that’s long overdue. You never know maybe he’ll fall for me hard and then spend all his time being miserable and pine for me and get blue balls whilst waiting for me to come back”.

Simon burst out laughing “That’s my girl” he splutters, his delight at my response is infectious and starts me giggling.

I catch the stylist’s gaze in the mirror who is smiling at us laughing, he winks and says “And may his hands be forever covered in blisters” that set us off laughing even harder.

CLAYTON

My jaw is beginning to ache as I grit my teeth listening to my mother berating me down the phone for my treatment of Pippa last night. She has been going on for nearly five minutes. Apart from saying hello I haven't said another word nor made a sound. I'm biding my time and waiting for her to run out of steam, if it doesn't happen soon, I'm going to hang up and damn the consequences. I let myself into my apartment and throw my keys down on the table along with my gym bag and head to the kitchen to get a drink. I put my phone down on the countertop switching it on to speaker, my mothers' voice echoes around the room as her tirade continues. Grabbing a bottle of water, I crack it open and drain half of it. Suddenly my mother stops speaking.

"She insulted Skye" I say through gritted teeth into the silence "and every word I said to Pippa she deserved it".

More silence and I let it drag out I can visualise my mother standing stock still, her mouth slightly open as she deciphers meaning from what I've said. I knew when she'd drawn her conclusion because of her sharp intake of breath.

"Oh, that just won't do" her voice soft with wonder. I wasn't about to enlighten her, as much as I love her, she can deal with the fallout from her meddling in my love life "Well, I'll see you tonight then dear" she hangs up.

I pick up my phone and quickly glance through my emails, nothing urgent requiring my attention so I head for the bedroom and strip off my workout sweats and walk naked into the bathroom. I decide to have a soak in the bath, Phillipee really worked me over and my muscles are feeling it. I turn the faucets on then went to the sink and fill it with water so I can shave whilst I wait for the bath to fill.

I groan easing myself into the steaming hot water, my skin, and muscles twitch as they get used to the heat. Holding my breath, I submerge myself fully and stay there until my lungs scream for air. I have absolutely no idea why I do this, I've done it for as long as I can remember but I feel refreshed, rejuvenated and relaxed by the time I let myself up for air.

Resurfacing I reach for my shampoo and body wash. As I wash my thoughts turn to Skye marvelling at how much I found out about her last night. How she is quick witted, sassy, extremely knowledgeable yet somehow, she didn't make anyone feel awkward or dumb, she is very observant although that shouldn't be a surprise due to her being an artist – duh! What surprised me most is how good a listener she is. I mean she really listened and paid attention that was evident by the questions she asked, in some cases they were quite intrusive and personal in nature, yet I'd had no qualms in answering her nor did anyone else for that matter.

My cock springs to attention when my thoughts stray to tonight and I speculate what she will be wearing. I start to imagine her in the sexy slinky black dress she wore on Thursday night at the gallery. I imagine her slowly taking it off revealing her luscious body; my cock jerks and aches demanding attention. Fisting my erection, I start with slow long strokes, my hips thrusting upwards of their own volition. My fantasy shifts to Skye dropping to her knees and taking me in her mouth and those full luscious lips circling my cock. Groaning I imagine what it'll feel like as she teases me with her tongue and sucks me hard, taking me deep into her mouth. I can feel my climax building, gripping myself tighter I pump faster and harder, this time imagining her beneath me and how pussy will feel clamped around me. I yell her name as my orgasm rips through me. Fuck, I haven't come that quick in a long time. What the fuck am I going to be like when I do get to be buried balls deep inside her?

Breathing heavily, I reach for the cloth to wipe myself down. Once my heart rate is back to normal and my legs don't feel like jelly I climb out of the bath. Looking down at my cock it's still hard and begging for more attention. Cold shower time, at this rate I'm going to end up with blisters on my hands.

In my study going through emails, I decided to do some work since I've a couple of spare hours before I must get ready for tonight, sorting and prioritising things to address Monday I come across one from an old friend and college buddy, Chuck. We keep in touch sporadically and get together when we can. I

haven't seen him for nearly eighteen months. He'd been in New York on a business trip and looked me up, now he's living in England with his wife who is something big in TV. He has a business proposition for me which looks fairly promising. I email him back expressing an interest and ask him to send more information. His response back is immediate then my phone rings. Before I can say hello Chuck's baritone voice booms down the line.

"Hey Clayton, good buddy, how the devil are you?"

"I'm good my man, how's the family?"

"Excellent, Nessa is pregnant" his joy radiates through his words.

"Congratulations Dude, so is it number two or three now?"

"This will be the second" he says proudly "anyway to business as I know you are a busy man. I've just sent you the proposal. If you want to attend there's going to be a presentation to all interested parties in about six weeks here in England, thought I'd give you the heads up, so you've got plenty of notice to plan your diary as I know your schedule is chaotic".

"You've got that right" I grimace "do you have the exact dates for the meeting?"

"I'll have them finalised in the next day or so. I should know before end of play Monday" he pauses "either way I'll email you as soon as everything is confirmed".

"Sounds good my man, I'll have a look over the proposal now and I'll give you my answer Monday before lunch, just in case I want to consult with some of my people".

We chat for few more minutes and swap gossip about various business acquaintances and mutual friends then say our goodbyes.

I set the alarm on my phone, so I won't lose track of time and end up being late for tonight. I'm already on my mothers' shit list and I sure as hell wasn't going to give her any more ammunition to make my life difficult.

SKYE

On my way home from the spa I went with Shelley to her studio to collect my dress for tonight. She wouldn't let me look at it there saying I could only do that when I got home. I feel sick to my stomach, I trust Shelley implicitly I just don't like the idea of having no choice in the matter of what I'm to wear.

Standing in my bedroom I hang the dress bag up, I decide not to look at the dress until I have to put it on, that way I won't give myself time to have a panic attack. I look at the clock I've an hour and a half before I must get ready. I go to the kitchen and make a sandwich to take the edge off the hunger pangs, carrying it over to my drawing desk I sit and start to sketch out some ideas that came to me whilst at the spa. I've no idea how long I've been drawing when my phone rings with Simon's ring tone 'It's Raining Men!' it always makes me smile at the memories of Simon prancing around the dancefloor, in fact it doesn't matter where he is, he'll dance to it whenever he hears it.

"Hey" I say around the last bite of sandwich as I continue drawing.

"Put down that pencil, you have approximately twenty-five minutes to get your slap on and in your dress. I'm on my way to yours now" he barks at me and hangs up.

Shit! With a quick rush of panic, I jump up and run to the bathroom, clean my teeth and put my face on.

Now I'm standing in front of the mirror staring wide-eyed at my reflection. Oh! my sweet fucking lord, I sigh as I take in the overall effect. The dress is fantastic as I knew it would be, but if I stand at a certain angle my top half looks naked. The dress has no back, or so it would appear. It's actually made up of flesh coloured silk and mesh. The front is a complex pattern of black lace and flesh silk and mesh across the chest, waist, and sleeves. From the hips the floor length skirt flows and it's made up of black lace and silk. Scattered throughout the whole dress including the back are sequins and diamantes. My hair is a series of complicated twists on my head

and threaded through it are diamantes and Swarovski crystals so when I move, I twinkle as the light catches all the shiny things on me.

“Let’s go knock ‘em dead” I say aloud to my reflection with confidence that I don’t feel. I pick up my clutch purse and check I have everything I need and head out to the living room. Simon wolf whistles when he sees me and indicates he wants a twirl, which I oblige.

“Honey Mr Clayton Blake ain’t gonna stand a chance” he drawls “he will have no idea what has hit him tonight when he gets a load of you. He’ll be fighting off every man in the room just to get near you. Hell! if I was straight, I’d be making a move on you”

I laugh at Simon’s compliment and link arms with him as we head out the door with Paul following.

CLAYTON

“So, which one is she?” my brother Joshua asks as he hands me a glass of champagne.

“Who” I say distractedly, Skye hasn’t arrived yet and I’m avidly watching the entrance.

“Who he says” Joshua scoffs “the beautiful creature who has captivated the elusive Clayton Blake, or so mother would have us believe”.

“Leave him alone Joshua” chides his wife Elizabeth “besides if she was here, Clayton wouldn’t be stood with us, would you?” I look at her, she smiles and winks at me, making me smile.

“Got that right” I say grinning back “you should listen to your wife she has the brains” Joshua laughs good-naturedly.

“Holy hell, will you get a load of what has just walked in” Andrew my other brother says in appreciative awe as he hands Elizabeth her drink whilst looking at the entrance. It’s not like Andrew to comment on women like that, but that might be because his long-term girlfriend isn’t here tonight.

I turn quickly to look back at the entrance, Skye. I suck in a sharp deep breath. Fuck! Could the woman get anymore stunningly beautiful.

“That gentlemen, is Skye Darcy. The beautiful creature who’s captivated the elusive Clayton Blake” I relish the dumb struck faces of my brothers “if you will excuse me, I need to go fight off hordes of lust hungry males”.

I walk across the ballroom with purpose my sole focus is on Skye. If anyone greets me, I don’t hear them. Hell, a bomb can go off and I won’t know. I’m captivated by the vision of Skye. As if sensing my approach Skye turns to face me. I see her eyes widen and her lips part, by the rise and fall of her chest it’s as if breathing is suddenly difficult, or she could be turned on by you, my mind whispers. The wicked thought makes me smile. My body thrums up a notch, my cock already hard, throbs in response. As I get nearer a slow shy smile appears in welcome on her face, when I reach her keeping eye contact, I take her hand and kiss the back with a long lingering kiss, and I see the flush spread across her cheeks and her breath hitches.

“Hi” I say softly still looking deeply and getting lost in her yellow green eyes.

“Hi” she replies breathlessly in a hoarse whisper.

“You look absolutely stunning” I step back and indicate I want her to twirl, with that shy smile she obliges. Fuuucckk me! The dress has no back. Oh, wait it does as I realise her back twinkles as there are diamantes and sequins stitched into flesh coloured mesh.

“You like?” says Simon with a knowing tone in his voice.

“Very much” I reply without taking my eyes off Skye.

“It’s one of Shelley’s creations, glad you like it” says Skye running her hands down the front of the dress.

“Skye darling” my mother calls out and I inwardly wince “so lovely to see you again” she elbows me out of the way and embraces Skye in a hug.

“Mrs Blake, so good to see you again” Skye says, her voice soft and husky. Holy fuck how am I going to survive the

night! The thought crosses my mind as my whole body tightens.

“Call me Stephanie, please. Mrs Blake is so formal. Let me introduce you to Clayton’s brothers as I doubt he will do it” Skye looks at me and I roll my eyes, she tries and fails miserably to hide her grin which makes my heart fit to burst.

Skye introduces her party, all of whom I met last night, and we fall into easy conversation. Various people come over to say hello and dutifully they were introduced to the rest of the group. After half an hour I’m about to ask Skye to dance when we’re interrupted by a loud Russian. Skye spins around with a broad smile and shouts “Mr C” the rest of the sentence I have no idea what she’s saying as she speaks to him in Russian, fluently. So that’s three languages now. She obviously knows him very well as he hugs her and looks at her with avuncular affection. Skye turns back and faces the group.

“May I introduce Mr Boris Cheremisinova” she says to everyone then proceeds to introduce each of the party.

Joshua leans into me and whispers “Not only is she stunningly beautiful but she is extremely well connected, that my dear brother is the Russian billionaire owner of Nova Industries you are meeting on Tuesday”.

My head snaps around and I look at my brother’s solemn face, so I know he isn’t kidding which also put paid to the ‘you’re shitting me’ comment I’m about to make. Joshua is a lawyer, and he acts as mine, his practice has a team purely dedicated to me and my business so he will have already been doing his homework on Mr Cheremisinova in readiness to brief me on Monday.

“And this is Clayton Blake” I turn around at Skye’s husky voice.

“A pleasure to meet you Mr Cheremisinova” I smile as we shake hands.

“Ah, Blake Enterprise Holdings, we meet Tuesday” Mr Cheremisinova says delightedly.

“That we do” I smile broadly “and I am very much looking forward to it”.

“Me too, me too” he agrees “however tonight no business except Skye I have something to ask of you” Mr Cheremisinova turns his attention back to her “I know you come to me a week Tuesday, however I fly back to Russia a week on Sunday would you and your party like to come on my plane two days early” he asks her.

“Oh” Skye looks momentarily startled then quickly collects her herself “hang on and let me check”.

Skye calls Macy over to her then I watch as she scans the room looking for someone, failing to locate the person she lifts her hand in a come here signal and Paul seems to materialise out of nowhere. Damn the guy is good at being invisible.

“Mr C has invited us to fly out with him a week on Sunday. If we leave two days early, will it mess up any plans?”

Both of them pull out cell phones and appear to be consulting diaries, in unison they say “No” with Macy adding “there’s a couple of appointments that can be moved into this coming week if you are okay with that”

Skye nods and instructs Macy to do it. Turning back to Mr Cheremisinova she says “We’re good to go. If you get Hanna to send details of times to Macy, we’ll see you at the airport”

I listen to this whole transaction with growing dread. Skye is going to Russia. I must find out for how long. I lean down and whisper “Dance with me”

SKYE

I know I must have a look of surprise on my face, had I heard right.

“Please, dance with me” Clayton says again in his low raspy smooth as melted chocolate voice. A shiver runs down my spine and all I can do is nod.

We excuse ourselves from the group and head for the dance floor. All my friends are grinning at me like idiots, I roll my eyes at them. I didn’t dare look at his family.

I'm amazed at how physically unlike Clayton is to his brothers. He definitely takes after his mother in hair and eye colouring as both his brothers are blonde and have paler blue eyes. Clayton is also a good three inches taller and broader in the shoulders plus he appears to be more muscular, yet when they all stand together there is no mistaking the family resemblance.

As we step onto the dance floor Clayton pulls me in close to him and sets off in a waltz. He dances well and I can feel his muscles flex as he moves. Oh, he feels good, my hands and fingers itch to roam over his body. His scent surrounds me, intoxicating me as I breathe him in. He looks damn mighty fine in his tux. I can see nearly every woman in the place sneaking glances at him, some openly ogling lustfully and hoping to catch his eye, but he seems to be oblivious to it all.

"How do you know Mr Cheremisinova?" his low raspy voice sends tingling sensations up and down my spine, good god will I ever get used to it.

"He's commissioned quite a few paintings from me over the last eight years. He had a daughter, Alexi. I was at college with her in London, we weren't friends, just knew each other through friends of friends. I suppose you could say we were acquaintances. She got into drugs in a big way and the inevitable happened she overdosed, I happened to find her and saved her life" I pause remembering the harrowing day of finding Alexi in the toilets at college "Anyway Mr C wanted to pay me, which is his way, he uses money as a way of thanks. I wouldn't take it, didn't seem right somehow. A few weeks later he turned up on my doorstep demanding I do a painting for him. Alexi told him I was an artist and he found out I did commissions, so he found the perfect way to pay me for saving Alexi's life" I shrug "I took the commission and the money he paid me made it possible for me, Simon and Shelley to come to New York and study"

I watch his face closely as I say all of this and I see a variety of emotions cross it, some I couldn't fathom others look like respect and admiration. I also realise I've given him more information than I intended. I put it down to nerves for

making me blab. A thought suddenly occurs to me, he is meeting with Mr C on Tuesday.

"If you're after any of his business secrets you have the wrong person, corporate espionage is not in my repertoire" mischievously I grin.

Clayton laughs "Busted again" he says and continues to chuckle, it's a lovely sound "but speaking Russian, Italian and French fluently are" he adds smiling.

"So is Spanish and Chinese" I smile impishly back, his eyes widen in shock.

"Wow, you are full of surprises" he says with genuine awe. I feel myself gleam with pride "how come you learnt so many languages?"

"Well Russian, Italian, and French is because I have a lot of clients in those countries and over the years, I've spent a fair amount of time there with work, so I learnt the languages out of necessity. I learnt Spanish and Chinese when I came to study here. There were two students who spoke little English, so I agreed to teach them if they taught me their language in return. I just seem to have a natural aptitude for languages. If I am ever in a country for a reasonable amount of time, I make the effort to learn the language".

"Fair point, you shame me" he says in all seriousness "I do business all over the world and I only speak French" he seems vexed at himself. He shakes it off and his hand strokes my back sending tingles of electrical currents all over my body "How long will you be in Russia for?"

"Six weeks, however I'm not back here in New York until September so that means I will be away for twelve weeks" I cautiously add and watch his reaction, he jolts in surprise.

"Oh, twelve weeks" he seems disappointed "Where will you be the rest of the time?"

I pick up he is genuinely interested but his disappointment puzzles me "At the moment it's two weeks in France then on to Italy, then LA. However, that could change" I pause debating whether to give more of an explanation when he didn't say anything I add "Sometimes a client can change

location, or I get the work completed sooner than expected” he nods his understanding.

“Had” Clayton says with a frown “You said Mr C had a daughter Alexi, past tense, what happened?”

“Alexi died about” I pause to work out when it happened “got to be three and a half years ago, she never did get clean of drugs. The sad thing is she had a daughter, now she’ll never know her mother. Aleksandrina is five now, lovely little thing and has Mr C wrapped around her little finger, she rules his household” I laugh remembering the last time I saw Aleksandrina all blonde curls and big blue eyes smiling sweetly at her grandfather and asking for a pony.

The band stop playing, the loud bellowing voice of the Master of Ceremony announces dinner is ready to be served and for everyone to take their seat. Although we’ve stopped dancing Clayton doesn’t let go of me, raising his hand to my face he trails his fingertips down my cheek.

“So beautiful, amazingly talented, highly intelligent, you have beguiled and bewitched me” he says softly looking deeply into my eyes.

Holy crap, my heart stops along with my brain, you could push me over with a feather “Come” he commands softly and leads me off the dance floor. I just about manage to put one foot in front of the other. I’m in a complete daze as he takes me to my table and friends. It isn’t until I sit down, and I watch his retreating back that my brain kicks back into gear.

Holy bloody hell is he serious!

“Honey, are you OK? You look as if you have seen a ghost” Simon says looking concerned and squeezes my hand.

All I can do is nod.

CLAYTON

Fuck, I’m in serious, serious trouble. I mentally kick myself as I head to my table. What in hell possessed you to say that? You’ve probably scared the crap out of her, I berate myself. Don’t be surprised if she runs screaming to the hills. If she did, I know I will chase after her. I’m going to fight to keep

her. Keep her, I didn't even have her how can I claim her as mine, by next week she'll be on a plane to Russia. The very thought makes me sick to the stomach.

"Clayton darling" my mother calls pulling me from yet another of my mental tirades. I take my seat beside her "I must say darling, the two of you make a stunningly spectacular looking couple".

Here we go and right on cue my brothers start.

"Mom has booked the wedding" says Andrew grinning widely.

"Yeah, it's at her estate for three weeks today" Joshua adds chuckling.

"Damn, it's a shame Skye can't make it, she will be out of the country for twelve weeks come a week tomorrow" my comment is met with stunned silence. Bingo, just the result I'm after.

Mother recovers first "Twelve weeks, why?" she splutters.

I raise an eyebrow at her in a silent 'seriously' instead I say "She is a successful businesswoman mother, a highly accomplished, talented artist in great demand and she travels the world because of her work, as I've already told you before" I hope I don't sound condescending.

No-one has anything to say to that, the conversation turns to other topics as the first course is served.

"So, what did you get out of her regarding Mr Cheremisinova?" Joshua says wiggling his eyebrows.

Laughing I tell him verbatim what Skye said about being the wrong person for corporate espionage. After that the conversation shifts and all teasing ceases. I glance over at Skye she looks thoughtful probably trying to decide if I'm genuine in my declaration or if it's part of some elaborate ploy to seduce her. I must convince her of my sincerity, as if sensing my gaze upon her she looks up, her large eyes beseeching me to give clarification of my intentions. I smile, I put all my thoughts and feelings I have for her into it, admiration, respect, awe, love – holy fuck I'm falling for her fast and hard. Her returning smile although tentative makes my heart swell.

The meal seems to take hours. I desperately want to be with Skye. I watch her interact with the others at her table, at first, she is subdued, no points for guessing why Einstein my conscious chides, but as time progresses, she becomes animated and laughs easily.

As soon as the meal is over people start to table hop. I stand but before I can get away, I'm cornered by a group of men all fawning and saying they had a business opportunity we had to get together and discuss, yeah right blah, blah, blah, I catch Skye's eye and mouth 'Help'.

A wide grin spreads across her face, if I was closer, I will see mischief dancing in her eyes. She stands and walks towards me with sensuous grace. A thrill shoots through me, a mix of desire and surprise as I didn't really expect her to come to my rescue. The men surrounding me all have their back to her.

"Excuse me gentlemen" Skye's husky voice renders them all speechless, and they part like the Red Sea. Skye steps into the space leans forward and grasps my hand "I simply must steal Mr Blake way from all this boring business talk and have my wicked way with him" she says looking each of them in the eye giving them a look of innocence with a mischievous smile. Looking back at me she gives a saucy wink and says "Come on" tugging my hand, all the men look at me in astonishment. I shrug my shoulders and follow her with a goofy grin on my face, leaving the men behind with stunned confused looks.

After several steps I stop and pull Skye to a stop as she turns, I step forward closing the gap between us, my hands grasp her waist pulling her to me, leaning down I whisper "Skye Darcy you are incorrigible".

Then I kiss her.

SKYE

Holy cow he's going to kiss me, the thought flits across my mind seconds before his beautifully sculpted lips meet

mine. His lips are surprisingly soft and firm Clayton pulls away before anything else registers.

“Sorry about that” his voice is low and seductive and not an ounce of sincerity in it “I couldn’t help myself”.

“S’ okay” is all I can mutter through my shock.

“Gentlemen’s excuse me” Simon says from behind me “I’m claiming Skye for a dance” with that he grabs my arm and propels me towards the dance floor. I don’t know whether to kick his shins or kiss him in thanks.

Simon takes me in his arms and starts to waltz. I catch glimpses of Clayton as he walks towards my table and sits down engaging my friends in conversation.

“You okay?” Simon asks softly, I nod “I just wanted for you to have a bit of breathing space, you didn’t seem yourself during the meal, well since you came back from dancing with him”.

I sigh heavily “You were right about protecting my heart” I tell Simon what Clayton said to me about beguiling and bewitching him “I don’t know if it’s part of some elaborate plan to seduce me or if he’s being genuine” I look over at my friends and Clayton “My instincts are telling me it’s the latter”.

“Oh Honey” Simon groans in sympathy “What can I do to help?”

I know he is referring to my lack of experience in relationships, I shrug. “Just be you and tell me if I’m making an idiot of myself”.

“Always, Honey, always”

For the rest of the dance Simon bitches about the lack of seriously good-looking gay men at the function then he sets about picking on the straight men and coming up with ways to have his wicked way with them making me laugh and lightening my mood from my earlier deliberations.

When we get back to our table Macy is regaling a story to everyone about her previous employer and one of his hilariously funny attempts at getting her into bed, I sit down in the chair that Clayton pulls out next to him. I’ve heard the story before, and I still find it funny, so I start giggling before she gets to the end.

“Pay back’s a bitch” Shelley says wiping tears from her eyes.

“That’s right Sista!” Macy agrees and they high five.

“And that’s why you don’t piss off a woman” Phil says laughing “OK time to be serious for a minute. Skye when are you back in September?”

“All being well the fifth, but if you’re asking when I will be back in the States then it’ll be the August thirteenth, why?”

“So where will you be when you arrive back” Shelley asks rather than answer me.

“LA or Vegas could be both. Why?”

Shelley and Phil put their heads together, whispering, having reached an agreement they turn back to face me.

“We’re getting married on September twentieth and I want you to be my Maid of Honour” Shelley says beaming at me.

“Yay” I shout and clap my hands, jumping up grinning I give Shelley a huge hug “I’m thrilled to be your Maid of Honour”.

Conversation around the table turns to the nuptials and good-natured banter about the Bachelor and Hen parties which Shelley and Phil adamantly refuse to have.

Over the following couple of hours, we have fun dancing and talking with those who come to our table. Clayton’s family join our party and I sit back watching them interact with my friends, I also find it highly amusing at the number of women coming over to fawn all over Clayton. One in particular reminds me of an octopus, no sooner Clayton peels one hand or arm off she puts the other on him immediately. From the snippets of their conversation I overhear, I guess her to be a former girlfriend or conquest, she is whining that she misses him and why hasn’t he returned her calls. I find myself wondering how many of the other women he’s been with. To stop that train of thought, I switch off from listening in, protect your heart I tell myself, to do that I distance myself from him. As silly as it is, I move seats to talk to other people only to find Clayton follow me. I don’t know whether to be annoyed or flattered.

“I’m going to the bathroom” I lean over and whisper in Shelley’s ear, so I won’t interrupt what Andrew is saying to her, Shelley acknowledges with a nod. I feel Clayton’s gaze follow me the whole time as I walk out of the ballroom, my skin prickles at the nape of my neck and along my arms just as it did when I first arrived, it amazes me how tuned to his presence I’ve become in such a short space of time.

Having relieved and refreshed myself I marvel at how much fun I’m having. I finally admit to myself I’m flattered and thoroughly enjoying Clayton’s company and attention. With a spring in my step and a smile on my face I exit the bathroom. I immediately feel the all too familiar tingle in my body as my senses let me know Clayton is nearby. I look up and sure enough Clayton is stalking towards me. I slow to a stop and watch him.

His gait is sensual and predatory just as it was when he approached me when I first arrived causing the same reactions in my body, my mouth is dry, my heart beats faster and my skin flushes with the warmth pooling in my stomach. Clayton’s long muscular legs eat up the distance between us with ease. His shoulder length wavy dark brown hair flows around his face, my fingers flex at the thought of grabbing hold and pulling it, his facial expression I can only describe as carnal, and it has me rooted to the spot.

Oh hell, I suddenly understand what the romance novels I read meant by a virile male. Clayton is the embodiment of that description, and he’s heading straight for me. Oh, my sweet lord! I try to take a steadying breath, but my breathing is accelerating so much I’m panting. Christ! he hasn’t even touched me yet and I’m a quivering wreck. I lick my lips trying to get moisture in my dry mouth. A low growl emanates from Clayton. The very sound ripples through me, I’m wet instantly. Oh! Sweet baby Jesus. I put my head down and close my eyes trying to restore my equilibrium. Feeling his large warm hands on my waist, I give up. In the blink of an eye Clayton has me in his arms, holding me tight to his hard body and kissing me senseless, his lips soft and gentle yet demanding.

Somehow, he moves us. I have no idea how, but my back is against the wall. I respond to his kisses. I open my mouth to take more from him. His tongue darts in licking, stroking, and tasting. Following his lead, I do the same. Blimey, this man can kiss. I feel my body responding. My nipples harden and ache to be touched; my skin is tingling all over. I want to rip his clothes off! My hands move up and down his back feeling solid muscles flex and move. I pull trying to get him even closer to me.

Clayton grasps my wrists and lifts my arms above my head securing them with one hand. His other hand running up and down the side of my body, from the side of my breast down to my hip and back, sending shivers of desire coursing through me, he shifts and uses his hips to pin me in place against the wall. I can feel his arousal pressing against my lower belly. A groan escapes me in response to the myriad of sensations he's creating in me.

"I can't move!" my brain suddenly screams. The fog of lust evaporates instantly, I'm catapulted back to the derelict office building. I'm restrained, the panic I feel at not being able to get away from my attacker surges through me. My body begins to shake in remembrance of the beatings and repeated rape. Clayton is kissing my neck and jaw line murmuring words I can't hear. All I hear are the vile and depraved words of my tormentor. My stomach churns and revolts, my gorge rising. Cold sweat breaks out across the whole of my body and I'm trembling, made worse as I swallow to stop throwing up.

"P-p-p-please l-l-let me go" I stutter in a frightened whisper.

"What baby?" Clayton murmurs continuing to kiss along my jaw.

"Please... release me... let me go" I sob out louder, it comes out almost as a scream. I'm crying, gut wrenching sobs. Clayton lets go of my hands and steps back instantly. My legs give way and I collapse to the floor on my hands and knees, my body dry heaving as I try to gulp in air, I'm shaking violently.

“What’s wrong, what’s the matter” he asks alarm in his voice, through my blurred vision I see his hands reaching for me again, instinctively I pull away from him.

In a movement too fast for me to register Clayton is knocked to the side and pinned against the wall by Paul.

“Skye! Skye! What’s happened?” a woman cries out terrified, kneeling besides me wrapping their arms around me, hugging tightly “What did you do to her” the person screeches at Clayton. I get my breathing under control and look up into Shelley’s horrified stricken face.

“I-I-I’m o-o-okay” I stutter “h-h-he’s n-n-not at f-f-fault” I manage to get out.

No-one is listening to me. Shelley continues to glare at Clayton, who looks grey and sick with torment. I realise Paul still has Clayton pinned by the throat. Clayton is taller than Paul by a couple of inches but that doesn’t matter, Paul is more muscular and a trained killer.

I take a deep breath and in as calm a voice I can muster I say “Paul, he’s not a fault, stand down”.

Giving him that command I know he will obey, although he doesn’t do it immediately. Paul looks at me, for the first time ever I see real emotion in Paul’s face, and I’m touched. He genuinely thought Clayton hurt me and I know that if he had or ever did, Paul will make him pay. I swipe the tears away from my face, my hands are still shaking in fact my whole body is.

“I’m okay, it’s not his fault” I repeat.

Without a word Paul steps away from Clayton and he reaches for me helping me up.

“Let’s get you home” Shelley says soothingly, I nod. I turn to look at Clayton he looks confused and devastated, it breaks my heart to see him like that.

“I’m so sorry, I can’t... I can’t...” I couldn’t finish “I’m so, so, sorry”.

Just then Simon appears, one look at the state of me and being support by Shelley and Paul he rushes at Clayton yelling “What did you do to her you bastard?”

I didn't hear Clayton's response because Paul having decided I'm not moving quickly enough for his liking picks me up into his arms and carries me out to the car. Paul loads me in like I'm a small child and Shelley climbs in the other side. I try to tell her to go back to Phil.

"Don't be silly, you are my priority. Phil is going to follow us back to your place with Simon" she says matter of fact and is not taking no for an answer. I take hold of her hand and squeeze it silently showing my appreciation. I'm thankful because I really don't want to be on my own, plus I want to tell them what happened so they wouldn't blame Clayton – poor guy. I feel saddened because after tonight I'm certain he wouldn't want anything to do with me.

Shelley, Phil, Simon, Macy, and Paul all sit in my living room watching me pace as I try to find the right words to explain what had happened.

"Look Clayton is not at fault" I can see they didn't believe me. I sigh heavily "I had a panic attack, a stupid panic attack. He kissed me, things were..." I pause and my cheeks flame and I clear my throat "anyway he got me in a position where I couldn't move, I was enjoying myself, I wanted it" I blush even more. I'm sure my face is now purple – the colour of beetroot at least "Only my brain decided to drag up memories of my attack and it caused me to freak out" I look pleadingly at my friends to understand.

"Oh, honey I believe you" says Simon standing and gives me a hug.

"Really?" I ask for reassurance.

"Really" he smiles down at me "besides, I haven't seen you blush so hard since... well never come to think of it" he squeezes me to him again.

"I feel such an idiot" I grumble "well, I guess I can chalk it all up to experience and I seriously doubt Clayton Blake will want anything further to do with me. He'll probably run as fast as he can in the opposite direction the next time, he lays eyes on me".

“Don’t write him off just yet” Simon laughs “He seems to me the kind of guy who doesn’t give up without a fight

