



# Re: Building **Sasha**

Renée Bess

# ***Re: Building Sasha***

**by**

**S. Renée Bess**

**Copyright © 2008 by S. Renée Bess**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The characters, incidents and dialogue herein are fictional and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-61929-034-1 (eBook)

eBook Conversion February 2012

First Printing 2008

987654321

**Cover design by Donna Pawlowski**

Published by:

Regal Crest Enterprises, LLC

3520 Avenue H

Port Arthur, Texas 77627

Find us on the World Wide Web at <http://www.regalcrest.biz>

Published in the United States of America

## **Acknowledgments**

Abundant thanks to Eileen Gildea for your careful reading, your questions, and your thoughtful suggestions.

Gratitude and hugs to my cousin, Liz, for your take on the challenges of managing a construction company.

A huge thank you to the women who plan and attend the annual Golden Crown Literary Conference. You've welcomed me into your company, and I am grateful.

A special thank you to Lori Lake who always seems to understand.

Much appreciation to Pat Cronin, Ruta Skujins, and my good friend and video producer, Brenda Adcock. You all helped this book assume its final form.

A salute of gratitude to the friends who, in a dark hour asked me if I were writing, and understood that writing sustains me.

To my sisters who, by their example, showed me it's all right to be female, black, and gay and write about it: Nikki Baker, Becky Birtha, Cheryl Clarke, Michelle Cliff, Alexis De Veaux, Jewelle Gomez, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Michelle Parkerson, Sapphire, Ann Allen Shockley, Makeda Silvera, Linda Villarosa, and Alice Walker.

I got your message, and I overstand. It is all "write."

## ***Re: Building Sasha***

**by**

**S. Renée Bess**

## Prologue

WHAT DOES IT mean if you find a cricket perched on your right shoulder? I'm asking because this happened to me one evening about a year ago. I wasn't outside working in my backyard at the time. I was inside the subtly lighted main parlor of the Antonelli Funeral Home, and I had just viewed my late-neighbor's body. After inching my way along the phalanx of his somber-faced survivors, I stopped in front of a young man who extended his hand to me.

"I'm Tom, Jonathan's son-in-law. I'm married to Carole."

"Nice to meet you, Tom." I shook the prematurely balding mourner's hand. "I'm Jonathan's neighbor, and I've known Carole since she was a little girl." I felt the need to explain who I was, because in the crowd of two-hundred plus people, I was the only person of color in the room.

Suddenly, Tom's expression changed from gray sadness to a look of startled surprise. His hand, which had just slipped from my tentative grip, abruptly changed direction. He hooked his middle finger under his thumb, took aim, and flicked something away from me.

"Scuse me, but you had a cricket on your shoulder."

"Oh Lord!" I scanned the carpet for any trace of the insect, but the uninvited intruder was nowhere to be seen. The grieving son-in-law must have propelled it away with the force of a reformed smoker who, having been caught sneaking a drag from a cigarette, jettisons it into a nearby gutter.

"Thank you. I don't know what to say." I was embarrassed.

"Sure."

Tom's ensuing silence convinced me he figured I'd given the hitchhiking critter a lift inside the funeral home. Or worse than that, I might have provided transportation for more than one multi-legged creature. I moved on, continuing to pay my respects to my dead neighbor's family members. Then, I wove my way silently through the company of strangers, barely breathing until I reached the exit.

Although I left that cricket somewhere inside the ornate funeral home, the memory of the whole event stayed with me for a long while. How in the world had a cricket landed on my shoulder and just what did that mean? I'm not terribly superstitious, but I do have my moments. Was that insect a symbol of the end? Did the cricket's presence at a viewing mean that my number was up? Would the next funeral be mine?

For one solid month I walked around thinking God had placed that little creature there in order to put the fear of death in my heart. Not that S/He needed to go to all of that trouble. Treading through life with Lee Simpson draped all over me was harrowing enough. For the past four years, I had allowed Lee to keep me stressed about the possibility of sudden catastrophes, unexpected injuries, and unnecessary death. I didn't need to carry an annoying insect on my shoulder to remind me life was short.

Now, I have a different opinion about Jiminy Cricket's relative. After everything I've been through, I believe the little creature showed up to announce the approach of good fortune, not to warn me about impending doom. The fortune came to me in the beautiful form of a woman. I wasn't looking for her. I wasn't expecting her. Nor was I the least bit prepared for her. However, I was completely and thoroughly unable to turn her away, so great was my need when she arrived.

## Chapter One

FOR THE UMPTEENTH time, I tried smoothing the wrinkle that interrupted the crease in my navy blue slacks. I didn't know why I thought I could get away with wearing the same pair of pants two days in a row. I knew better. I'd been on enough of these short business jaunts to figure two days meant at least two pairs of slacks, two shirts and maybe two different jackets. Had I become so distracted lately, I could no longer trust my wardrobe decisions?

Thank God I remembered to bring my iPod. Even though I wouldn't be able to listen to my pre-programmed music until the flight was underway, I slipped my headphones over my ears and cued up the twelfth tune. The trip from Portland, Maine to Philadelphia was a short one, and I calculated I'd have enough time to hear most of the songs I'd downloaded from my favorite Europop CD. I couldn't wait to disappear between the folds of the seductive melodies stored in the little white electronic rectangle. I was dog-tired. I knew if I weren't so preoccupied with the events of the past twenty-four hours, I'd be able to fall asleep, lulled by the songs that always nudged me back to the small London hotel lounge where Lee and I first met four years ago.

I gave my seatbelt a subtle tug, testing its reliability to hold me in place. This was one of my pre-flight rituals, as was counting the number of seats in front of me so I'd know how close to the exit I was in case I had to crawl through blinding smoke to reach the plane's door. I didn't like

flying, and I did it only when I absolutely had to. Convinced the harness was taut, I looked out of the window at the retreating flatbed luggage hauler. No need to worry about a lost suitcase on this flight. The only piece of travel gear I had for this brief unsuccessful business trip was one carry-on bag. I hadn't even needed my laptop for this journey, just the company-owned Blackberry and of course, my personal cell phone.

It was a good thing I had both of those pieces of equipment with me. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to email my best friend, Julie, last night while I still had Lee on the phone. Mobilized by the alarm in my message, Julie stopped what she was doing and drove past my house. She wanted to be sure Lee hadn't carried out her threats, and the house was still there. I warned my friend not to linger, just in case Lee was standing by a window. Julie drove by several times before returning to her own place and emailing me that everything looked all right, or as all right as she could tell from the vantage point of her car.

My friendship with the dependable Julie Kelner predated my love affair with Lee. We've been tight for so long now, we've almost forgotten how we met. Julie is the only pre-Lee friend I've stayed in touch with. Probably because Lee was never jealous of her. She never believed I could have such a strong bond with a white woman. The thing is, Julie and I became buddies without caring about our racial differences. We had that rare experience of discovering the ways in which we were alike before believing any of the crap that meant we couldn't be close. When Lee phoned me at the auction last night, the only person I could trust with an email about my plight was Julie. Clive and I were close, but I couldn't tell him everything that was going on last night. It was bad enough I had to phone him about the auction results.

Clive. What kind of a reception awaited me later today in his office? I was reasonably sure the yelling was over. But bearing the weight of his frustration with me would be worse. I'd do anything to forestall his questions. If only I could escape all the thoughts that kept running through my mind; maybe go to sleep for a while. I'd never snoozed through a takeoff before, not even the time when I'd had walking pneumonia, and my fever convinced Lee to return home a day early from Puerto Rico. Right this minute, losing myself in a short nap appeared to be good idea. I was going to need as much physical and emotional energy as possible to be able to deal with Clive this afternoon and with Lee this evening.

I glanced at the unoccupied seat next to me. I knew having it remain empty for the duration of the flight was too much to ask. But because it was still vacant this close to take-off time I'd become hopeful. Just then I sensed someone approaching and slowing down. I turned my head toward the window and purposely closed my eyes as I listened to the sounds of the other passenger settling into the seat. I was in no mood for idle chit-chat with a stranger. Not today. And especially not with some guy wearing an excessive amount of spicy, musky aftershave. I wanted solitude for as long as I could experience it. How else could I ready myself for what promised to be a shitty day?

My business trip to Portland had been brutally disappointing, forcing me to return empty handed to my company's suburban Philadelphia office. My boss was livid when I phoned and told him I hadn't made the purchase I'd been sent to make. Gripping my cell phone and huddling in a corner of the auction house near a fleet of mid-century pine armoires, I told him the bad news.

"Oh bollocks! How the hell did you let that happen, Sasha? How could you let those lots of old beams and antique hardware slip through your fingers? Damn it, Sasha! I'll never again get a chance to obtain material like that at such a good price!"

This morning the echo of Clive's British-toned exasperation competed with the roar of the jet engines, pushing me back even further into my seat. My only comfort was in imagining I was being lifted to another planet. I didn't intend to open my eyes long enough to see the reality of the miniaturized buildings and green fields that lay on the terrain below us. Nor did I want an "awake and alert" me to invite conversation with the passenger seated close by.

"Just let this flight last forever," I prayed. "Anything to delay facing the look from Clive when he sees me without the materials he'd been depending on. I hated like hell to fail, especially at something relatively simple. I'm Sasha Lewis. I'm not used to failure.

I exhaled deeply and moved the volume control on my little music machine ever so slightly. Hopefully, my seat mate wouldn't notice my thumb's subtle movement.

I felt the plane level off just as the guy next to me got up. I figured he probably needed to use the bathroom. Or maybe he was just restless and a little frustrated that he had no one to talk to during the short flight. Confident he'd left his place, I turned my head away from the window and opened my eyes. He was gone but the seat wasn't empty. He'd left it partially covered with a copy of the morning's *Wall Street Journal* placed on top of two magazines. A folded Starbuck's napkin, playing the role of a bookmark, protruded from one of the periodicals. A magazine fanatic, I was curious about their titles and I speculated he was probably reading *Sports Illustrated*, *Car and Driver*, or some electronic-techie kind of publication, anything a little less intense than the financial pages.

Good, I thought. He's got plenty of reading material and I have at least another half hour or so to lull myself into forgetfulness. If I could get into the right zone, I'd be prepped to face Clive and his clipped vowels self. Facing Lee at home tonight would be another matter all together.

"Would you like something to drink? Coffee, juice, water?" A freshly starched flight attendant leaned over his cart and looked down at me.

"No thanks." If I were supposed to be sleeping, I couldn't wrap my hand around a cup of coffee.

Distracted, the attendant turned his head away from me before he could register my response. His plastic smile on automatic replay, he pulled his beverage cart back a few feet and repeated his drink menu to the passenger who stood facing him in the aisle. That person must have declined the offer also, because the airline employee prepared to move on without picking through his drink supply and retrieving anything. I closed my eyes once again, and smelled the now familiar fragrance of my seat mate's cologne as it blended with the coffee fumes trailing after the cart.



Aromatherapy, I thought. Atmosphere for the free-floating thoughts and music streaming through my brain. Anita Baker's "You Belong To Me." This song always reminded me of the time four years ago, when Lee and I first met.

"Would you like another, Madam? Or will that be all now?" The barman waited as I twisted a quarter turn on the barstool and struggled to make a decision.

"That will be all, thanks. Could I have my bill, please?"

"Certainly, Madam." He tapped his fingertips against the rich mahogany bar and then stepped over to the electronic till, pushed a few keys, and delivered my tab. "Here we are, then."

Just as I was sorting through the pound notes in my all-of-a-sudden-too-small American wallet, I heard a woman's voice caress my right ear.

"You're not leaving so soon, are you love? Won't you give me an opportunity to buy you a drink?"

I turned toward the source of the intriguing words. There, standing very close to me, was a deep-brown version of temptation dressed in a tawny beige suede pant suit and a crimson silk shirt. I had neither the heart nor the resolve to turn down her offer.

"Thanks. I'm drinking Glenfiddich--neat."

The fashion plate held up two fingers and smiled at the barman. She returned her attention to me and extended her slender hand. "I'm Lee Simpson."

I accepted her soft hand in mine, never breaking eye contact with her.

"Hi, I'm Sasha Lewis."

"Nice to meet you, Sasha."

"You're an American."

"Yes, I am. Just like you." My newly found drink sponsor looked me over like she was appraising a painting at Sotheby's.

"How do you know my nationality?"

"By your American accent, and by your clothes."

Self-consciously I looked down at myself and took a quick inventory. I was wearing tailored brown slacks, a gray and white striped polyester shirt, nondescript shoes with a little wedge heel, one of those utilitarian belly pouches and a well worn trench style raincoat folded over the barstool next to me. "Is it that obvious?"

"Your slacks are lovely, really. But your blouse is one of those dries overnight after being washed in the hotel bathroom sink types." She paused and gave me a chance to smile wryly at my own fashion faux-pas. "It's practical and very American. And your belly pouch? Only Americans and a few of the Girl Guides chaperones wear them."

"You've certainly done a thorough analysis, Ms. Simpson." I smiled unsteadily, feeling more like a Marine recruit who'd just been torn down prior to being reformed to fit a new image, than the sophisticated lesbian business traveler that I aspired to be.

"Been up to a bit of sightseeing, have you?" Ignoring my comment, my new acquaintance persisted her questioning with renewed enthusiasm.

"No, I'm here on business. And I haven't had any time at all for sightseeing." I didn't know if I felt uncomfortable or annoyed with this chick's trying to pin down both my nationality and my recent activities. "Where do you work? Scotland Yard?"

"Hardly."

That one word answer told me nothing.

"Is locating Americans in bars and buying them drinks some kind of hobby of yours, or what?" I didn't want to sound antagonistic, but I did feel the need to assert myself.

"Not at all." Amused by my sudden defensiveness, Lee smiled.

"Then how did I get so lucky?" I asked.

"I recognized you from last night. You were at the pub with Clive Whittingham, right?"

I flashed back to the last evening's exhausting round of dinner with clients followed by pub and club hopping. If this sister remembered me from any of the three bars we visited, then she was probably as gay as Clive and I were.

"We were in several pubs. Which one are you talking about?"

"G.A.Y."

I nodded, recalling that bar. It was the second one of the evening, and after a drink I'd danced with a total stranger for the duration of an endless stream of house music. That's what did me in. The day's routine of running from meeting to meeting, and then doing the social thing at night caught up with my jet-lagged body. Clive had the energy of a teen-ager, so it never occurred to him that I might have been slowing down by the time we hit G.A.Y.

"You appeared to be having a grand time," Lee said.

I downed half of my glass of smooth scotch in one large swallow, while watching this Lee person follow the line of my throat with rapt attention. "Yeah. For a while anyway. It was the only club that had more than three women of color in it."

"It's usually mixed, and on Thursday nights there are more women there than men."

I leaned back in the leather covered chair and took my turn perusing my new drink buddy. "So how about you, Miss Lee? Did you enjoy yourself?"

"While I was looking at you I did."

She caught me off guard with that answer. It was aggressive, and I kind of liked it. I liked it as well that we were aligned face to face, with me seated atop the barstool, and her standing close enough to bring her thighs in contact with my knees. The fact that we were only an introduction short of being strangers didn't make any difference to me. There wasn't anything strange or uncomfortable about our physical proximity to each other. The familiarity of it was beginning to mix with the scotch in my belly.

"So, what do you do in London, and how long have you been away from the States?"

"Now it sounds as if you work for Scotland Yard." She took a half step away from me, but brought me in closer with the intimacy of her smile. "What makes you think that I've been away from home?"

"You don't have any trace of an English accent, but you use English expressions. So I figure that means that you've been in the U.K. for a while." "You're quite clever, Ms. Lewis." "Not really. I'm just a good listener." Was it my imagination or did this woman just brush my knee with the back of her hand while she pressed her thighs more firmly into me?

"Okay." She nodded, knowingly.

Ms. Lee moved fast, but not too quickly for me to miss her moves. She checked out the progress I'd made with my drink, and then signaled the bartender to pour another one without asking me if I wanted it.

"Back to my question." I persevered. "What do you do, aside from buying drinks for women you don't know?"

"Oh, I know a little bit about you, Sasha. I know you're here on business, that your business is home construction, last week you and Clive were in Sweden looking at pre-builds, you've been following a frightfully full schedule, and for the last three afternoons you've retreated to this lounge for a pick-me-up drink before the evening's round of dinner meetings and social activities."

"I'm impressed." That was the single-malt scotch talking. I was really intimidated by her knowledge, not impressed by it. Was I having cocktails with some kind of a stalker?

Lee must have seen a flicker of doubt flash through my eyes. She touched the back of my hand and proceeded to confess how it was that she knew so much about me.

"I've known your boss, Clive, for a while; since college actually. He was in grad school at Penn when I was an undergrad there, and we used to hang out together. In some ways he's responsible for my passing some time here in England. I wanted to really get to know the U.K. Clive always described to me, and right now I'm in-between businesses, so I have the time to be away from the U.S."

"What kind of business were you in?" The drink left enough of my brain cells firing to get a decent question together while I registered Lee Simpson's attractiveness.

"Public relations. I was self-employed."

"So, you and Clive were buddies at Penn?"

"We were, and we've kept in touch with each other over the years. It was great running into him last night."

I nodded, and wondered why over the years that we've worked together, Clive had never mentioned this woman's name to me. "How well do you know Clive?"

Lee smiled broadly. "Well enough to know you're neither his girlfriend nor his wife, and why you happened to be in that particular pub last night." Lee insinuated her body closer to mine. "In fact, while you were off dancing with that blonde Amazon in the leather trousers, I asked Clive for your vital statistics."

"Should I be flattered?" I decided to flirt back with this ebony expatriate. After all, I figured, if she was a good friend of Clive's, then she had to be okay, right?

"Absolutely."

My third drink in less than ninety minutes obliterated my memory of what was said next. I do remember standing up slowly from my barstool and taking a full, if not groggy, measure of Lee. She was an inch shorter than I, neatly dressed, with dark hair permed and blunt cut in a sort of boyish style that looked both rakish and femme simultaneously. She radiated a heat that I felt in my core, and it didn't take much effort on her part to convince me to continue our cocktail hour in my room, four flights above the lounge.

We were the sole riders in the elevator, both of us intensely silent. Lee's physical presence thundered through my scotch-dampened mind. As we walked down the hallway she coaxed my hand to that place where her back becomes the top of her hips. I kept track of each one of our footsteps by the movement of her hips under my hot hand. Pausing at the entrance to my room, we kissed. I slipped the keycard into the lock, while Lee was slipping her tongue into my mouth. I opened the door to my hotel room, and then I spread open my arms, my legs and, unbeknownst to me at that moment, most of my heart to Lee Simpson.

"EXCUSE ME MISS. We're going to land soon." An insistent hand tapped my arm, jarring me from my memories.

I turned toward my wake-up call and found myself looking at my seatmate's face. The unobtrusive spicy-cologne-wearing traveler strapped in the seat next to mine wasn't the man I'd imagined. She was a woman. Stunned by a reality that didn't match my earlier scent-fueled assumptions, I had trouble finding my voice, and settled for lip-synching, "Thanks."

"Please put your seatback in the upright position. We're making our approach to Philadelphia International Airport, and we'll be landing shortly. On behalf of the captain and crew, US Airways thanks you for flying with us today. We look forward to serving your travel needs again in the very near future."

My seat companion pointed to the small speaker above our heads and smiled at me. "I should have waited for the announcement. I didn't have to wake you up after all."

I matched her pretty dimpled smile with one of my own. "That's okay."

"Please put your seat in the upright position, Miss." The same flight attendant who had offered me something to drink earlier, was making his pre-landing rounds.

Obediently, I adjusted my chair and saluted him. "Sure."

My seatmate winked at me before becoming engrossed in refolding her "*Wall Street Journal*." I tried to make her a quick study. She was clad in designer jeans and a casual wool tweed jacket. Her wild lively curls kissed with a hint of salt and pepper, suggested she was in her mid-to-late forties, and there was something about the color of her skin that reminded me of dulce de leche ice cream. She was attractive and no doubt straight, or if not, partnered. She didn't look like the kind of woman who would go through life without being pursued by lovers.

Not wanting to stare, I turned slightly and glanced out of the window at the oil storage tanks morphing into their true size as each second of our descent toward the runway ticked by. The plane touched down and its public address system greeted us with its tinny untitled music. Ignoring the "Remain Seated" command flashing above our heads, the passengers were all arms and legs, snapping open the overhead storage bins and reaching for their carry-on bags.

My soon-to-be ex-seatmate finessed her exit in one smooth dance movement, beginning with the click of her seatbelt fastener, and progressing to her standing and opening the storage compartment. She asked if she could grab anything for me and I declined her offer, preferring to let the plane come to a complete stop before I made any move to get up and leave. I figured we were all arriving in Philadelphia at the same time. I didn't have a pressing need to be in the terminal two minutes earlier than anyone else on the plane. I watched the nameless woman's tan, ring-less hand slip through the straps of a small leather backpack and hook it casually over her shoulder. She might have been aware I was staring at her, because she looked down at me as we

waited for the aircraft to lock onto the jet-way. Appearing confident, she gave the impression that she found my gawking at her totally expected and acceptable.

"You must have been tired. You slept during the whole flight."

Before I could answer, the plane lurched to a stop, propelling all of the standees a full two feet ahead of themselves. I watched my sister traveler lose her balance for a second and then drop her newspaper and magazines in her vacant seat. There, laid bare and fully exposed, were the *Wall Street Journal* and the latest editions of *The Advocate* and *Curve*.

I reached over and rolled the three publications into one compact cylinder which I handed to her. "Here you are."

"Thanks." She took the bundle from me, smiled and never unlocked her large deep brown eyes from mine. Unnerved by her willingness to keep gazing at me, I looked down at my lap for no more than a second. When I looked up again she was gone. Just like that. I stood and scanned the backs of the other departing passengers. I thought that I caught a glimpse of her jacket. Gathering my carry-on satchel from the storage compartment, I picked up my shoulder bag and stepped into the aisle.

"Ma'am? You dropped your card." The pesky flight attendant stood in front of a row of seats directly across from me. He bent down to scoop up a small burgundy colored rectangle from the floor not far from me.

Something, maybe curiosity, maybe something more, made me take the small piece of card stock that he was handing me.

"Thank you."

I slipped it into my jacket pocket, joined the line of departing passengers trudging off the plane, and headed to the short term parking garage. After bailing out my car, I drove past the city and out to the northwestern suburban office complex where I had to face the firing squad that was Clive.

## Chapter Two

"FLIGHT 3701 ARRIVED at Philadelphia International Airport, Gate C-5 at three thirty-two p.m. If you want to hear this information repeated, say 'Repeat', or push..."

Clive Whittingham hung up the phone and looked out of the window toward the east. Good, he thought. With luck, she'll be here within the next hour. Unfortunately, she'll arrive with my blank check and not a receipt for the antique timbers, hardware and handmade tiles she was supposed to buy for the Jackman project. What the hell happened up there at that auction?

Clive walked past his desk toward the huge planning table in the ell section of his office. On the way, he stole a quick glance at his partner's image, encased in the framed photo that stood proudly along with a few others on the bookcase shelf. He remembered Eddie's consoling tone and the advice he had offered that morning along with a bowl of oatmeal, a steaming mug of coffee, and a bear hug.

"Don't be so hard on her, Clive. We have no idea what kinda shit Lee is taking her through. You know how hard Sasha works for you, day and night. She's never screwed up anything before. Why don't you give her a chance to explain? She's too valuable an employee to risk losing because of one mistake." Eddie punctuated his advice with a playful jab at his partner's bicep.

"Yes, but that one mistake is a costly one, Eddie."

"You'll come across another shit load of building materials like those. It's happened before."

"If you recall, at that time I was able to wait for a shit load. Richard Jackman won't be the least bit interested in twiddling his thumbs whilst I look for another lot of materials on special offer." Clive reasoned. "He wants his house built as quickly as possible."

"Well then, his rich Republican ass will get his house built without genuine used beams and antique fittings, right?" Eddie poured himself a second cup of coffee and winked.

"That's easy for you to say, Ed. Those materials up in Maine came from an old distillery. They were the first pick of reclaimed antique heart pine." Clive stared into the distance. "They would have produced spectacular flooring, just the type that Richard Jackman wanted."

"I know that, babe." Eddie rested his coffee mug on the table and leveled his gaze at Clive.

"Look, you're a wonderful builder, and Jackman knows you're putting together one hell of a house, with or without that exact flooring and period hardware. What Jackman doesn't know, is that your right-hand assistant is the person who makes sure everything is flowing in your office and out at the building sites. If you give Sasha a hard way to go because of one dumb ass mistake, she might go looking for a boss who's more understanding. Cut her some slack, at least for a little while. Let her find her way through her problems with that crazy woman she calls her partner."

Clive's features softened momentarily. "I'll try to be patient, Eddie. It's just that I'm not keen on her allowing her personal life to interfere with her professional one."

"I'm sure Sasha isn't crazy about that either, hon. You know, if the two of you hadn't gone bar-hopping that night in London, and you hadn't run into Lee Simpson..."

"It's all my fault, is it? That's what I get for trying to introduce my single but lonely lesbian employee to London's gay night life? How was I to know that Lee was there? I thought she was still connected at the hip with her lover, Rachel."

Clive's eyes traveled from Eddie's portrait to the photo of his company's management team. There was Sasha, his good friend and most faithful employee, in the center of the group of five. Two years older than his forty-three, Sasha had known Clive for a dozen years, and worked for him for the last decade.

Clive picked up the photo to examine it more closely. He trusted each person there, some more than others. But it was Sasha who had earned his unconditional trust along with his friendship. Sasha knew every nut and bolt of Clive's company's business, every detail.

Over the years she had become the older sister that his Ghanaian mother and British father hadn't provided for him. Clive smiled warmly, recalling the many times he and Sasha had said to each other that they could have been siblings. They used to sit around and make up fantasies to explain how one of them had been reared by a grandparent in Philadelphia and the other was brought up by a mother and father living in the small town of St. Neots in Cambridgeshire, England.

So similar were Clive and Sasha in their appearance that strangers who saw them together just assumed they were related. They were both short and solidly built. Their creamy mocha complexions and deep brown eyes were filled with sincerity. Both wore their hair closely cut, oblivious to the loc and braid trend. Clive, more concerned with aging than was Sasha, dabbled with the idea of coloring his hair. It was still dark brown for the most part, but more and more his mirror reflected the intermingling of wiry white curls with the darker ones, especially if he let too much time elapse before getting his hair trimmed. Sasha loved to remind him *she* was the lucky one. Her hair had announced its forty-fifth year by graying in one sweeping wave near her right temple.

"Look at this, Clive." The builder smiled, picturing the way Sasha had pointed to her hair line one afternoon not long ago. "Doesn't this white streak give me an air of mystery and adventure? Your white hairs are popping up all over the place, at random."

"Yes, that's true. But you can't cultivate this handsome mustache." Clive smoothed the strips of hair above his upper lip. "Or, on second thought, perhaps you can."

The office intercom rang harshly to life, slicing through Clive's daydream.

"Sasha is here to see you."

"Please tell her to come in, Nona." Clive quickly put the photo back in its place and turned toward the entrance of his office. He knew that he should offer a smile to his assistant, but his state of annoyance wouldn't permit his usual welcome.

Sasha walked in and closed the door behind her. "Hi, Clive."



"Sasha."

"I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. If there's another auction coming up, I'll fly anywhere to get the materials for you." Sasha kept clenching and then unclenching her hands, something Clive had seen her do before, whenever she was nervous or agitated.

Clive looked at his friend and employee and immediately lost his anger. It was clear that Sasha was upset for disappointing him and for letting herself down as well.

"Look here. Let's not worry about what we can't change. The Jackman project will proceed as scheduled."

"But what about the antique fittings? And the beams and floorboards?" Sasha asked.

"We'll get along with some proper substitutes. I've already made the arrangements with the subcontractors. And it's not as though this job is the only one that we're working on right now, is it?" Clive saw Sasha's posture relax a bit.

"Oh, Clive. You're being so decent about my fuck up." Sasha extended her hand to her boss.

Clive brushed it aside. "Give us a hug, then."

Sasha accepted Clive's bear hug and then smiled at him. "Thank you. Nothing like this will happen again. I promise."

"Indeed. And how about our company's blank check then?"

Sasha laughed as she reached into her notebook and retrieved the envelope that held the unspent check. "Here it is. As pristine as it was when you gave it to me two days ago."

"Uhm...thanks, love." Clive placed the envelope on his desk and then looked at Sasha once again. "It's getting late in the day. Are you on your way home?"

Sasha shook her head. "No. Not yet. Nona gave me my messages, so I'm going to go through them and answer as many as I can before business hours are over."

Clive nodded his approval. "Very good. I'll be on site tomorrow. So if you need to reach me, try my mobile."

"Okay. Is there anything that has priority and needs my attention today?"

Clive looked off into the distance, mentally ticking off the items on his "to do" list.

"Yes, there is one thing." He became serious. "I want you to know that I'm not angry with you, despite the tone in my voice when you first called to tell me that you'd had a cock-up. And I'm

more than ready to put the auction in its proper perspective. I am curious, though. Could you tell me precisely what happened that caused you to miss the call to bid on our goods?"

Sasha looked down at the carpet before leveling her gaze at Clive.

"I made the mistake of phoning Lee a half hour before our lot was on the docket. She went on one of her screaming tirades about my being away, and even though I tried, I couldn't calm her down. She was really pissed off and out of control. It took me so long to get her to stop yelling at me, that before I knew it, I'd missed the chance to place our bid." Sasha blew out a stream of air. "I apologize, Clive. Sometimes I don't know what I'm going to do."

"It really is a conundrum, isn't it?" Clive nodded sympathetically. "You know, one of these days you're going to have to make a decision. Your situation is getting worse."

"Yes, I know that. I have some thinking to do. But not on company time, don't worry." Sasha offered her boss a smile that had a question mark attached to it instead of a confident end-of-sentence period.

Clive watched Sasha leave his office. His concern for her bordered on worry. He knew they would be able to move past losing the auctioned building materials, but he wasn't certain Sasha could work through her problems with Lee.

## Chapter Three

ANGELA JACKMAN HUNG up the phone with one hand and eased her left heel into her designer sandal with the other one.

"Sandrine! Don't forget to set the alarm system when you leave!" She cupped her perfectly tinted lips as she shouted the final directive to her housekeeper. Not waiting for Sandrine's reply, Angela hooked her manicured fingers through the handle on her handbag and click-clicked her way over the tiled foyer to the front door. She scooped up her keys and fairly ran to the luxury SUV awaiting her in the circular driveway, parked as close to the house's entrance as possible.

Angela gunned the engine and checked the dashboard clock. "Shit I'm gonna be late," she thought. She steered the car over the Belgian block pavers that delineated the driveway's border and entered the deserted country lane. "Why we have to live all the way out here is beyond me. And why Richard wants the new house to be even further away from the city...What's he using for brains? He could take all of that new house money and pour it into a fabulous condo on Rittenhouse Square or near the Avenue of the Arts. But no. He wants acreage out in the sticks.

He'd better be planning to give me one hell of a decorating allowance if he wants me to live all the way out there. That's for damn sure."

She checked her reflection in the car's mirror, and then spoke aloud. "Well, they'll just have to wait. They can't start the meeting without me. After all, I'm the one who's made the key decisions. And they're all right here in my little notebook." The flawlessly coifed woman patted her handbag, remembering she had placed her brown lizard-skin covered notepad in the side compartment of the sleek pocketbook.

Suddenly overcome with the urge to have someone other than herself listening to her voice, Angela fished for her cell phone and punched two of its buttons.

"Marla? It's me."

"Hey, Angela. Are you at home?"

"No, I'm on my way into town."

"What's going on?"

"I have a meeting with the partners'wives."

"Oh, those broads." Marla chuckled.

"Yeah, that group." Angela said.

"So what's on their agenda today?"

"It's not their agenda, honey. It's mine. I'm chairing the Social Committee, remember?" Angela looked at her reflection in the car's rear view mirror.

"Some of those women must have clutched their beads when they realized you were in charge."

"Yeah, they probably did. Although they don't run anything but their mouths and their husbands. And their husbands are busy at work eighteen hours a day."

"Well you know all about that. The job keeps Richard pretty occupied doesn't it?"

"Hell yes. But most of the time I don't mind that at all."

"So is your group still working on those social plans for February?" Marla asked.

"Yeah. That cocktail party and brunch thing."

"How did the interview with the event planner go? The one the Chic Set hired to do their picnic last August?"

"Fine. As far as I'm concerned, she's the one we're going to tap to do the events for the law firm."

"Uh, that sounds good. But be careful. I told you what else I heard about her."

"I don't give a good goddamn about that. She's the one who's getting the job." Angela slowed the car.

"All I'm saying, Angela, is that you might want to be careful about who's tapping who."

"It's all business, honey. Marla? I gotta go. I'm stopped at a traffic light and there's a cop on the other side of the intersection, facing me. I'm not hooked up to my hands-free, and they have a law about that out here in this township."

"Hang up, girl."

"Bye."

Angela Jackman was always aware of her surroundings. She knew driving this expensive car out here in horse country garnered her attention. She didn't need to be seen talking on her cell phone without using the right apparatus. She deposited the phone on the passenger seat and pressed firmly on the steering wheel mounted radio control buttons until she found the local affiliate of NPR.

The traffic light gave her permission to go, and Angela smiled at the police officer as his cruiser aligned with her car for the briefest second. She figured he had noticed her even though his eyes, like two orbs on automatic pilot, performed that well practiced habit of looking through her, as if she didn't exist.

Thirty minutes later, Angela pointed her car toward the entrance of the parking garage under her husband's law firm's office building. She maneuvered the shiny black SUV into one of the stalls designated for visitors. Angela got out of the car and walked toward the elevator that would take her to the nineteenth floor and the conference room reserved for the Partners'Wives'Social Committee meeting.

Despite being at least ten minutes late, she passed by her destination and continued walking until she reached the Ladies Room. Angela stood in front of the full length mirror adjacent to the row of granite topped vanities. Taking her time, she reassured herself that she was together from head to toe. Sporting a beige linen blend dress and a pair of mid-heeled c.f.m. sandals that matched her handbag, the wife of Stanton, Cawley and Brown's lone African-American senior partner was perfectly made up. Every strand of her permed honey-colored hair in place, the chairperson of the wives'branch of the Social Committee was ready to begin her meeting.

Angela left the Ladies Room and walked regally to Conference Room Nineteen-A. Convinced she would be the best looking woman there, she entered the room.

"Hello, Ladies. Sorry I'm late." In one sweeping glance the Chairperson took them all in.

"Angela. Hello. We were getting worried about you. You're hardly ever late for our meetings." Siggie Robertson waved her cigarette laden hand in Angela's direction, in flagrant disregard of the building's no smoking policy. "We absolutely couldn't start without you."

Helen Cawley, the former chairperson of this committee and the third wife of Benjamin Cawley, one of the firm's principle partners, nodded her agreement with Siggie. "What was it, Angela dear? Heavy traffic? A line of Canada geese crossing one of those narrow country roads out where you live?"

Angela took a half second before she answered. "No. No problems with the traffic or geese. Just a domestic matter."

"Oh my goodness. Well, you're here now, so let's get started, shall we?" Betsy Scott Price, the peacemaker, stopped wringing her hands long enough to signal that everyone should be seated at the wide, cherry wood conference table.

"I had to clarify a few things with Sandrine, my housekeeper." Angela was determined to finish explaining her tardy arrival. "She's Haitian, you know, and sometimes I can't think of the exact word I need in French. It's been a while since college. Anyway, by the time I finished explaining what I wanted her to do, it was later than I thought."

Betsy Scott Price nodded. She wore a pained expression on her face and she used her hands to smooth the non-existent ridges from the conference table's smooth patina. "It's all right, Angela. We're only a few minutes late, and Jonathan said we could use the room for as long as we wish."

The very second that Betsy Scott Price mentioned her husband Jonathan's name, Angela shifted her gaze from the ironing motion of the peacemaker's hands up to the middle-aged woman's face. Angela thought that she could see Betsy's mouth actually grow bigger as she pronounced her spouse's name. Certainly her voice grew louder and stronger. It was as if saying his name out loud validated Betsy, and gave her an identity. Angela could swear that she witnessed Betsy's metamorphosis from a gauzy pale figure, to a fully formed and colorized three-dimensional one.

Angela always found Betty's transformation strange, because she too knew Jonathan. She'd met him several times and in several different places. Whether it was in the discreet boutique hotel located in the city's toney gay zone or in the master bedroom of the Price's palatial condominium, Angela hadn't found anything spectacular about Jonathan Price. Nothing that would have made her voice grow louder, nor her mouth become larger when speaking his name. Angela had found Jonathan Price to be quite ordinary. In fact, she recalled hearing her own husband describe Jonathan as simply "adequate" when she'd asked what kind of lawyer he was. Richard couldn't understand why Jonathan had earned his partnership a year before he did. What did Jonathan bring to the firm? What was it that enabled him to climb to the top a year earlier than Richard's ascent?

Her interest piqued by her husband's wounded pride, Angela wasted no time in finding out what was so special about Jonathan Price. Two mid-afternoon assignations later, between cocktails and fuck sessions that ended very quickly and unsatisfactorily, Angela learned that Jonathan's

wife, the youngest daughter of a well connected and old Philadelphia Main Line family that kept Stanton, Cawley and Brown lawyers on retainer for ages, needed only two things to complete her life's scheme. The first was to marry intelligently and produce at least one male child to continue the family's prep school and Princeton tradition. The second was to maintain her place among her peers by having a husband who made partner in the old, prestigious Philadelphia law firm. Jonathan Price's stature at Stanton, Cawley and Brown was set when he married Elizabeth "Betsy" Scott.

Imbued with the self-assurance that came with knowing so much back-story about the Prices as well as about the other women on the committee, Angela reminded herself to straighten her posture as she sat in the comfortably padded chair.

"Ladies, the main purpose of today's meeting is to finalize our decision about our events planner, and to reach a consensus about how grand the Tri-city Office Partners' Cocktail Party and Sunday Brunch should be."

Angela spotted a raised hand. "Josette?"

"I know that of the three candidates, Miss Simpson's rates are the highest, but she offers us more. She knows exactly what we want. And according to her resume, she's had the kind of experience we're looking for."

"I agree with you, Josette." And, Angela thought, once again, we are on the same track. I like this Josette Zimmer. She has a lot of style. She's not as uptight as some of these other women. She might even be a registered Democrat.

Siggy Robertson cleared her smoke-coated throat. "Do you think she's really up to the task? The other firms that she's worked for are smaller than Stanton, Cawley."

"And I don't think I've ever gone to any event she's planned." Helen Cawley, her reading glasses perched at the very end of her rather long nose, injected her opinion. "I asked some of my close friends, and they're not even familiar with her name. She's an unknown with an unknown track record. I think we'd better stick to one of the other two candidates."

"Well, I think we should give her a try. How will she learn her business if we don't offer her a chance?" Betsy Scott Price chimed in, a voice for the underdog.

"Are you suggesting an act of affirmative action?" Helen Cawley cast a deprecating look at Angela. "Sorry, Angela, but just because Ms. Simpson is a person of color...I mean no offense."

"None taken, Helen. Affirmative action can cut two ways, can't it?" Angela was sure that Helen didn't get the full message of what she'd said. Why should she? She'd never needed to understand the other side of the coin.

"Shall we put this to a vote? Raise your hand if you want us to hire Lee Simpson as our events planner." Angela shut down the dialogue, more for her purposes than for anyone else's comfort.

Josette Zimmer, Betsy Scott Price and Angela raised their hands. Helen Cawley and Siggy Robertson remained still, although Siggy did clear her throat once again and move her hand to reach for another cigarette.

"That's settled, then. We're hiring Lee Simpson. I'll ask Richard's secretary to type Ms. Simpson's name in the required places on her contract, and to fax the document to her. Now, let's discuss what the cocktail party and brunch should look like, in general terms. That way we can tell Ms. Simpson what we expect, and she'll be able to meet our expectations." Angela sat back from the conference table and listened as one by one, her committee members expressed their ideas.

After another hour, and three more of Siggy Robertson's cigarettes, Angela suggested they adjourn the meeting. "And as soon as Ms. Simpson has something concrete planned, we'll meet again. She'll join us."

The women left the conference room. Three of them scattered in different directions, while the other two headed toward the elevator. Betsy walked quickly, trying to keep up with Angela's rapid pace.

"Did you park in the garage, Angela?"

Angela felt as if she were looking down on Betsy, even though Betsy was a full two inches taller. "Yes, I did."

"Mind if we go down there together? I know it's the middle of the day, but I hate going into underground garages by myself." Betsy had this supplicant look in her eyes.

"No problem." Angela had a flashback of some of the garages she'd ventured into in the middle of the night. Nothing but luck had stood between her and victim-hood. "I guess two are safer than one."

"Oh, there's no doubt about it. Jonathan always tells me to park above ground. On the street if I can find a place. But you know how hard it is to get a parking spot during work hours."

Angela stopped listening to Betsy the second that she'd said "Jonathan." There she goes again standing all straight and getting loud when she speaks that prick's name. "Yes, well, tell Jonathan to try to find an on-street parking spot after nine a.m. That'll be the last time that he counsels you to do that."

"Yes. Maybe." Betsy turned toward Angela as they exited the elevator and headed toward their cars. "I'm so glad Lee Simpson won the contract. I really think she's the best one for the job."

"So do I. I'm glad you voted for her." Angela favored Betsy with a smile.

Bolstered by borrowed bravery and a baseless sense of camaraderie, Betsy spoke up. "I don't think Helen had a clue about what you said up there. You know, about affirmative action cutting both ways."

Unsure of the extent of Betsy's perceptions, Angela reacted coolly to her statement. "Oh?"

"I'm sure she didn't understand you. And the comical thing about it is, Helen will think we've hired Lee Simpson because she's black. She doesn't know Lee represents a triple minority."

Convinced she'd underestimated Betsy's sophistication, Angela pressed her for details. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Ms. Simpson is a black woman."

"Yes, that's no news flash. She's as black as I am."

"She's a lesbian, also." Betsy had as much success containing this news as a sieve does holding water. "The Partners'Wives Social Committee of Stanton, Cawley and Brown has hired an African-American lesbian as their events planner. Isn't that terrific?"

"That really rocks, Betsy." Angela kept walking. She didn't miss a beat. "But tell me, how do you know this?"

"Well, Helen Cawley's best friends may not be familiar with Lee's work from any soirees they've attended, but I've seen her name mentioned in the newspaper. For two years now she's planned the main receptions and parties for the annual Gay and Lesbian fund raisers at the Museum of Art and the Franklin Institute. This year she was interviewed about the success of her business. She said it's growing by leaps and bounds, and it's one of the premiere lesbian owned social events businesses in the country. That's how I figured out she's a lesbian."

Angela realized Betsy was talking so quickly, she was practically out of breath. She was proud to possess and disseminate facts no one else in her closed circle knew. Angela felt that the "wife of Jonathan" had welcomed her to a glimpse of the "real Betsy", and that she did have a life of her own after all.

"I wonder why those events weren't on Ms. Simpson's resume."

"She probably saw who was on the Social Committee and figured she'd never get hired if we knew that she was a gay woman." Betsy sent Angela a look of conspiratorial joy. "You know better than I do how tough it is being a minority person."

"How right you are, Betsy." Angela smiled.

"Shall we keep this our little secret, Angela? Unless for some reason Lee wants to out herself. Oh, I'd love to see the look on Siggy's and Helen's faces if they ever found out."

"I would, also." Angela looked off for a second before patting her co-conspirator's arm. "This is too much, Betsy." Angela opened her car door and slid into the gray leather seat. "Thanks for sharing all of this with me."



"Don't mention it, Angela." Betsy looked at Angela through the driver's side open window. "Thanks for letting me come down to the garage with you. I feel like you and I are kindred spirits. I trust you, Angela."

Angela smiled. That's a stupid thing to do, she thought. "How nice. See you at the next meeting, Betsy."

Angela steered her way out of the garage and toward the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. She guided her car a quarter of the way around a traffic circle before veering into the outside lane that would take her to the entrance of the Expressway. Gliding seamlessly into the continuous flow of cars and trucks, she gave herself over to the seductive tune playing on the radio and she made a silent promise she'd phone Marla as soon as she arrived home. She had to tell her friend how the meeting went, and how she controlled the decision to hire a sistah, Lee Simpson, to do the event planning. Marla had already heard and passed on the rumor that Betsy Scott Price confirmed. But Angela wasn't ready to confide to Marla exactly how she had felt after Lee Simpson's recent interview and presentation. She wasn't prepared to tell her good friend that she'd had Lee on her mind every day and night since that interview, nor that she recognized the emotions the woman had stirred in her; feelings that were simultaneously familiar and foreign.

## Chapter Four

LEE SIMPSON LOOKED at her watch for the hundredth time that day. She paced back and forth from the dining room to the kitchen, absentmindedly twirling errant strands of hair around one of her fingers. The clock on the fireplace mantel played its Westminster chimes. Six o'clock.

"Where the hell is she? Still at that goddamn office? She's been back from Maine for hours."

Lee spoke to the empty room and then stared at the silent telephone, remembering the hours-old phone call from her partner; a call made while Sasha threaded her way through heavy traffic from the airport to her office.

"I'm back, hon."

"Are you on your way home, Sasha?"

"I'm headed in that general direction, but I have to stop at the office."

"You have to stop, or you want to?"

"I really have to stop there, Lee."

"Can't they get along without you for two days in a row?"

"Sure they can. But I promised Clive I'd check in with him. I need to talk to him today in case he's not accessible tomorrow."

"He's always accessible, Sasha. That's what cell phones and Blackberries are all about."

"I know. But this is important. I'll be home before you know it."

"No you won't. You'll get all involved in work. Your workaholic boss will have a ton of things for you to do, and I won't see you for hours."

"I'll be there as soon as possible, Lee. You have my word."

"Yeah, right."

Almost frantic with frustration, Lee searched in vain for a distraction. Why was she always the one who ended up waiting?

"Randi! Randi!" The dark haired woman yelled for the cat. Her summons went unanswered. Their cat, a timid snow white Himalayan female, knew when to hide. She wouldn't make an appearance until the woman with the calmer voice got home, and not a second before.

Lee walked to the living room window and with the back of her hand she swept back the drapery panel. Disappointed to see an empty driveway staring at her from the other side of the glass, she let the drape fall back into place. Then she moved purposefully from the living room to the sideboard in the dining room. She uncapped a bottle of scotch, grabbed a large tumbler, and directed a copious stream of the amber colored liquid into a medium sized glass. Striding back into the kitchen, Lee flung open a cabinet door and picked up her bottle of lorazepam, rolling two of the small white tablets out onto the counter. She scooped up the pills and swallowed them in one large gulp of the alcohol.

"This will calm me down." Momentarily satisfied, she smiled at the sound of her own voice and the comfort of the fiery fluid's residue on her tongue. She drained the remainder of the liquor from her glass, set it down in the sink, and turned around to face the pulsing electric green numerals of the clock on the microwave oven.

"Sasha Lewis! Where the fuck are you?"

Lee ignored her desire for another drink and decided to pay a visit to her home office. She knew an army of bills awaited her somewhere on her desk; invoices along with a couple of contracts that needed to be signed so she could earn the money to pay her debts. She ambled toward the wide glass and chrome table that held all of her business paraphernalia.

Lying atop a pile of post-it notes and assorted scraps of paper was an ecru-colored envelope bearing the return address of Stanton, Cawley and Brown, LLC. Lee removed the contract and

read through it one final time. She perused the handwritten note from Angela Jackman, the chairwoman of the firm's social committee. Recalling Mrs. Jackman's transparent innuendo-laden smile, Lee signed the document, and faxed each page of it to the designated person at the law firm.

Then she began the job of segregating her bills from her notes and other correspondence. Bills over there and other mail here. She stared at the invoices and wondered why the hell she'd ever said that she'd take care of writing the checks for the household expenses. She wasn't a damn secretary-bookkeeper. Wasn't she just as busy with her career as Sasha was with hers? Why was this chore her responsibility?

Rachel Thomas, her ex-lover, was the answer to her question. This time around, Lee was determined to be the one who controlled where all of their money went every month. She wasn't going to reprise being abandoned and staring at a "rent-due" notice lying next to a checkbook that had zeroes written in the balance column. As sure as she knew her name, Lee was certain there wasn't any woman on this earth who was beautiful, clever or wealthy enough to separate her from her survival instincts. After Rachel's abrupt and unannounced departure, Lee made an unspoken pact with herself. She'd been left in the lurch looking stupid once, but there wouldn't be a second time. If anyone was going to leave a relationship, she would be the one, and she sure as hell wouldn't exit penniless.

Lee stood up and walked to the wooden file cabinet where they kept their household checkbook. Her legs felt heavy and they moved sluggishly. The two little "calm-down pills" washed down by the scotch had started doing their job. When the telephone rang, it took her a few seconds to identify the source of the noise.

"Hello."

"Hey, Lee. I'm on my way home. I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

Lee concentrated on the voice on the other end of the line. "Sasha?"

"Yeah. Are you all right?"

Lee heard the concern in Sasha's question and she debated whether she should play with her partner's disquiet. She sat up straight in her chair. "Sure. I'm fine. Where are you?"

"I'm on Route 202. The traffic is a little slow, but I'll be there soon."

"Okay." Lee knew the less she tried to verbalize when she felt this tired, the better off she'd be. "See you when you get here."

"Lee? Are you still angry with me?"

"Let's just say that we need to talk, Sasha."

Lee heard Sasha sigh into her cell phone. "Okay. Be home soon. Bye."

Without saying another syllable, Lee put down the telephone and tore open the envelope holding their electric bill. She checked its due date and rested it on top of the checkbook. She drummed her fingers on the edge of the desk. Then she reached for the monthly phone bill and concentrated on each of the listed charges, especially the wireless expenses. She aimed the desk lamp's beam of light over the page containing Sasha's cell phone details, and one by one, she examined each record.

There were always numerous calls to Sasha's office and to their house phone. Lee was used to seeing Clive's cell, office and home numbers, along with Sasha's insipid friend, Julie Kelner's digits. This bill, however, listed four new contact numbers, and Lee questioned who the hell Sasha had phoned so early in the morning on five separate occasions?

Lee peeled off one of her post-it notes and copied the unrecognized phone call records. She put the slip of paper in her personal file cabinet, in a folder labeled "I". Lee had created the "Infidelity" folder four years ago; a month after she and Sasha picked each other up in the bar of a London hotel, a year after her lover, Rachel Thomas, disappeared with Lee's savings account, her cash, jewelry, credit cards, business records and her identity. It had taken some time, but with the help of the authorities, Lee was able to recover everything of value except her willingness to love and trust any other woman.

## Chapter Five

EVERY SLOAN SHIFTED her backpack to her left hand, freeing her right one long enough to pick up three days worth of newspapers and mail from her front porch and mailbox. Maybe I should have had the paper stopped and the mail held, she thought. Nothing like advertising that I'm not here. Once again rebalancing her burden, she reached into her jacket pocket to get her house keys, and then unlocked the front door. Avery deposited her bag in front of the staircase to the left of the spacious foyer. She took a couple of steps toward the study and then stopped abruptly, suddenly remembering she was returning to an empty home. Norma was no longer there.

She left the week before Avery's "Former Offenders'Care Providers" conference was scheduled to take place in Portland, Maine. After twelve months of living together, yet apart, of cohabiting without affection, without sex and sometimes without more than two shared sentences over the course of a day and night, Norma had left their loveless living arrangement. The movers arrived to collect her possessions the day after she made settlement on a condo in the city. Norma took with her a bedroom's worth of furniture, various kitchen appliances, some lamps, bed and bath linens, pieces of art, all of her clothes, and her conveniently facile attitude about open

relationships. She'd left Avery living in a house with half furnished rooms, half empty closets, an intact heart, and a determination to feel grateful and at peace about the end of their love affair.

Avery stepped into the dining room, skirting the Oriental carpet under the table and chairs, and walking instead on the pine floorboards. She looked around the space, taking in the recently painted wainscoting, her last house project. She reached out and touched the last few feet of its smooth profile before it stopped at the door molding. Instinctively, she brought her fingertips to her nose, searching for that fresh paint smell that would remind her how satisfied she had felt at the end of her job.

Knowing that she needed to retrieve the phone messages that had accumulated during her absence, Avery entered the kitchen and made her way to the Welsh cabinet at the far end of the room. A big red five blinked at her from the display area of the answering machine. Avery pushed the "messages" button.

"If you don't know the number, please hang up..." Someone had called and hung up without leaving a message.

She pushed the retrieval button a second time.

"Avery, it's Loretta Jones, Nia Quarles'P.O. Sorry to call you at home, but when I called your office I was told you were out of town for a couple of days. I wanted to touch base with you about Nia. Her family has thrown her out and she's living in a shelter. So far so good, but I do have some concerns. Please call me when you get this message. If I'm not in the office, call me on my cell. Bye."

Avery reached for the notepad and wrote herself a reminder to call Loretta Jones. She decided to listen to the three remaining messages before returning the probation officer's call.

"Ms. Sloan. This is Bob from Comfort Heating and Cooling. We'd like to schedule your semi-annual furnace maintenance visit. Please give us a call at 1-800-BECOMFY. Good-bye."

Avery smiled as she wrote the number and the reason for that return call. "Okay, Bob B. Comfy."

Two more messages to go.

"Hey, Ave. It's me, Norma. Listen, what's the name of that handyman guy who did some work for us last year? I have a couple of things for him to do here in the condo. Get back to me with his number a.s.a.p. Thanks."

"Damn." Avery put down her pen and looked out of the kitchen window. "You took our address book when you moved out. Look it up yourself." She shook her head and ran her fingers through her unruly hair. Pressing the message button for the fifth and final time, all she heard was a second hang-up.

Avery checked her watch. It was late in the afternoon, but she still had plenty of time to catch up with the heating company. She opted instead to return Loretta Jones' call. She respected the young parole officer, and she knew Jones would not have called her if it hadn't been important. She suspected also, that Loretta was a gay woman. Not that it should matter, but it gave Avery a strong incentive to support Loretta's efforts. If she could help her with any additional information about their client, Nia Quarles, she would do it. Avery dialed Loretta Jones' office number, heard her voice mail directions, then decided to try her cell phone.

"Hello. Loretta Jones speaking."

Avery recognized Loretta's warm but professional voice. "Loretta, hello. It's Avery Sloan. I'm returning your message."

"Hi, Avery. Thanks for getting back to me. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks. What's going on with Nia Quarles?"

"Well, you know that Nia and her baby have been living with her father and mother since her release."

"Yes, I know. She talks about them when she comes into the center." Avery knew that Loretta was giving her all of this background information as a prelude to bad news about Nia.

"Avery, I have to breach Nia's confidentiality here, but I know you'll understand."

"Of course. Whatever you tell me stays here." Avery could hear the hesitation in Loretta's voice.

"Well, you may know already that Nia is a lesbian. She came out to her folks recently."

Avery quickly remembered the moment when Nia, sitting across from her in the Baker Center office, had declared her sexuality. Without disclosing she too was a lesbian, Avery had simply smiled and assured her young client that being gay was all right, and if she needed any information about LGBT resources, she'd be happy to help her. Avery recalled Nia saying something about how strict and traditional her parents were.

"And how did her mother and father react to the news?"

"The way you might expect. First, they blew a gasket and then, they threw her out. She's living at the Robeson Shelter."

Avery shook her head from side to side. "What about her baby?"

"They won't let her have her. They refuse to give her up. They claim that Nia will expose her to all kinds of deviant people."

"That's just a load of crap, Loretta."

"I know that as well as you do, Avery." Loretta paused. "But that's what's happened. I have Nia connected with an attorney, so I know she'll get her baby back. Right now she's so stressed and worried I'm afraid she'll fall apart before the first hearing can be scheduled."

Avery thought for a second. "Okay. I'll make some calls. I think I can get her into our group home on a temporary basis. It's crowded and it's an older house, but it's better than being in the shelter. We have a counselor-therapist she can talk to. That might help a little. Does she need any clothes or personal toiletries?"

"No, she's covered there. Her father let her take all of her clothes. But she's so worried someone is going to steal from her, that she's not showing up for work consistently. She's already missed two days, and that's a violation of her parole. That's why I called you." Loretta sighed.

"I'll do what I can, Loretta. So far, our agency has a pretty good track record with these emergency situations. Thanks for letting me know."

"Thanks, Avery, I knew you'd help me." Loretta paused before continuing. "Uh, on another matter, a social one, I think we have some mutual friends. Sandy and Helen and Marie and Ameerah."

Avery smiled broadly. "Yeah, they're good friends of mine. How do you know them?"

"I met them a month ago at a dinner party. A party you'd been invited to, but couldn't attend?"

"Oh, yeah. I couldn't make it that evening." Avery remembered phoning the party's hosts and begging off with an excuse. Normally she loved going to dinner parties, but that night she'd been feeling low about her work, her disintegrated relationship with Norma, and her pervasive feeling of emptiness. Never one to have lingering thoughts about her age, Avery had suddenly been struck with the reality that she was closer to the beginning of her fifth decade than to her fourth one, and that she was partner-less. It wasn't the prospect of living alone that sobered Avery. It was the probability of being unloved and uncared for that had set her back on that particular day.

"That was too bad. You would have had a great time. And you would have learned that one of your colleagues was a sister." Loretta chuckled into the phone.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I do regret not being there." Avery was no amateur when it came to flirting, but she wasn't sure if she really wanted to flirt with this woman. Loretta was too young for her and probably newly out and eager to make a conquest. Avery knew she didn't feel any particular attraction toward her. "But I'm happy you had a good time. You were with a nice group of women that night."

"Yes, it was a good time." Loretta paused for a second. "So, let me get going. And thanks in advance for anything you can do to help Nia."

"Don't mention it, Loretta. I'll get right on it. Thank you for keeping me in the loop. 'Bye.'"

"Good-bye, Avery. I'll be in touch. About Nia, that is."

Avery hung up the phone, thought for a moment, and then made three more calls. Within twenty minutes she had arranged for someone to pick up Nia and her belongings at the shelter, drive her to the filled-to-capacity group home run by the Baker Rainbow Center and help her get set up there. Nia would see the therapist before the evening was over and hopefully be ready to return to her job the next morning.

Avery felt good about what she'd accomplished in so short a period of time. She decided that she could take a few minutes to unpack and do some laundry and personal chores. Her office work could wait until tomorrow. She returned to the foyer to retrieve her backpack to carry to the laundry room. After removing her partially unread magazines from the bag's side pocket, she pulled out a few pieces of clothing and dropped the garments into the washing machine.

Avery took her lightened bag and her stack of mail upstairs. She paused in the second floor hallway, sorted the envelopes that had arrived during her absence from home, and placed the pile of mail on her bed. Then she turned on the music system housed on a shelf in her bookcase. A moment later she undressed and stepped into the shower under a steady stream of warm soothing water. Relaxed, she allowed her mind to replay the major events of the past few days. Attending the conference in Portland had been a good use of her time. She'd been able to make contacts with other folks who had been in the business of providing services to ex-offenders far longer than she. Several people in particular had been extremely helpful and generous with their offers of assistance. As she leaned against the tub's surround wall and gave the hair conditioner enough time to do its job, Avery thought about adding several names and email addresses to her computer's database.

Eager to take care of this minor task, she turned off the water jets and stepped out of the bathtub. She wrapped a thick towel around her copper colored body and began massaging moisturizer onto her still damp face. The foggy mirror challenged Avery's attempts to decipher her reflection as she searched for it. Seconds later, with the room's humidity thinning, she could see her clear dark brown eyes staring back at her. She noticed the beginnings of lines on her forehead and the birth of small indentations near her eyes; laugh lines is how she referred to them. Her lips, one shade darker than her skin, were expressive, soft and well defined. A random stream of water released itself from the tight curls on her head and coursed down her face, making the moisturizer mask less than perfect.

Avery walked into her bedroom and took a pair of sweatpants out of her closet. Assuming she had no need to dress any better than this to do the rest of today's chores, she stepped into them and then pulled a long-sleeved tee-shirt over her head. As she put her watch back on her wrist, she noticed that her forearm was sore. She didn't see any redness, nor any bruising. Mentally backtracking through her day, she tried to remember what she might have done that would cause her to feel pain.

Suddenly, the reason for the pain in her arm occurred to her. She recalled hitting it against the back of a seat when the plane lurched to a stop. She remembered hitting her arm so hard that she'd dropped the newspaper and magazines into her vacant seat. She visualized her sleepy



seatmate picking up the periodicals and handing them to her. Avery wondered if the woman noticed the magazine titles, and if she knew about *Curve* and *The Advocate*. She'd been struck by the way her seatmate looked at her dead in the eyes when she handed her the magazines. Avery thought the traveler was kind of attractive in a soft butch kind of way. Too bad she'd slept during the entire flight. If she hadn't snoozed, Avery guessed they might have had an interesting conversation.

## Chapter Six

TRUE TO MY word and nearly running over the empty trash can, I pulled into our driveway twenty minutes after calling Lee from the road. I'd made good time and even had a chance to dial Julie to arrange to meet her for coffee soon. As I hauled the huge gray vinyl can into the garage, I realized I could hardly believe I'd started the day in Portland, Maine and spent the balance of the afternoon in my office trying to track down more sources of antique hardware and old but very usable wooden support beams. I was as determined to rectify my screw-up at the auction as I was to pacify a still angry Lee. And I was willing to bet that the former would be easier than the latter task.

I opened the door to the laundry room, stepped over a pile of unwashed clothes left on the floor next to the washer, and entered the kitchen.

"Lee? Lee? I'm home."

No answer. Maybe she didn't hear me. Or maybe the open bottle of Oban on the kitchen counter explained her silence. The presence of the liquor made me assess my chances of having a peaceful evening. If Lee had downed one scotch, she might be mellow. If she'd drunk two, she'd be on her way to irascibility. If she'd had any of her tranquilizers along with some of that scotch, she might be asleep somewhere. And that would mean only short-term peace for me. She'd either sleep until tomorrow, or wake up in the middle of the night ready to curse, scream, and argue. Basically, if she'd consumed anything more than one short drink, I was screwed. Tonight wouldn't be the best time for us to talk about yesterday's telephonic rage.

I could hear my friend Julie's calm but concerned voice keeping me company as I returned to the garage to get my carry-on bag out of the trunk of the car.

"And you're still with her because...?"

"Because basically she's a good person. She just has these angry spells once in a while, that's all. I love her."

"And does she love you also?"

"I hope so, Julie."

"You should know the answer to that question with certainty, Sasha. Life is too short to simply hope for love."

I passed through the kitchen and noticed Randi's water bowl was bone dry and her food dish was empty. All that remained of her last meal was the cat food residue caked on the sides of the ceramic container. I put down my bag, went to the sink to fill her water dish, and then bent down to a lower cabinet where we stored her food. She must have heard me because she tore into the kitchen, stopped just short of my feet, and wove her way around my legs.

"Hey, are you hungry?" I scooped her up in my arms, grateful for her purring softness and respectful of her need to leave my arms in search of her meal.

Randi followed me to her feeding spot and promptly got lost in her senior cat formula dinner. For a moment I watched her eating greedily, and then I continued my trek toward Lee and what I hoped would be a good night's sleep. I stopped in our den to see if there was any mail sitting on my desk. Sure enough, there were a couple of trade magazines, a catalogue and a few circulars. I remembered to put my receipts from the Portland trip in a folder with my income tax material. If I didn't do that right away, I'd forget all about it.

The soft hum and the blinking green lights on the DSL modem drew my attention to the computer on Lee's desk. My laptop lay silently in its commuter bag. Booting it up would take more time than I wanted to spend down here, so maybe I could use Lee's desktop to play just one game of Free Cell before I went upstairs. After all, I didn't need her password to access a game, only to get onto the Internet.

One of the first disagreements we'd had was about her knowing my password and using my computer, but my not knowing and using hers. She claimed she needed her machine strictly for her event planning business, while I used mine for my job as well as for everything else. She didn't want me fooling around with her computer and mixing our social contacts with her professional ones. If I recalled correctly, the phrase she hurled at me that day was "corrupting her contacts" with my "simpleminded social circle."

Remembering all of those details convinced me the Free Cell game could wait until tomorrow. I was tired, hours past hungry, and I didn't know what the rest of the night held.

I picked up my bag and was headed for the stairs when I saw Lee standing in the middle of the staircase. I wish I could say the sight of her no longer made me smile, but that would be a lie. It was only during the bad times that I forgot how good looking she was.

Unfortunately, the bad times were happening more and more frequently and usually from out of the blue. How could I be so good at my job, so good at anticipating every possible mistake and fuck up that could occur in the process of building one house or creating a whole community of

new houses, and not be able to predict when Lee would steer us headlong into one of her emotional cyclones?

"Hey, babe." I approached the steps and looked up at her.

"So you finally decided to come the hell on home from work?" She stared me down defiantly. Her hair was pushed to one side. Her clothes were disheveled and I could see a crease in her cheek where she must have been resting her face on her hand.

"It took me a while to get to the office from the airport. Remember? I called you from the road?" Tonight was destined to be only slightly better than last night, and that's because at least I was at home, not hundreds of miles away, begging and cajoling Lee to calm down.

"Then I had to meet with Clive and take care of some of the messages piled up on my desk. Some of them were priorities." I kept a smile on my face, hoping it would soften Lee's response to my homecoming. She continued staring at me, silently fuming.

"Sure you did." Lee shot me a swift and bitter smile, devoid of any warmth. "I know by now I am not one of your priorities."

"Yes you are, Lee." We'd gone down this ugly road so many times before.

My less than loving partner raised her voice. "No, I'm not one of your priorities, Sasha. But that's all right, sweetheart. One of these days you're going to realize how you've messed up our relationship by taking ABC out to dinner, showing XYZ the available lots, making sure that all of the sub-contractors are lined up, and doing every damn thing that Clive Whittingham asks you to do."

I felt like a human barometer measuring her escalating pressure. I needed to calm her down quickly, before she got out of control. "Lee, I'm sorry you feel this way. Look, don't you spend a lot of time with your clients?"

"Not at the expense of our relationship!" She was beginning to yell now, and I could see the vein in the middle of her forehead start to bulge.

I stood one step below her and looked directly into her eyes. "What do you want me to do, Lee? Quit my job or do it half-assed?"

"What do I want you to do? What the fuck do you think I want you to do? For one thing, you can tell Clive you're not going to go on any more of his business trips, whether they're for two days or two weeks. He has a big enough staff to send someone else. And second, you're going to work strictly Monday through Friday. No nights! No weekends! After all the time you've worked for him, you deserve some perks! You claim that you and Clive are such good friends. Tell him to take better care of you so you can take better care of your relationship with me."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Are you serious? Do you actually think I can tell Clive when I'm going to work? We're good friends, but he's my boss. I can't dictate policy to him. "

"You can if you want to badly enough." Lee pointed her finger at me. "Are you going to tell him or am I?"

Lee's imperious expression let me know that she wouldn't hesitate to march right into Clive's office and give him orders about the terms of my employment. She would do that as certainly as she had verbally insulted my closest friends, the women with whom I no longer socialize.

I put my bag down on the step. "Lee, please be reasonable. You work a lot of evenings and weekends. It's the nature of your job. I understand that, and I'd never challenge you about your schedule. What could I say? You can only plan events that take place during the week? Come on, now. Let's try to be supportive of each other." I thought I saw Lee's glare relax a bit. I was mistaken. She was just taking a second to reload.

"The fuck with supportive! Take a look around your house. Do you like what you see?"

She didn't give me a chance to say, hell yes, I love what I see. I'd worked hard to afford this house and to maintain it. She paid for the utilities, but the title bore my name.

"Try leaving me alone again while you go off on another business trip, Sasha. The only thing you'll find when you get back is the foundation of the fireplace. I promise you."

There was that fire threat again. I looked at her calmly. She was beyond reason, and I was beyond understanding her. A few more of these scenes and I'd be close to beyond caring. Lee was somewhere other than the land of scotch and pills, and I had no clue how to reach her. I knew of no way to get her to believe that I could still love her if she'd let me. And soon, I'd stop believing that, because little by little I was starting to slip away from her.

They say that couples shouldn't go to sleep still angry with each other. But quite frankly, we went to sleep under a blanket of ire more often than not. Hostility was becoming our way of life.

I reached down and picked up my suitcase which, by now, felt heavy. "Excuse me, Lee. I need to take this bag upstairs and unpack it."

She turned around and preceded me up the steps. Looking over her shoulder, she fired one last salvo. "I'm sleeping alone tonight. You can stay in the guest room."

Although this was my house, I thought that my sleeping in the guest room wasn't a bad idea at all. I answered her in a monotone, "That's fine."

I walked down the hall, past the bathroom and into the guest room where I turned on the lamp. Its warm golden light welcomed me, even though all my clothes and other belongings were in the master bedroom closet. I opened my carry-on and fished out the small case containing my toothbrush, lotions, deodorant, and shampoo. Placing it on the dresser, I couldn't avoid noticing

my sad-sack reflection in the mirror perched atop the wide expanse of the bureau. Dark circles emphasized the tiredness of my eyes. Deepening lines highlighted the mouth that Lee had once described as the sexiest lips she'd ever kissed. And the swath of silver near my right temple was simply a collection of gray hairs, not the dramatic feature that got me attention from time to time.

I removed my shirt and placed it neatly over the armchair by the window. Next, I stepped out of my shoes and socks, remembering the concern I'd felt earlier in the day when I'd been asked to take my shoes off in the Portland Airport and noticed how dirty the tiled floor was. Taking a few steps across that cruddy, germ infested area had been yet another insult to the injury of the failed business venture in Maine. Had I really screwed up at that auction some twenty-four hours ago? Had I really been terrified Lee would burn down our house and set herself afire? Some things no longer appeared to be real.

I unbuttoned my belt and emptied my pockets. An errant tissue, transformed into a ball thanks to my damp palm kneading it nervously from time to time, an unchewed stick of gum still folded in its foil home, and a paper clip emerged from my left pocket. A quick search of the right one yielded a small rectangular piece of card stock. I pulled it out and turned it to the side that held its printed information. Silver letters embossed on the burgundy card read, "Avery Sloan, Executive Director/ Josephine Baker Rainbow Center/ 1615 Pine Street/ Philadelphia, PA 19103/ 215-542-0101/ asjbre1@zeno.com

What the hell was this? I hadn't met any Avery Sloan in Maine. And besides, this was a Philadelphia address. Did someone give me this card at the office this afternoon? Oh, this was pitiful. I couldn't remember anyone giving me a business card.

The flight attendant! The snooty, pole-up-his-ass flight attendant on the plane this morning. My seatmate must have dropped it when the plane hooked onto the jet-way, and that jerk thought it was mine.

My seatmate. Pretty eyes and hair. She was reading *Curve* and *The Advocate*. She'd really made tracks getting off the plane. Too bad I pretended to be asleep for the whole damn trip. I had no idea she was sitting next to me. I could still smell the spicy perfume she wore.

I took off my bra and felt everything above my waist breathe and relax. The inviting bed beckoned me. For once, I didn't care it was a double and not the queen size expanse where I was used to stretching out. I was so beat I wouldn't need a book or the television to persuade me to turn out the light and close my eyes. I pulled the covers up over my head and was well on my way to drifting off when I heard the door open and saw the inch of light creep into the room.

"Sasha? Sasha, I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to fight with you tonight. Please come to bed with me." Lee stood next to my exhausted body, pulling the blanket and sheet away from me.

I shuddered, the room's cold air enveloping me from head to toe. "Lee, I'm so tired."

"I know you are, honey. Come to bed and I'll keep you warm."

"Okay." If I were to get any peace at all that night, it would be because I gave in to Lee's request. That's the way it worked anymore.

## Chapter Seven

ANGELA JACKMAN LOOKED up from the newspaper long enough to feel a blush of annoyance as she watched her husband, Richard, bite off the corner of a piece of toast and, with his mouth wide open, chew the crusty angle. Masticating while the whole world could see every one of his teeth was the only unrefined habit Richard practiced. And despite her best efforts during the past fifteen years, Angela had failed to reform this behavior.

"Richard." A robot could have spoken his name with more affection and warmth than his wife did.

"Yeah?" The stockily built mustachioed lawyer put down the paper he'd been perusing.

Aware of her husband's apparent failure to notice the parental tone of her voice, Angela changed course and decided against chiding Richard's dining behavior. "What are you reading?"

Richard touched the nose piece on his stylish eyeglasses, adjusting the way that they sat on his face. "The paperwork with the change-orders for the house. They were faxed to my office late yesterday afternoon."

Angela narrowed her gaze. "And when were you going to share this information with me?"

"As soon as I was finished examining everything. Don't worry. I'm keeping you in the loop." Richard winked confidently at his wife.

"I'm not worried at all. I'm just a wee bit interested in what this new house of ours is going to look like." Try as she might to keep her sarcasm under wraps, it had a way of seeping between her lips.

"Well, these aren't major changes. And the good news is we don't have to pay for any of them. This is all on the builder's tab, because he can't deliver some things in the contract.

"Things like what?" Angela sat forward in her chair, paying closer attention.

"The post and beam timbers for the living room, dining room, family room, and foyer have to be changed. Whittingham couldn't get delivery of the antique oak that he'd promised. And the pine floor boards that we wanted aren't available either."

"In other words, the entire first floor is going to look different from what we thought."

"Not the entire first floor. The study, your office area, the mudroom, and the laundry room will be the same. I'm pretty certain that the garden room won't change, either. At any rate, the replacement beams will be manufactured to look like they're old. Most people won't know the difference."

Angela had an expression of disbelief on her face. "Is there anything else that he's changed?"

"Uh, yes." Richard paused, looking for the right way to frame the rest of the information he had read on the document that lay before him. "I know this isn't going to sit well with you, Angela. But we have to select different door knobs and hinges as well as new cabinet hardware for the kitchen and pantry."

"What? You can't be serious."

"As serious as a heart attack." Richard gave his wife a sympathetic look. "It seems like Whittingham thought he had a bead on the fixtures we wanted, but somehow they disappeared."

"They disappeared? What does that mean?"

"Well, what he told me was that he can't track them down. Something about an auction up in Maine, and not making the right bid."

"Yeah, I'll bet. He probably figured he couldn't make enough of a profit out of the deal. Builders are all alike. They want to sell you crap and then make a fortune off of it."

Richard stared at his wife. "I'm sure some builders are like that. But from what I've heard about Clive Whittingham, he isn't one of them."

"What? Just because he built Ben and Helen Cawley's new house? Ben was always too busy to know what was going on, and Helen was so involved with her charity events, for all she knew they could have built the damn house without a foundation."

"We're pretty busy too, but we know exactly what's going on with our project because I talk to Clive or the site foreman almost every day." Richard cocked his head to one side. "In addition to that, I go over there to see what's going on."

"Well you'll have to excuse me for complying with the instructions in Whittingham Builder's letter. You know, the one about not trespassing on the work site and disturbing the contractors? Besides, I wouldn't know what I was looking at anyway."

Richard smiled smugly. "Well I decided to ignore Whittingham's directive and to take the time to go over there every other day. It's my bonus money from the last two years that's making the house possible, isn't it?"

Angela made no attempt to hide a smirk. "Yeah, your bonus money is funding it and your ego is fueling it. We both know that you have to have as big a house as the senior partner of Stanton, Cawley and Brown, don't you?"

Richard folded the change-order papers. He reached for his suit jacket hanging across the back of the chair next to him, and stood up. Moving one, then the other arm through his jacket's sleeves, he met his wife's now silent demeanor with a few seconds of simmering silence of his own, before breaking his verbal fast.

"I'll be late this evening. Don't wait for me if you want to eat dinner at the regular time."

Angela devoted herself to the newspaper, once again. Without looking at her husband, she blew a kiss into the air and wished him a good day. His retreating presence ushered in the sound of the telephone. Angela blew a breath of frustration through her lips, as if walking a few paces to the kitchen desk to answer the phone were too oppressive a task.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Mrs. Jackman. It's Sally."

"Oh, good morning Sally. How are you today?" Angela's gracious voice hid her slight annoyance with the interruption to her morning.

"I'm fine, thank you. I'm phoning because you asked me to call you as soon as the contract arrived."

"What contract?"

"The one for Ms. Simpson, the event planner. It was here when I got in this morning. She must have faxed it last night."

"Oh, of course. That's good news." Angela's annoyed mood morphed into a subdued excitement.

"Shall I mail you a copy of the contract, or should I give it to Mr. Jackman to bring to you?"

"Just put it in the mail, thanks." Angela added an afterthought. "Sally, could you do me a favor? Give me Ms. Simpson's phone number so that I can call her to set up a meeting." Wearing the mantle of chairperson of Stanton, Cawley and Brown's Partner's Wives' Social Committee, Angela reached for a pen and paper. She quickly wrote the information her husband's secretary dictated to her.

"Okay, I have it. Thank you, Sally."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Jackman. Take care."

"You also. Enjoy your day, dear."



Angela glanced at the clock on the wall. Seven thirty-five. Too early for this kind of business call. She'd wait until nine o'clock to phone Lee Simpson about getting together to begin planning the firm's cocktail party and brunch. Should they meet at the office downtown, or at Lee's office, wherever that was?

Angela abandoned her newspaper and what was left of her coffee. She walked into the spacious dining room, touching the edge of the table as she passed by. Seized by a sudden thought, she smiled at her reflection in the enormous mirror that spanned the entire wall.

We can meet right here. I'll call Siggy, Helen, Betsy and Josette and we'll all meet right here instead of my dragging my butt into the city. On second thought, maybe I just need to phone Betsy and Josette. They were the ones who favored hiring Lee Simpson. That way, we'll be able to do all of the planning without the other two old bags trying to disrupt everything.

Angela paused, taking a moment to truly focus on her thoughts and on her form, as she continued to gaze at herself in the mirror. She remembered the one and only time that she'd met Lee Simpson. She recalled Lee's strong grip as they shook hands, the disarming way that she looked right through her. Lee had been the job seeker and Angela the job giver. But Lee had cast her eyes over Angela as if she were the one making the decisions. Angela clearly remembered thinking, "What the hell is this chick about?" Then she remembered what Betsy Scott Price had told her about Lee's sexuality. Recalling the look in Lee's eyes and the way her own body reacted to Lee's delicious intrusion, Angela knew at once what arrangement she would make with Lee when she phoned her later this morning.

After all, I'm the chairperson of the friggin'committee. I can meet with Lee Simpson one-on-one wherever and whenever I want. And it might as well be right here.

## Chapter Eight

EVERY REGRETTED THAT the train had arrived at her stop, Suburban Station. She hated to let her daydream about the sleepy plane passenger fade into the background as she walked the six blocks or so between the station and her agency's office. Last night she had had an honest to goodness dream about the woman. A dream that felt so real that it planted itself in her loins and stayed with her throughout her morning's routine of shower, shampoo, bowl of cereal and quick drive to the train station. The half hour commute into the city gave her time to continue the dream; now, of course, in a state of wakefulness. She'd reached the sweetest part of it, where they were sharing their first kiss, when the train's wheels squealed to a stop in the cavernous station. Avery left the railroad car's warmth and threw herself into the thick of the other commuters, all walking toward their Center City destinations.

The morning air was cold and damp. Too cold for early November in Philadelphia, and too damp for Avery who had grown up in Des Moines, Iowa's dry and windy winters. She pulled up her leather jacket's zipper as far as it would go without strangling her. She wished she'd paid closer attention to the weather report and had snapped the lining into the jacket.

Stripped of the heat from her dream-turned-fantasy, once again Avery relied on her imagination to banish the cold. She could feel the warmth of the steam rising from the cup of tea that she'd pour for herself the moment she got to the office. It would be a cup of English Breakfast tea, not the watered down herbal stuff her secretary was always trying to ply. And how fitting that she would drink tea this morning, because her nine-thirty appointment was with an ex-pat black British builder, an ex-pat gay black British builder. Perfect! She thought. A Brit-Bro.

Avery was smiling as she stopped in front of the grimy glass doors of the building that housed her agency's office as well as a dozen other businesses' headquarters. She still had that smile on her face as she got out of the elevator and sprang across her office's threshold.

"Hey, Pat. How are you today?" Avery beamed at her secretary who looked up from her computer screen.

"Well, good. But obviously not as good as you are. You must have had a good night. Did you have a hot date or something?" Pat smiled at Avery.

"No, I didn't have a hot date or something." Avery shrugged out of her jacket and hung it next to Pat's multi-colored poncho on the Bentwood coat tree.

"Didya meet someone up in Portland?" Pat winked at her boss.

"Only the other care providers at the conference. Nobody of interest."

"Then why the big smile?"

Avery let the smallest slice of her dream float by. "The big smile is because I'm hyped about my first meeting this morning. This is the day that I'm going to get the plans for our group home off the ground."

Pat nodded. "You think so?"

"I know so, Pat." Avery gestured toward the entrance of their office. "In half an hour, the project's benefactor is going to walk through that door, drink a cup of perfectly brewed English Breakfast tea, look at our plans, and tell me he and his company will be happy to completely rehab the three story monstrosity of a house that we've purchased. And, to cap it all, they'll do the job for the price of the materials plus a reduced rate for their labor."

"I've got two questions for you. First, how do we brew a cup of perfect English tea when all we have is a mini microwave oven? And second, what makes you so sure he's going to give us such

a great deal?" Even though she was seated, Pat emphasized her question by putting her hands on her hips.

"First, I'll take care of the tea. I just have to clear the table of all of this gentle orange blossom business and chamomile-honey soother stuff." She grinned at her secretary. "As for your second question, I know people. I met Clive Whittingham at an HRC fund raiser about a year ago. He's a successful businessman, he's socially conscious, and I can tell he's got a good heart."

"How can you tell that? Are you a mind reader?"

"No. But I talked to him for a little while, and I just got this vibe."

"You just got this vibe? Is that how you size up people? Listen, my dear, when you finally do meet an exciting woman, please be careful. You're so gullible, you could get taken in a New York minute."

Avery smiled at Pat, but decided not to respond to her bait. "Oh, there is one more thing aside from my vibe. It's November. We're getting near the end of the tax deduction season."

"Now you're making sense. You think this guy needs to increase his charitable donation figures?"

"I'm counting on it." Avery went to the water cooler and filled a mug. She put it inside the microwave. "Might as well experiment with my English tea making skills while I have a few minutes."

The second Avery pressed the oven's touchpad, Clive Whittingham stepped into the office of the Josephine Baker Rainbow Center. Avery snapped to attention.

"Mr. Whittingham! I'm glad to see you again." She shook Clive's hand enthusiastically.

"As am I, Ms. Sloan. But please, call me Clive." He smiled broadly, his gaze taking in both Avery and her secretary.

Avery turned toward her assistant. "Clive, this is Pat Hawthorn, my Administrative Assistant."

"How do you do, Ms. Hawthorn?" Clive stepped closer to Pat and extended his hand to her.

"I'm just fine, thanks. Feel free to call me Pat." The older woman was charmed by Clive's British clip. "So you're from England, Mr. Whittingham?"

"Originally, yes. But I've lived here in the States for quite a few years. I'm a naturalized citizen, actually."

Pat pointed to the headline in the morning newspaper on her desk. It spoke of the number of U.S. soldiers who had died in the country's latest unauthorized war. "Maybe it's easier to be a

naturalized citizen these days than it is to be a natural born citizen. I'm struggling with this war, you know?"

"Yes, as are many of us. The U.K. has lost some of its sons, also."

"Well, we're losing some of our daughters, too. Did you see that article..."

Avery broke in. "Uh, Pat. We don't want to take too much of Clive's time talking about the war in Iraq. He's here on another mission, remember?"

Looking at Clive, Pat demurred. "Oops, my bad. Sometimes I forget where I am and what my job is."

"Would you like a cup of tea, Clive?" Avery remembered her game plan.

"That would be splendid, Avery. Have you any herbal tea? I love that on a cold and damp day."

Avery refused to look at Pat. Even so, she could feel her secretary's smirk aimed right at her. "Let's see what we have here. Would you like chamomile, peach, lemon mist or sweet dreams?"

"Lemon Mist would be just the ticket. Thank you."

Avery shot Pat a glance that erased the sarcastic grin from the secretary's face.

"Why don't you two get started with your meeting, and I'll bring the tea to Mr. Whittingham as soon as it's ready."

"Thanks, Pat. If you could take any messages for me for a while, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure, Avery. I'll take care of everything."

Avery guided Clive along a narrow hallway that lead to her office. Once inside the large room she offered him a seat and a verbal tour of her agency's activities and goals.

"Right now, we have a case load of forty-three formerly incarcerated women. Their ages range from nineteen to sixty-two. Most of the women have full-time jobs, many of them must report regularly to a parole officer, and every one of them needs some kind of support. Our agency offers them assistance; anything from pre-employment training, a job search, securing housing, or getting connected with mental or physical health services. Sometimes our clients need help understanding their leases, or finding day care and after school programs for their kids. They come to us with a problem, and we try to help them solve it before they reach the frustration point. And we have a very small group home for the younger women who get rejected by their families or for some other reason, have no place to live."

Clive was spellbound. "I have to admit I've never thought about this segment of society, nor why their families wouldn't accept them, even after they've been released from prison."

"They face rejection for several reasons. First of all, they're ex-felons. They've been convicted of a crime or crimes, and they've been in jail. Some parents are so ashamed of their daughters, they refuse to take them back once they're out of prison. Other families take their daughter back, until they find out she had a female lover in prison and she wants to maintain contact with that person. They can't accept their daughter being a lesbian. Her sexuality becomes a bigger issue than the fact that she committed a crime."

"Well," Clive sighed, "Some of us have been there with our parents, haven't we?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

There was a faint knock at the door as Pat entered, carrying a small tray laden with a cup of tea, sugar, powdered creamer, and lemon. "Sorry we don't have any cookies to offer you, Mr. Whittingham. What is it you call them? Biscuits?"

"That's quite all right, Pat. The tea will be fine. Thank you."

Avery watched Clive drop a packet's worth of sugar into his cup and stir the liquid.

"How do you fund your agency? The state or the federal government?"

"We used to get federal funds, but they've dwindled away.

Believe it or not, our primary funding source comes from two private grants and a little city money. When I'm not visiting clients, I'm investigating new funding sources or I'm filling out grant applications."

"That's got to keep you extremely busy." Clive's brow furrowed.

"Oh, you can believe it, Clive."

Avery sat back in her chair, and carefully regarded the man sitting across from her. She liked his steady firm handshake and his easy straightforward manner. Recalling their first meeting last spring at the Human Rights Campaign dinner, she wished she could come right out and assure him they shared something very basic in common.

"So tell me, Avery. How can I be of help to you?"

Forearms planted firmly on her desk, Avery smiled slightly and leaned forward. "I'll cut right to the chase, Clive. A month ago, the agency bought a rather large three story house in Mt. Airy. It was a steal, really. Our intention is to open a group home to house half a dozen of our clients who temporarily find themselves without a place to live."

Clive nodded, "Having a place to live is a condition of their release from prison, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. How do you know that?"

"I read various and sundry items, some of which I actually manage to remember." Clive said.

"Oh, let's not talk about what we can remember and what we forget." Once again, Avery thought about the dream she'd had last night. How the sleeping woman had awakened and spoken her name. Shaking that memory away, Avery returned to her explanation. "Anyway here's where you can come in, Clive. This house we bought was priced low because it needs some work."

"Hmm. How much work?"

"Major work, I fear." Avery paused. "What I had in mind is hiring you to go through the house, listen to our renovation plans and give us an honest assessment of how much it will cost us in labor and materials to make the kinds of changes that need to be made."

"Do you have your plans formulated?"

"Sort of." Avery hesitated.

Clive smiled generously. "Well, that's a bit like being sort of pregnant. One either has renovation plans or one does not have them."

Avery returned the gesture. "I've been working with the chairperson of the Board of Directors, and we've compiled a list of what we think we need to do, but we haven't spoken with a contractor or an architect yet, so we don't have any formal plans."

"Where is this house located? Did you say that it's in Mt. Airy?" Clive swallowed the last drop of his tea.

"Yes, it's on Mt. Airy Avenue. Do you know that part of the city?"

"A bit. My partner, Eddie, grew up there, and we visit his parents from time to time."

Avery was pleased that Clive was so openly "out" and willing to mention a male partner. "It would be great if you'd agree to see the place and to listen to my rambling vision of what it could be."

"What's in your diary today?"

"My diary?" Avery was puzzled.

"Sorry. Your schedule."

"Oh. Nothing that can't be changed with a phone call."

"That's my situation, also. Look here, if I can rearrange a noon meeting, I believe I can have a look at your house right now." Clive said. He looked at his watch and removed his cell phone from his belt.

Avery reached across her desk and clasped Clive's free hand. "This is wonderful, Clive. I really appreciate this."

"I'm glad to help. Your agency is providing a wonderful service. Do you mind if I ring my office?"

"Not at all." Avery busied herself with a stack of papers on her desk as Clive punched a few numbers on his cell phone.

"Hello, Nona? Do I have another appointment on my schedule this afternoon after the one with Richard Jackman?" Clive paused. "Good. Please don't set anything up for me before three o'clock. I expect to be back by then."

Avery tried not to listen to Clive's part of his phone conversation.

"Could you ring Sasha for me, please? Thank you," he said. Avery noticed him brushing his mustache with the side of his forefinger while he waited.

"Sasha? Are you well today?--Excellent-- Do you have anything in your diary for noon and shortly after--Right--I need to ask a favor, love. I'm scheduled to meet with Richard Jackman on the site at twelve noon. Do you think that you could cover for me?--Not to worry. He won't tar and feather you. Look, this is a company project, and as head of the company, I've taken full responsibility and I've figured out how to resolve the conflict. I was going to bring the cream of the crop of the change-order materials with me, and try to persuade him to make some selections. I'm especially keen for him to select the flooring and the exposed beams. Those items need to be ordered straightaway."

Clive glanced at Avery. "Yes, this is turning out to be very interesting, and a chance for me to do something to help a brilliant effort. Are you familiar with the Josephine Baker Rainbow Center or with a woman named Avery Sloan-- Well, she's persuasive and very dynamic. And very attractive, also."

Avery winced. She leveled her gaze at Clive and shook her head in disapproval.

"You're bound to meet her if we take on her agency's renovation project--yes, I have a vague memory of that, but this Avery. You're off the hook for now, then. Please ring me after the Jackman meeting. And thanks in advance for going to see him."

Avery waited for Clive to close his cell phone before she spoke. "I'm already grateful that you've agreed to visit the house today, Clive. I had no idea that you'd be so accommodating."

"It's no bother. I think that my company manager is a tad surprised though. I had to ask her to make an appearance for me at a noon meeting."

"Then you did have to change your schedule. I'm sorry if anyone had to be disappointed."

"Not to worry. Sasha, that's my manager, Sasha Lewis. Sasha is absolutely first rate. She's mature, level-headed, decisive, skillful."

"She sounds like a dream employee."

"Like a dream indeed." Clive gulped the last of his tea and carefully put the cup on Avery's desk. "Well, shall we be off to look at this house of yours?"

## Chapter Nine

MY SHOULDERS FELT tight, too tight for so early in the day. That annoying pain that sometimes lurked at the top of my spine reminded me to try to control my stress. A headache was on the sidelines, ready to keep my anxiety company. Mentally, I counted how many hours of sleep I'd gotten last night. Not nearly enough.

"Sasha, I can't believe how well you get along with only a few hours of sleep." Clive made this discovery during one of our long-haul flights to Europe.

It was true. I didn't need more than five hours of sleep to recharge my batteries. And many nights I spent time tossing my way through short naps, not sleeping soundly, even when I was exhausted. That's because I'd had to adjust to Lee's restless sleeping pattern. I was used to waking up every time she'd leave the bed.

I couldn't sleep if I heard doors opening and closing and the sound of water trickling in the bathroom. I could always diagnose what the disturbance meant. If it were the bedroom door, Lee was on her way downstairs to sit in front of the computer. If it were the bathroom door shutting to muffle the sudden gush of water tumbling into a glass, my partner was swallowing a prescribed pill in an effort to keep her demons at bay.

Last night's concert included the bedroom door opening. I fell back to sleep--three different times. Despite my broken rest, I awoke alert and ready to go this morning. The day's agenda rolled across my consciousness like the CNN news headline crawl at the bottom of the TV screen. So I didn't understand why I was having a wardrobe crisis. For the life of me, I couldn't find my gray slacks and gray and burgundy plaid jacket. That jacket had been in the same place in my closet for as long as I'd owned it. And I'd just picked up the pair of slacks from the tailor two days before I flew to Portland. I could have sworn I'd put them in the closet, also.

After three months of monitoring everything I put in my mouth, I'd lost some pounds and inches, enough to make a difference in the way my pants fit. After a while I convinced myself I wasn't a donut away from regaining the pounds, and I decided to have a tailor alter my newest pair of



slacks. That investment represented the victory of my will power over the evil trio: sugar, shortening, and flour. I could have sworn I'd hung those altered slacks in plain view, to remind me I'd been strong enough to pass by the daily treats in the office and the temptation of fast food lunches while I shuttled from one job site to another.

Searching for those trousers, I exhausted the minutes I usually spent drinking two gulps of orange juice, and swallowing a small bowl of oatmeal and a huge mug of black coffee. As I drove my car out of the driveway and onto the street, my stomach called out in all of its emptiness a second before my cell phone rang. I squinted at the unfamiliar number on the phone's tiny screen.

"Good morning. Sasha Lewis here. Oh, how are you Luis? How can I help you?"

I slowed my car, as if doing so would make the caller's message easier to understand.

"That doesn't sound right. Give me a minute to make a call, and then I'll get back to you."

Luis Salazar, the newly hired foreman at the Laurel Ridge project, was calling to say, frantically and in heavily accented Spanish, that a major delivery of drywall was no where to be found. This was a problem, because Laurel Ridge, an enclave of eight custom-built homes, was sold-out and well underway. All of the house plans called for volume ceilings, irregularly sized rooms, and tons of architectural details that you don't find in a formula designed development house. I referred to Clive's custom jobs as "angles and dangles." "Angles" because they all had elaborate moldings throughout with finish carpentry to die for. And "dangles" because if you didn't hire the best la-de-dah carpenters, stone masons and landscape artists, or if you didn't order the top-of-the line materials in enough time, the completion date for any one of those houses would be left dangling, and Clive would start getting threatening mail bearing the letterheads of top-drawer law firms.

I glanced down at my phone and pushed the numbers for our drywall distributor.

"Good morning. It's Sasha Lewis on behalf of Whittingham Builders. Is Max in?" Max was always in his shop, no matter what time of day or night that I called. "Max, how are you?"

"Just fine and dandy, Ma'am. How about you? Are you still fine as can be?"

I knew, as usual, I'd have to deal with the building supplier's bullshit.

"Yeah, I'm still fine. And before you ask, yes, I'm still with my girlfriend." I always had to go through this routine with Max. It was his way of reassuring himself that it was all right to have a conversation with a woman about huge quantities of drywall if the woman was a dyke.

"Well, what can I say?"

"You can say something about that big order of sheetrock heading out to Laurel Ridge in Whitmarsh. Where is it?" I was annoyed with myself for having failed to reconfirm the delivery date last week.

"I'm looking at it on the screen right now, Sasha. My guys drove it to Oak Tree Place in Whitpain. They've started off-loading it."

"No, Max. You sent it to the wrong site. My crew is standing around waiting in Whitmarsh." I heard Max suck in some breath and exhale a "goddamn it."

"They're going to fall behind and that will make some people very unhappy." It was the supplier's error, not mine. That meant it was deal making time. "So how can you make this right, Max?"

"Aw, man. Tell you what I'll do. I'll mark it down five percent and you'll have it on site in under two hours."

I grinned at my rear view mirror. "Thank you for helping me. I appreciate it. Talk to you soon."

By now I was almost at the office, and I wanted to redial Luis to let him know I'd solved the problem. Clive had assured him that as general manager, I was the "go to" person if anything bubbled up, so I wanted to prove to him I knew how to get things done quickly and efficiently.

"Luis? Sasha. Your drywall is on its way. The supplier sent it to another project by mistake, so he's redirecting the truck as we speak. Is all of the pre-rock inspection paperwork done?"

Luis assured me that the "i's" were dotted and the "t's" crossed.

"Great. Talk to you later."

I parked, went into the office building and headed to the visitors' reception room where I knew I could find some hot coffee. Ignoring the bagels and icing covered pastries spread out on the table, I stoically poured a stream of the hot dark liquid into a Styrofoam cup and grabbed an orange from the artfully arranged fruit basket. Good girl. Now that you've gotten the first of many pairs of slacks resized, you've got to keep losing the pounds. If only you could recall where you put those slacks.

"Good morning, Nona. Anything shaking I should know about?" I liked Nona. Officially she was Clive's secretary, but she took messages for me too. Nona had this calm, unruffled way about her, like she'd never met an emergency she couldn't handle with ease.

"Good morning, Sasha. Clive wants you to know he has a meeting at nine-thirty with a social service agency, a Baker Rainbow Something or Other. It's in Center City. Then he'll be at the Jackman project at noon."

I was curious about the Baker Rainbow Something or Other, because its name rang a familiar bell, although I couldn't make a connection between the organization and anyone that I knew. I have to admit that my heart sank to my food deprived stomach when I heard Nona say the name Jackman. It would be a long time before I could get over my huge error in regard to that particular project.

"And one more thing. Luis Salazar called from Laurel Ridge. He can't find the drywall order that was supposed to be there this morning. He sounded desperate, so I told him to call you on your cell."

"He called me a few minutes ago. As Clive would say, it was a 'minor cock-up.' I took care of it. Thanks for suggesting that he call my cell, Nona."

"No problem. Since we're quoting Clive, I knew that you'd 'sort it out.'" We allowed ourselves broad grins at Clive's linguistic expense.

I gestured toward my office door. "I'd better get busy. I have a lot to catch up on."

The door to my sun-drenched office yawned open and I went right to my work table. The four-by-eight feet slab overflowed with charts, ad copies, some assorted material samples, project proposals, and contract templates. Two white boards, their entireties covered by the work flow charts for the Laurel Ridge and the Oak Tree Place houses stood on one side of the room, waiting to be updated. The pieces of mail I didn't take the time to open yesterday afternoon waited for my attention. And the list of email that had piled up during the past two days crossed my line of vision, tugging at me and begging to be read.

The first thing I wanted to do though, after checking in again with Luis and with the site foreman at Oak Tree, was an Internet search for upcoming auctions of antique lumber, beams and flooring. If I could find one scheduled in the next week to ten days, I could still get those materials for the Jackman project, and maybe Clive could cancel his noon meeting today.

Two hours and ten interruptions later I still hadn't come up with anything that resembled the kind of auction goods I sought. My disruptions hadn't included Luis Salazar, so that must have meant Max made good on his correction and sent the supply of sheetrock to Laurel Ridge. The second I decided against being a mother hen and calling Luis to confirm my guess, my phone rang.

"Excuse me, Sasha. But Clive's on the line for you."

"Thanks, Nona" I waited for the click signaling Clive's presence on the other end of the phone line. Although I never knew what construction business issue Clive might need to talk about, I had become quite adept at handling the bad news as well as the good. There weren't too many emergencies I couldn't manage.

Having to meet with Richard Jackman however, transformed that minor pain in my neck into a giant throbbing tentacle enrobing the entire back of my head. Clive reassured me he had shouldered the blame for my shortcomings and all I had to do was present the substitute

materials to our client. The new materials were, in some respects, superior to the merchandise that I hadn't bid on in Maine. So, I'd be able to do this pretty gracefully. Still, I dreaded the assignment.

My boss's other newsflash was the reason he wanted me to be his stand-in at the twelve-noon meeting with Mr. Jackman. After a brief conference with a prospective client, Clive had agreed to inspect an empty house in Mt. Airy and to evaluate how best it could be renovated. Frankly, Clive sounded more like he had spent the last hour evaluating the woman who ran the social service agency that owned the house. He kept mentioning her name, Avery Sloan. She must have been very persuasive, because Clive doesn't make snap decisions about projects, major or minor. He kept promoting this Avery person's abilities so much, that my curiosity was stirred. Clive didn't usually boast about women, so Ms. Sloan must have done one hell of a dynamic presentation.

Toward the end of our conversation, my boss said something about Avery Sloan's appearance that sparked a synapse in my brain. I remembered the burgundy business card I'd taken out of my jacket pocket last night. The name of its owner and the name of the agency matched Clive's nine-thirty meeting information. There's got to be validity in the six-degrees-of-separation theory. How else could anyone explain the woman who bolted from the plane yesterday having a meeting with my boss today? And who would have guessed I'd feel a jolt of pleasant expectation just thinking about the possibility of running into her again, if only for business?

The second Clive said "ring me after your meeting," I hung up the phone, kicked off my office shoes, and laced up my muddy construction site clod-hoppers. I'd learned the value of wearing the thick-soled leather foot gear years ago, after trying to look suave while standing in foot-deep mud. I ruined two of my favorite pairs of saddle-brown slip-ons before I gave in and listened to Clive's advice. I didn't mind my work boots not matching the rest of my outfit. The only thing I needed to be sharp during this meeting with

Richard Jackman was my mind. Spending face time with this particular client was the last thing I wanted to do today, but I knew I didn't have a choice.

I began gathering the change-order paperwork, shook my head, and muttered aloud, "A meeting with Mr. Jackman. This is par for the course."

I checked my schedule. There weren't any meetings on tap for this afternoon, so I was completely free to meet with Mr. Jackman and show him samples of the door and cabinet hardware as well as the floorboard and the exposed beams we could use in his house. I went to the storage room where we kept our premium materials and set aside the samples I wanted to bring with me. Then I called our jack-of-all-trades gofer, gave him my car keys and asked if he wouldn't mind putting everything in the rear storage area of my vehicle. Some of those sample boards weighed a ton, and my days of hauling heavy stuff were over.

"Here you go, Ms. Lewis." My helper, usually a very talkative guy, couldn't let go of my keys quickly enough. He had a strange expression on his face. "You're all set for your appointment."

He better not have jammed the trunk closed, or scratched the bumper, I thought.

I knew I'd need a good half hour to drive to the Jackman site; so I closed down my fruitless search of auction sites and prepared to leave for the appointment. If I jetted from the office right now, I'd have time to stop somewhere for a salad and a cup of tea.

At least, that's what I planned to do before I found myself caught in a traffic jam created by a mid-day road resurfacing crew. The salad and tea idea quickly became figments of my imagination. I arrived at the building site at ten minutes past twelve, later than the client, whose steel gray Mercedes sat like a contented cat sunning itself in the only area on the property that had been cleared, leveled, and covered with crushed stone. I maneuvered my Honda over the hardened mud ruts, and parked it at an angle with the front wheels resting atop a man made hillock.

Clive's policy is always the comfort and convenience of the client, so my awkward parking spot didn't bother me. Lacking time to look for someone to help me carry the sample boards from my car to the house did bother me. Being late for the appointment concerned me more than having to carry all of that stuff myself. What bothered me the most though, was opening the rear storage door, removing the sample boards, and then seeing long thin strips of gray fabric laying there. Stunned, I picked up a handful of the light weight wool and let it fall back onto the floor of the trunk. It took a few seconds for me to understand exactly what it was that had filtered through my fingers. It may have been the tailor's receipt that gave me a clue. My newly altered pair of slacks had been reduced to slivers of woolen material. A little square of paper bearing a note scribbled in Lee's handwriting, said something about my deliberately losing weight just so that I'd be able to seduce other women.

Surreptitiously, I scanned my surroundings. Had anyone been watching me for the past minute? The routine building noises continued. A two-man roofing team's pneumatic nail guns kept up their steady conversation. And the periodic scream of a power saw inside the developing structure didn't hesitate nor choke to silence. My secret was safely hidden. My shame of having a lover who would cut an article of my clothing was just that, my shame. It was unknown to others except the gofer at the office who had loaded this stuff into my car. He had seen the mess. Maybe he'd read Lee's note.

I shook off my embarrassed hurt and picked up two of the lighter weight sample boards. Walking into the building through a framed opening destined become a handsome double door flanked by leaded glass sidelights, I took a deep breath and swallowed the newly-sawed-lumber flavored air. A man in a well-tailored dark suit, his back to me, stood a few yards away.

"Mr. Jackman?" We'd met only once before, and that time we'd stood face to face.

The client turned around, clearly surprised to see me. He nudged the silver-toned nose piece on his eyeglasses. "Where is Clive? Is he outside?"

"No. He's been detained at a meeting in the city. He asked me to stand in for him." I put down the boards and extended my hand to the lawyer. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Jackman."

"Yes, same here. Do you have the information about the change-orders?" His pro-forma handshake was finished in a second. He dropped my hand quickly, and scowled humorlessly.

"Yes I do. Every single one of them. And hopefully, I've brought plenty of materials for you to look at. If you want to take anything home with you to show your wife that will be fine."

"That won't be necessary." Jackman began tugging at the hardware samples. It was as though he thought the handles would open some secret door on the display board. "Is this all you're offering?"

"No, not by a long shot. The rest are in my car. Give me a couple of minutes because it's going to take a few trips back and forth."

Jackman stared at me, trying to decide whether or not to proceed. He nodded curtly. "Fine. I have time."

Every inch of me is a feminist. But the fact that this guy was going to let me traipse to and from my car, carrying boards loaded with all different types of door and cabinet hardware and short lengths of timber beam models and flooring samples, and not offer to help, gave me a quick tour of his character. The fact that he wasn't planning to include his wife in any of the decisions gave me a sneak peek into his marriage.

It must have taken a good eight to ten minutes for me to lug everything into the house. And it would have taken longer if it hadn't been for the plumbing subcontractor. After he gave me an assist with the last of the samples, he shot me a look letting me know he'd met Richard Jackman on this site before. I could see from the message in his eyes that their previous meetings had not been cordial.

"Okay, Ms. Lewis. I've made my selections." Before I could return the plumber's knowing gaze, Jackman had segregated two of the flooring samples, one of the beams and one of the sets of cabinet pulls and hinges. "Write this up and fax me a copy for my records."

"That was pretty fast, Mr. Jackman. Are you sure that this is what you want to select?"

"Do I look like I'm not sure?" He snapped at me.

"Not at all. I wondered though, if you had any questions." I took a deep breath, channeling Clive's patience.

"None that you could answer, Ms. Lewis." He frowned. "I thought my appointment was with Clive Whittingham, not with some female assistant."

So that's his problem, I thought. "I'm sure Clive regrets not being able to be here, Mr. Jackman. But I assure you my being his female assistant doesn't have anything to do with my skill set. Now, is there anything you had hoped to accomplish with Clive, that you think you can't

accomplish with me?" I looked the imperious home buyer dead in the eye. He was not going to intimidate me.

Jackman swept his pecan colored hand over the sample boards. "I want an assurance that you've presented all of the possible material substitutions to me."

Stretching the truth a little, I responded. "These are all the samples that Clive picked out." I was going to have to remember to mention this detail to my boss when I phoned him.

"Are they all top of the line products?"

"Each and every one of them." That was no lie.

"All right. I'll expect to receive the faxed copies of this paperwork ASAP. And I'll be in touch with Mr. Whittingham. Enjoy the rest of your day, Ms. Lewis."

He walked away, but I was the one who felt dismissed. I listened to the businesslike hum of his car engine as he drove off.

I knew instantly I didn't like Richard Jackman. I might love the house we were building for him, but I wasn't going to enjoy the process, and I hoped to hell Clive would be the point person the next time a problem surfaced. I knew in my skin that Jackman was a man who detested women, and only felt comfortable when a woman was squirming under his heel or elsewhere. I was positive he loved fucking women, but he didn't like them.

The fibers of Jackman's Savile Row suit were a fancy filter for his feelings, but he couldn't hide them from me. I could smell the ire lurking under his facade. After all, I needed to be on a first name basis with anger in order to survive Lee's temper tantrums. I prayed the rest of the Jackman project went as planned, so that Whittingham Builders wouldn't have to experience any of the thunderbolts of hostility the attorney might be harboring.

## Chapter Ten

LEE CHECKED HER email before leaving home to meet with Angela Jackman. After sending her messages to the land of the deleted, she clicked her way to Sasha's office email account. All she needed to know was Sasha's password, and the world of Whittingham Builders opened up to her ravenous insecure eyes.

Julie Kelner wrote her apologies for not being able to meet Sasha mid-morning at a coffee shop near Sasha's office. She hoped that everything was okay on the home front, and maybe they

could get together one day next week. Lee clicked to the next message, dismissing Julie with a, "Get the fuck together with someone else!"

Somebody from a reclamation business wanted Sasha to know about a building materials auction scheduled for tonight. Well Sasha's ass will be at home this evening, not at her office participating in some bidding war. Screw the auction.

Lee got out of the Whittingham network and returned to her own mail page. She sent Sasha a terse missive to be on time for dinner. Lee threw on her jacket, picked up her business bag, stepped over Randi as the cat lay snoozing on top of the metal grate near the front door, and left the house. She had a business appointment.

Angela and Richard Jackman lived in another part of the same suburban Philadelphia county where Lee Simpson and Sasha Lewis resided. The route between the two addresses took Lee past pastoral, undulating stretches of land and through winding curves complicated by their ups and downs. Lee's satellite navigation system guided her over streets that were so narrow they should have been designated one-lane roads instead of two.

Lee slowed down. After twenty minutes of the "first one turn and then another" course, the faux female voice coming from the GPS box warned her she'd gone too far. Not realizing that the French Provincial manse situated back from road was the Jackman home, she overshot her destination. Lee put her car into reverse and backed up until she was a little beyond the entrance. She braked, and then proceeded forward, aiming her car between the Belgian blocks bordering the driveway.

A fancy SUV occupied a spot near the front door. That, she surmised, must be Madame's automobile. The detached three car garage, its architectural style mimicking that of the house, stood to the back and left of the property. Lee gazed at the muted beige stucco exterior, the potted topiary shrubs at either side of the front door and the wrought iron fence surrounding the front of the lot.

The Jackman's have money, she thought, new money. First generation Benjamin's earned by a law degree and acceptance in an old Philadelphia law firm. La-the-fuck-de-da.

Lee fastened one of the brass buttons on her double breasted blazer, and then rang the doorbell. She could hear the metallic sound of a lock being turned followed by the sucking whoosh of air as the door was flung open.

"Ms. Simpson! Hello again. Please come in." Angela Jackman extended her soft mocha-colored hand to Lee, who took it into hers, completely swallowing it in her decisive grip.

"Hello. It's a pleasure to see you." Although she kept her voice almost monotone and her gaze disinterested, Lee meant what she said. She was prepared to enjoy seeing and evaluating every inch of this woman, from head to toe. "That's a nice outfit."



Angela smiled beguilingly. "Thank you for the compliment." She appraised her own appearance. "It wasn't easy finding the right shade of sweater for these slacks."

"Looks to me like you made the right choice." Lee was pleased her comment made the woman blush. She hadn't lost her touch.

"Thanks, again." Angela gestured toward the large room to her right. "Do you want to work in the living room, or would you rather talk in the breakfast room? The sun's nice and bright in there."

Quickly scanning the immaculately furnished living room and knowing instinctively how soft and plush the carpeting would feel under her feet, Lee deferred to the woman who had hired her for this job. "It really doesn't matter. Wherever you choose."

"I think the breakfast room is better. It's cozy, and intimate."

Lee knew she hadn't imagined the sound of Angela's voice dropping half an octave. She followed her through the formal dining room and toward the back of the house. With each step, she noticed the sensuous movement of Angela's suede-covered rear end. She figured it was probably one of those perfectly shaped asses, whether by nature, surgery or an expensive and carefully prescribed fitness program.

The breakfast room, jutting out from the house like a small appendage, was just as Angela had described it: cheery with sunlight, small, and private despite the large windows set in three of its walls. Beyond it was the rear yard with its landscaped beds of evergreen shrubs and red twig dogwoods whose perfectly straight scarlet red branches reached for the sky.

The women headed toward the table in the center of the room. Angela pointed to a chair. "Why don't you put your bag down and have a seat? Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"No, no thanks." Lee pulled out the designated seat that stood at one end of the rectangular table. She looked around the room. "It is very bright in here. You get the late morning sun, huh?"

"Yes." Angela nodded. "I love reading the paper in here and dawdling over a second cup of coffee."

"I imagine that would be a nice way to ease into your day." Lee noticed Angela's flawless make-up and her dazzling smile showing off amazingly white teeth. She speculated that Angela had spent as much time keeping cosmetic dentistry appointments as she had getting her behind sculpted.

"Oh it's a great way to start the morning, Ms. Simpson." Her formality sounded hollow and unnecessary.

"Why don't you call me Lee?" she said and displayed a broad smile of her own.

"And I'm Angela."

"Great. Nice to meet you. Why don't we start all over again?" Lee offered her hand, playfully. She captured the warmth of Angela's skin and she teased one more blush from the woman.

Steering her chair closer to Lee's, Angela reached for Lee's outstretched hand. They held onto each other a few seconds longer than they needed to.

Lee bent down to retrieve some papers from her bag. "I brought my notes from the last meeting so I could refresh my memory about your Social Committee and what you ladies have in mind. Shall we work on the plans for the cocktail party first?"

"That sounds good." Angela agreed.

"Are the numbers still the same?" Lee skimmed her handwritten notes. "About two hundred twenty-five or so?"

"Yes." Angela stared directly into Lee's eyes.

Lee checked her notes once again. "And you want butlered hors d'oeuvres, an open bar with top shelf liquors, a choice of three or four premium wines and champagne?"

"Yes, again." Angela said, smiling coyly.

Lee noted the smile and had no difficulty summoning one of her own. "How about two hors d'oeuvres stations, one for cold canapés and a second one for hot ones?"

"That will be fine." Angela leaned back in her chair. Before Lee could ask her another question, she parted her lips and frowned just the slightest bit. "Lee, are you sure that you don't want anything to drink? How about a Bloody Mary?"

Lee hesitated for only a second. Under most circumstances she didn't drink with her clients. But when she considered how tempting Angela Jackman looked wearing those thigh conforming slacks and that breast hugging sweater, she knew that it would be easy to make an exception to her policy.

"You know what? A Bloody Mary would be perfect right now."

Angela winked at Lee and arose from the table. She walked slowly and deliberately to the kitchen, turning back in time to notice Lee's gaze trained on her hips. "Do you like it spicy or mild?"

"Very spicy." Lee made no effort at all to focus on Angela's face. She kept her eyes glued to the very place her thoughts had traveled. After giving Angela time to mix the drink ingredients, Lee continued discussing the details of the law firm's pre-conference cocktail get-together.

"Did you want a three piece combo?"

"What?" Angela walked toward Lee.

"Did you want live music at the cocktail party?"

"Why not?" There was that attention-getting grin again. "Anything to drown out the sound of a hundred-plus lawyers'voices droning on and on."

Lee's lips registered her amusement at Angela's response. "You'll still hear the suits talking. The music won't be that loud."

"That's too bad. But come to think of it, they get so carried away with themselves, we could have Prince up there playing, and some of them would never notice."

Lee laughed. "They'd have to be pretty damn occupied to miss his performance."

"Trust me, they're always pre-occupied. Every last one of them, including my husband." Angela stood at the table, balancing the two drinks on a small tray.

"I'm sure your husband isn't too pre-occupied to notice you." Lee reached up and took one of the glasses, touching Angela's hand in the process, and almost causing her to spill some of the drink. "Careful. You don't want to lose any of this."

"Oh, I'm very careful with everything, baby." Angela put the empty tray on the table and then lifted her glass in Lee's direction. "How about a toast?" She waited until Lee's glass clinked the rim of hers. "Here's to the first of many successful Stanton, Cawley and Brown social events planned by Lee Simpson."

Lee took a large gulp of her drink and then drew her lips into a wry smile. "You put together a good drink."

"Thanks. And I've heard that you put together a good party."

That's why I said what I did about this one being the first of many."

"That's kind of you, Angela." She lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "But I should warn you about something. I may not be as careful with everything as you say you are."

"Is that your only warning?" Angela met the challenge head on.

"No, it's not." Lee put down her drink and narrowed her eyes. "Here's the second warning. Don't call me 'baby'unless you're willing to back it up."

Angela was not deterred. "How do you know I won't do just that?"

"You're a married straight woman jingling a few of your husband's coins in your pocket. You're not about to start anything with me because you don't want to jeopardize the source of your income--baby." Lee baited the hook. She'd met women like Angela Jackman before and she knew very well the territory she had entered.

"You think you're pretty fierce, don't you?" Angela reached over the short distance of table that lay between them, and began caressing Lee's arm. "I am, also. And I usually get whatever I go after."

Lee grabbed the hand that was gliding over her skin, stilling it. "Do you intend to get what you want here and now, or after we've discussed Stanton, Cawley and Brown's brunch plans?"

Heat traveled from Lee's hand to Angela's. "I can delay my gratification if you can hold on to yours."

"What do you think?" Lee's eyes bored into Angela's, demanding an answer from her.

"I think you're a woman who likes to be in charge."

"You're right. And it's smart of you to recognize that." Lee lifted her palm from the back of Angela's hand. She picked up her glass and tilted it toward her mouth, never breaking her visual connection with her hostess.

"So you're in the driver's seat and you'll let me know when you want me, is that what you're saying?" Angela was amused.

Lee placed the glass back on the table. She pointed to it. "Why don't you put these someplace else, Angela?"

The suede-hipped woman gathered both of the vessels and walked into the kitchen, where she deposited them on the counter. Then, she sauntered back and moved as close to Lee's seated form as she could. She looked down at her, cupping Lee's chin with one of her carefully manicured hands.

"You're not the only one giving out warnings, baby."

Lee, pretending to be only mildly interested in the turn of their conversation, looked up at Angela.

"Don't tell me when I can do something, especially in my own house." Angela punctuated her admonition by bending down and kissing Lee fully on her mouth.

Lee broke off the kiss and stood up, facing Angela. She hooked her arm around Angela's waist, pulling her close. "This may be your house, but you're not going to run what happens here with me."

Lee kissed Angela's lips with a lack of gentleness that telegraphed both her instant desire for the woman who had hired her, as well as her will to direct the desire-fueled acts that would explode between them. "Where is your bedroom?"

Angela didn't hesitate. "Up one flight of stairs too far from here."

Lee pulled on the zipper of Angela's slacks and guided it down far enough to allow her entry to what lay beneath the fabric. She slipped her hands under the silky softness of Angela's bikini panties and then kneaded her faultless round hips. Lee's urges caught in her throat. She kissed Angela again, more insistently this time. Then she unzipped Angela's slacks and guided them down as far as her ankles. She helped Angela keep her balance as she stepped out of them, one delicate footstep at a time. Lee rhythmically coaxed Angela's groin toward hers.

Angela gasped. "You feel good, baby."

"And you've done this before, haven't you?" Lee figured Angela's reactions came much too quickly, as if she already knew how she would feel with another woman's hands massaging her hips. She didn't give Angela a chance to deny having had a previous experience with Sapphic lovemaking. She brought one of her hands to Angela's pubic area, and pushed two of her fingers into the awaiting crevice. "And you're wet for me, aren't you?"

"Yes, damn it. I've been wet for you ever since your interview." Angela lowered her center of gravity, seeking impalement upon Lee's hand.

"Well then, I'll have to make your wait worth the while." Lee withdrew her fingers from Angela. She put her mouth near Angela's ear. "But before I do, you have to understand this is a hit and run."

Angela, her eyes half closed, tried to pull Lee's hand to the source of her pleasure. "What are you talking about?"

"In a few moments, I'm going to make you feel incredibly good, but it's a one shot deal. You're clear with that, right?" Lee sucked on Angela's earlobe.

Angela shuddered and then moaned. "Baby, just fuck me. I'm not looking for a divorce and we sure as hell can't get married."

Lee responded with a guttural chuckle. "Sit on the table, Angela."

While Angela stood on her toes and hiked herself up high enough to sit on the table's edge, Lee helped her slide her panties off and onto the floor. Without the benefit of any further directions, Angela understood what she needed to do next. She scooted back toward the middle of the table. Resting her upper body weight on her elbows and forearms, she opened her legs, wrapping them around Lee's waist and hips. Lee leaned in toward Angela and introduced three, then four of her fingers into Angela's vagina and flicked her thumb over the woman's swollen clitoris.

"Oh God! Lee! Oh damn, this feels so good, baby. Oh fuck! Baby, baby!" Angela was getting lost in her own heat. "Oh, baby, I'm...I'm..."

"Come on, you can come for me." Lee looked down through shrouded eyes at her conquest.

"Lee. I can't stop myself." Angela climaxed, sending echoes rolling through the first floor rooms of her huge house. Still shuddering, she reached out to embrace Lee.

Lee avoided her sex partner's arms and bent down to pick up Angela's panties from the floor. "Here. You might need these."

"Not if they're as wet as I am." Angela answered, her voice thickened with spent passion.

Lee smirked. "Well, you have to have something on. You don't want to mess up your suede slacks."

Grudgingly, Angela slid off the table and took the underwear from Lee. She retrieved her slacks. "I'll be back in a few. I need to do some repair work."

Lee cleared her throat, remembering she felt thirsty. She looked around for her unfinished Bloody Mary and found it exactly where Angela had left it on the kitchen counter. She took a long uninterrupted sip before she moved to the sink and turned on the tap. She plunged her hands into the stream of hot water, and held them there until they felt cleansed of Angela's scent. Lee wasn't afraid that Sasha would smell her unfaithfulness. In fact, part of her wished to hell that Sasha would know about this little episode. Maybe then, she'd pay more attention to her.

Angela reentered the kitchen and glided over to the sink area. She pressed herself against Lee's back, cooing, "You can have a turn too, if you want."

Lee turned around and looked at Angela blankly. "So what did you and the committee have in mind for the brunch? A sit down meal, a buffet, a series of buffet tables?"

Angela stepped back, as if she couldn't believe the business woman standing in front of her was the same person who had taken her on a sexual high less than fifteen minutes ago. "Uh, why don't you plan it? Whatever you think is best."

"All right. I'll get back to you day after tomorrow with a completed plan." Lee walked briskly toward the breakfast room table where she located her notepad and pen and put them into her work bag. At the last second, she turned to Angela. "Does the committee have any menu preferences? Any particular type of cuisine?"

Angela shook her head. "None that I'm aware of." She watched the woman who had just brought her to an orgasm. "Lee?"

"What?"

"You were serious, weren't you, when you said we'd do this only once?"

Lee nodded. "Completely serious. One and done."

"Okay, baby. I understand how it works." She attempted a seductive smile. "It sure was good while it lasted."

Lee just stared at Angela. "If that's all, I'll be going. Talk to you day after tomorrow." She started for the front of the house. "Oh, Angela. I received my down payment from the firm. Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it, baby."

## Chapter Eleven

AS UNPLEASANT AS Richard Jackman had been, I pushed the memory of our meeting to the back burner. In the years I'd been working for Whittingham Builders, I'd learned to focus on the positive clients and to diminish the importance of the difficult ones. Richard Jackman was already background noise. What was really jumping all over my mind was my shredded slacks and Lee, the shredder. I knew I'd much rather deal with a hundred Richard Jackmans than confront my partner about a pair of my pants she had tattered.

I lingered in front of my office window, watching the autumn sun play with the orange and gold maple leaves. The colors were more brilliant now than they'd been a few months ago, wearing their mid-summer green. I looked off into the distance to the other side of the river where the multi-hued trees popped up like a quilt with filled puffs of fabric. I imagined myself setting up a tripod and a camera and capturing the images I saw. What really needed my attention though, was my relationship. How could I be in my mid-forties, have a good job, a nice home, a modicum of common sense, and find myself willing to live in fear of my partner's anger? What was I waiting for? The day or night Lee would graduate from taking scissors to my clothing and move on to cutting me?

I left the view from the wide window and returned to my desk.

"Sasha," Nona was standing in the doorway. "Clive just called. He's on his way back from Mt. Airy, and he wants to meet with you as soon as he arrives."

"Thanks, Nona. Did he say anything else?" I clicked my computer out of stand-by.

"Nope, just that he wants to see you, so you shouldn't go out to any of the sites." She gave a resigned smile.

"Okay. I'll be here. I need to fill him in about my meeting with Mr. Jackman."

"Did that go well?"

I rolled my eyes, "As well as can be expected."

"Say no more. At least I know it isn't me, then." I recalled that Nona had met Richard Jackman twice before, and she hadn't cared for the way he spoke to her.

"No, it's not you. It's probably every female on the planet." I smiled as Nona retreated to her desk in the reception area.

I gazed at the list of unopened e-mails staring at me. Seeing nothing that looked like an emergency, I began to click through them one by one. Julie's familiar "JuKe" address beckoned me. No, she couldn't re-schedule our coffee date for the next day because she had to go out of town. But she'd phone me the minute she returned. She'd been thinking a lot about me and Lee.

When I reached the next e-mail I forgot all about my good friend and nature's color palette outside my window. A Google alert rang across the screen, announcing an online auction of building materials. My fingers dashed over the keyboard in search of the website that had the details. Hallelujah! A reclamation firm was offering a total of eight hundred thousand board feet of antique heart pine. They would accept bids on smaller lots and they were willing to arrange the shipping and delivery. This lumber promised to be similar, if not better than the flooring I missed buying in Maine. All I had to do was be at my computer at seven-thirty tonight when the bidding was scheduled to start. I could do that here in the office or at home. No problem. In a few hours, I'd be able to recover my own fumble. Perhaps it wasn't too late to interest Richard Jackman in this flooring.

Recognizing Lee's address attached to the next message, I traded in my temporary excitement for the tenuous unknown. I didn't know what to expect. The message turned out to be one of her shorter, terser ones. Unwilling to be taken down from my high about the auction, I read her words quickly. She'd written something about my being at home on time for dinner tonight.

She didn't need to worry. I'd be there. In fact, I'd be early so that we could get through dinner and I could be in the den in time to bid on the flooring.

A sharp tap, tap, tap pinged against my door as Clive came bursting in.

"Hello there! How are we this afternoon?"

I couldn't help but grin at my boss. "We're fine. And you appear to be well, also."



Clive grabbed the chair across from my desk and scooted it closer. When he does that it means he's really excited about a project, or he wants to listen to me unburden myself about a problem, professional or personal.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Well, first fill me in about your day. How did the Jackman meeting go?"

"Fine, if I'd been willing to be a slave re-enactor."

"That doesn't sound promising. Was he displeased by anything?"

"Only that you sent the stupid field nig..." I saw Clive's smile begin to morph into a grimace before I could pronounce the N word. "Sorry Clive. I know how you hate that word even when a sister says it."

"Most particularly when a black person utters it."

"I'll start over again. Mr. Jackman was not happy that I met with him instead of you. He made that clear. He did, however, make his selections." I took the paperwork out of my briefcase and gave the forms to Clive. "Here they are."

Nodding, he looked through the sheets. "Everything is in order. He made some good choices."

"He ordered me to fax him copies of everything, but of course, they needed your signature first."

"Sasha, you could have signed them. You always sign these change-orders."

Now it was my turn to nod. "I know. I know also that he wouldn't have been satisfied with my signing them. He's a nasty son-of-a-bitch. I want to have as little to do with his project as possible."

Clive fingered his mustache. "We've had nasty characters before, and you've always dealt with them. This bloke really got to you, didn't he? "

"Sorta'kinda'. So if it's all right with you, he's all yours." I waited until Clive agreed. "There's one more item, though. And this could be a good thing. I got an e-mail alert about a lumber auction. It's the heart pine that you wanted for the Jackman project. It's an online auction and it's tonight, so I can place our bids from the comfort of my den at home. Would it be wise to phone Jackman and tell him you'll sign and fax the paperwork contingent upon one more try to get the flooring that he wants?"

"That's brilliant, Sasha! Absolutely first rate." Clive looked off into space for a second before refocusing on me. "But why don't you bid from here?"

For the second time that day, I rolled my eyes. "Because I'm involved in another auction. Lee has bid on my being at home on time tonight, and I don't want to disappoint her."

Clive smiled half-heartedly. "I understand, love. But could you call me to let me know how the auction goes?"

I may need to call you to let you know how it goes with Lee once I confront her about my slacks, I thought. "Sure. Count on it."

"Now, let me tell you about my morning and early afternoon activities." Clive smiled broadly as he launched into his saga about a city based agency that assisted female parolees, the agency's lesbian chief executive and their plans for rehabbing an old house and converting it into a group home that would house five clients and one resident mentor.

"So this Ms. Sloan roped you into going to the house in Mt. Airy to see what needs to be done to bring it up to code for a group home residence?" Clive was up to his ears in his profit making projects. I couldn't believe that he was taking on something else, and possibly at no charge.

"Yes, Avery is a clever woman. And so far, I've spent only some time."

"So far? Are you going to be involved any further than giving your professional advice?" This could be interesting.

"Well, who knows? I could donate some materials and perhaps some man hours. I need a charitable deductions tax write-off, you know, and there's not too much time left for that."

I shot Clive a look of fake disapproval. "And here I figured you'd been bitten by the social responsibility bug."

"Well, I have to some extent. It's a worthy cause. And it's being run by a gay person."

"You know that for sure?" I didn't mean to give my boss a hard time, but I was a little skeptical.

"I certainly didn't ask her, but I'm relatively certain of it. I've spent enough time around you and your "sisters-in-the-life", as you call it, to know a lesbian when I spend a few hours with her." He laughed at his own stab at being a smart-ass.

I didn't know why I asked Clive how sure he was that Avery was gay. I'd seen her myself and I knew for sure she was a lesbian. Unless there were two Avery Sloans running the Josephine Baker Center in Philly, she was the woman with the dimpled grin who accidentally dropped her business card in the aisle of an airplane, along with her copies of two LGBT magazines. I already knew the sister who sat next to me during the flight from Portland, Maine was one hundred percent gay.

"So what's the next step? Should I set up a work-flow chart for this job?"

"Let's not rush it, love." He pointed to his worn leather work bag. "I took a lot of notes. You know, room dimensions, the ages and makes of the house's major systems, fixture details, Avery's wish list. I need a little time to figure out what would be best for the house. Then I'll need to run it by Avery and eventually do a presentation for her board of directors. With everything else that's on my plate, I'll need a few hours to organize a project plan."

"Sounds like you'll need a few days."

"Yes, right. Days and/or evenings. Sasha, you could be a huge help with this. I might ask you to meet with Avery sometime next week. I need a second pair of eyes to go through that house with her and draw up a firmer list of her needs."

I let the intriguing picture of my meeting with Avery Sloan to talk about her needs remain right where it was, in my head. I didn't want to encourage Clive's tendency to play matchmaker, especially since I wasn't available to be matched with anyone. That thought sent me right back to Lee, my slacks, and the auction. I needed to leave the office in order to get home promptly.

"Sure, Clive. I'd be happy to be a second pair of eyes. Just let me know when you'd like me to set up a meeting with Ms. Sloan."

"How about the beginning of next week? Can you get a date with Avery on Monday or Tuesday?" Clive had a definite glint in his eye.

"I'll phone her tomorrow to make an appointment." I tried to make my intonation as clipped as Clive's always was.

"Brilliant." Clive turned my desk clock around so he could check the time. "I'll let you get along now. Don't forget to ring me after the auction."

"You bet."

I put my computer in stand-by, left everything as it was on my desk, and slipped my arms through the sleeves of my jacket. I grabbed my car keys, and then for some unknown reason, I sat back down and decided to change the password on my desktop. Clive was always suggesting that we change it periodically, and I'd neglected to do that for more than a year. I'm no tech genius, but I remembered our IT person confirming that if we changed the password on one of our networked computers, it would change automatically on any other one connected to the office system. That chore done, I turned out the light and headed out.

I was close to home before I knew it. Buried under the weight of the torn fabric lying in the back of my car, I had no memory of passing some of the streets I knew were there. I had simply missed seeing them. My trepidation about spending the evening with a woman whose mood was totally unpredictable clouded my vision and played tricks with my recall.

The news reader's voice on the car radio announced five-thirty as I slowed down in front of our house. I peered through the dining room's windows and saw that the chandelier's lights were

turned on. I steered the car down the sloping driveway and into the garage's dark open space. I could hear the hum coming from the kitchen's exhaust fan as I closed the car's door and walked to the entrance of the laundry room. I wrapped my hand around the cold brass door knob, took a deep breath, and steeled myself to endure the night.

The aroma of frying fish smacked me in the face. It was that smell that passes through you with just the slightest reminder that fish could be fresh and odorless, or spoiled with its flaccid flesh camouflaged under a coat of eggy breadcrumbs; that it could nourish you, or it could make you deathly ill. The suggestion of the latter possibility paid me a visit, bringing with it a specter of nausea that lasted a second or two. The sick feeling vanished as quickly as it arrived, not persistent enough to keep me from eating the meal.

"Hey." Lee stood in front of the stove, a spatula in her hand. "You're here on time. That's a surprise."

"Sure I am. I promised you I'd be prompt, didn't I?" When had we stopped our habit of exchanging a hug and kiss the first moment we saw each other at the end of a long day? I couldn't recall exactly when we'd begun replacing affection with criticism.

"Your saying something and actually doing it are two different things."

I decided to ignore her comment. I was here on time. And this was not the hill I intended to die on. "I'm going to put my stuff down in the den. Do I have time to change my clothes?"

"No. You don't even have time to go to the den if you want to eat a hot dinner."

I stood there like a stranger in my own kitchen, looking around for a place to rest my briefcase.

"Just put your bag on the chair, Sasha. Then wash your hands and go sit at the table. I've already poured you a glass of white wine."

I wasn't hungry for food, and my needs couldn't be fulfilled by a fish dinner and a glass of white wine. Silently though, I complied with Lee's directive. I washed my hands and tried to send my doubts about being here right down the drain along with the soapy grime. I reached for a paper towel and noticed a very expensive bottle of French wine standing on the kitchen counter adjacent to the sink. "We're drinking the good stuff, huh?"

"Yes we are, and it's my treat." Lee put the last fish filet on the platter and surrounded all of it with parsley and lemon slices. She handed the serving dish to me while she picked up two bowls of vegetables.

"What's the occasion?" I followed her into the dining room.

"I've gotten a very lucrative contract to plan two events for a law firm and I felt like celebrating."

"Good for you, Lee. Which firm?"

"Stanton, Cawley and Brown. Once a year, in mid-February, they have a conference for most of the attorneys in their three offices, and they give a cocktail party and a brunch for all of the lawyers and their significant others."

Stanton, Cawley and Brown was our client, Richard Jackman's, firm. That my job would intersect in any way with Lee's company was a rare coincidence.

"You're not going to believe this, but I had a meeting with one of their partners this afternoon. Six degrees, huh?"

"Something like that."

I guess Lee wasn't interested in the name of the Stanton, Cawley partner who was having a house built by Whittingham Builders, because she didn't ask. In fact, she looked right through me and then said she didn't want to spend her time at the dinner table talking about business.

Silence reigned until I spoke up. "Thanks for cooking dinner, Lee. It was good."

"You're welcome." Lee stared at me. "I was busier than I thought I'd be, so I didn't have time to stop for dessert. I figured you wouldn't mind, what with your diet and all."

"You're right. I don't mind" I looked at my watch. Six o'clock. In ninety minutes I had to be online for the auction.

"Lee, since you cooked, why don't I clean up?"

"Good idea."

"But before I clear the table, could we talk about something?" This was as good a time as any to talk about our problems.

Lee pushed her plate away.

"Your gray slacks?"

"Yes." I was a little surprised that she dove right in. "Why did you cut them?"

"Didn't you see my note? I made it perfectly clear." Lee spoke about my pants as if shredding them had been a logical course of action. Neither her words nor the tone of her voice showed any amount of guilt.

"Couldn't we have talked about this?" I wanted to understand what filled her with so much anger. "Did you have to take such drastic action?"

She didn't miss a beat. "I was feeling drastic, Sasha."

"About what?"

"About you putting your slimmed-down hips into those slacks to go parade your ass in front of some new chick."

"There is no new chick, and I've told you over and over again that I'm not going to do that." I repeated my often-used defense.

"Whenever we talk, you never hear me." Lee accused.

"I do hear you. I always hear you." I was determined to keep logic in the air. "You didn't have to cut up a piece of my clothes. You could have gotten my attention by simply telling me how you were feeling. I know you have certain issues."

Lee turned her volume up. "I have certain issues? They're our issues."

I shook my head from side to side. "You believe I'm losing weight just so I can attract another woman. That's your issue."

Lee flattened her hands on the top of the table, palms down, and she spread her fingers wide apart. She looked like she was holding the table in place, fighting some sort of anti-gravity force field. She stared at me and lowered her voice to a controlled growl. "How long have we been together, Sasha?"

I sighed. "Four years." I knew immediately where we were, on another one of our well traveled roads through the argument countryside.

"You say that like it's been four hundred years." She closed the space between her fingers, and her voice grew louder.

"I'm sorry, Lee. I didn't mean to sound that way."

"You are sorry, Sasha. Do you think I enjoy being with someone who's always looking at other women?"

Now I was lost. I couldn't imagine what she was referring to. My fidelity to logic was weakening, and once again I felt myself allowing Lee to lead me into a whirlpool of self doubt. "What are you talking about? I don't look at other women."

"That's exactly why I don't want you going on those business trips. You just want to get away to get laid."

The improbability of Lee's words shut me down. We were both hushed for a moment, until I found my voice again. "You're not making any sense, Lee. I can't talk with you when you're like this."

I scooped up the plates and the used knives and forks. "I'll take care of the dishes and clean up the kitchen. Then, I'm going upstairs to change my clothes."

"And after that? When are we going to finish our discussion?" Lee picked up her wine glass and took a last swig of the beverage.

"We're not having a discussion. As usual, we're arguing."

"Well, when are we going to finish this?"

I was done for the night. "I don't know. Maybe later on." I knew things would only get worse, so I might as well drop my evening plans in her lap. "I need to do something for work at seven-thirty."

"Oh, that's great! You don't know when you'll have time for us to finish our talk, but you do know what time you're going to do something for your fuckin'job."

I took the dishes into the kitchen and placed them in the dishwasher. Drained from trying to digest dinner and our argument, I went upstairs to our bedroom. I had just gotten a pair of jeans out of the dresser drawer when I thought that I heard something crash. I went out into the hallway in time to see the blur that was Randi dash up the stairs and jettison herself into the bathroom.

"Lee?" I aimed my voice down the stairwell and to the first floor.

"What?"

"What was that noise?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it." Lee's answer discouraged any further questions.

Foolishly, I took her at her word and went back into the bedroom to find a sweatshirt and my slippers. If I had to do some work at home, I was going to be comfortable. I meandered back downstairs, and paused in the living room long enough to turn on the television and listen to a few minutes of the evening news. I could see a splinter of light under the closed den door, so I knew where Lee could be found. If I left her alone for the next half hour, maybe she'd be finished using her computer, and I'd be able to work alone with mine in relative peace.

On the other hand, if I used this time to read my mail and to answer any emails from our few friends, I'd be ready to call it a night as soon as the auction ended. Preparing myself for her wails of protest, I cut a path toward the den. I was ready to justify doing some work by reminding her at least I could do this at home and not at the office. I opened the door just as Lee was putting the last fragment of my smashed computer atop the pile of busted up laptop parts covering my desk.

I gasped. "What the hell happened?"

"There was an accident. Your laptop fell off your desk and broke." She answered me robotically, with a flat expressionless voice.

"What do you mean it fell off my desk? How could it just fall all by itself?"

"Maybe you left it too close to edge." She actually looked me straight in the eye as she offered this explanation. "The last time you used it did you pay any attention to what you were doing?"

I didn't answer her right away. What was the use? I knew she was responsible. Otherwise, she wouldn't be blaming me. I stared at the pile of electronic rubble, my mind ping-ponging between trying to make sense of it all and reciting a prayer of thanks that everything on that computer was backed up and safely stored on my desktop at the office.

"You did this, didn't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Why would I push your computer to the floor?"

Her question was her admission of guilt.

I approached the heap of plastic and metal and picked up what was left of the contorted screen. Too large to sift through my fingers like my slack's shredded fabric had earlier in the day, the remains of my computer reminded me of that first shocking discovery, nevertheless. This time I didn't look over my shoulder to see who might be watching my shame-filled reaction. Instead, I turned around quickly, capturing Lee in my sightline.

"I'm going to the office for a few hours."

"Oh, that's just great."

Lee's histrionics had caused me to miss one auction. Her latest irrational act wasn't going to force me to miss a second one.

## Chapter Twelve

LEE TURNED OFF the lamp on Sasha's desk, and shook her head at the pile of trash that, only a few hours earlier, had been her partner's laptop computer. "Once your password got changed, you outlived your usefulness to me. Did you really expect me to let you hang around here collecting dust?"



She sashayed to the other side of the den and lit the lamp standing guard over her work space. The small room could hardly contain the anger she felt toward Sasha. She simmered, wondering what the hell gave Sasha the right to leave the house and go back to her office at this time of night?

"What the fuck is that about? What's so goddamn important that she has to leave me to go back there?" Lee yelled at her own computer's screen.

She tapped on a couple of keys, bringing the electronic device to life. Roaming to her email page, she spotted six consecutive entries from the same sender.

"Shit. What does she want?"

Lee scrolled through all six of the messages, cursing and shaking her head after she read each one. Reluctantly, she picked up the telephone and, following the directions she'd read in all of the emails, she punched out a phone number.

"Angela. Why have you sent me all these goddamn emails? You could have made your point with the first one."

"It's nice to hear from you too, Lee." Angela's voice was a shot of syrup with a vinegar chaser.

"Are you being sarcastic, or is your husband nearby?" Lee tapped her foot.

"Richard's working late. He's preparing a closing."

"Well, that's convenient, isn't it?"

"I'm enjoying the solitude. How about your girlfriend? Isn't she there with you?"

"Do you think I'd be talking to you if she was here? Something took her back to her office." Lee's foot tapping increased its speed.

"Oh? Something or someone?"

Lee glared at her own reflection in the computer's screen. "What the hell do you want, Angela?"

"Several things."

Lee kept quiet. Her body tensed in anticipation of the unknown.

"First, I need to know when you're going to get back to me about the event plans."

"I told you earlier that I'd call you day after tomorrow." Lee responded curtly.

"We had such an intense meeting today that I must have forgotten." After a pause, Angela continued, "Are you sure we don't need to confer with the rest of the committee?"

"No, I sure as hell don't need to meet with your whole friggin'group."

"Then, how about meeting with me again?" Angela's voice teased her prey.

Lee's shoulders relaxed. She knew she'd be able to handle the conversation from this point on. "I don't need to do that either. You know how this game is played. I don't intend to repeat myself."

"You don't have to, baby. I heard you the first time." Angela cooed into the phone. "You did make me feel good though, and I'm willing to bet you felt the same way."

"Yeah, I enjoyed myself." Lee's breathing deepened. "In fact, you felt more than good to me. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"For starters. " Angela continued. "Now I want to hear when we'll see each other again."

"We won't." Lee didn't blink.

"Why?"

"Because that's just how it goes." Lee stared blankly at the wall in front of her.

"Oh, that's right. We play by your rules, don't we?"

"Correct." Barely pausing, Lee fired the rest of her regulations. "And whenever you think you have to call me, dial my cell number."

"Sure, baby. Is there anything else?" Angela feigned submissiveness.

"Yeah, don't send me any more emails." Lee fired her response.

"Uh, huh. Sleep tight, baby."

"You too." Lee hung up the phone. She shook her head in disgust and idly perused the den. She noticed Randi, planted on the edge of Sasha's chair, sniffing the smashed computer parts. Her tail flicking agitatedly from side to side, the cat stared at Lee.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

Randi didn't react to Lee's angry question.

"And what do you expect me to do with Sasha flying off on business trips to this place and that, and never missing me when she's away? She's the one who's changed, not me. And she's going to be sorry she's different. Especially if she's sniffin'around some other woman."

Lee left her computer and got down on her knees, crawling toward the white-furred cat.

"You remember how attracted she was to me when she let me pick her up four years ago in that hotel bar? She couldn't wait to jump into bed with me."

Randi yawned, stood up, balanced herself on a few inches of available desk space, and stretched her full length. Oblivious to Lee's presence, the cat jumped down from her perch and walked out of the den.

## Chapter Thirteen

I DROVE THE darkened route to my office, pushing my car past the speed limit and testing the accuracy of my radar detector. An NPR interview with a political activist did its best to distract me and help me untangle my jumbled feelings about Lee. I was struggling to love her. Hell, I was struggling to like her.

Ten minutes shy of my destination I began to focus on the upcoming auction. The vision of Lee and my destroyed computer faded into the background, replaced by the possibility of my being able to recoup construction materials equal to the ones Clive sent me to bid on a few weeks ago. If I couldn't be a success with my partner, maybe I could be a winner with my job responsibilities.

All would be right in my world at the office for the next hour and a half; or so I thought until the mellow voice on the public radio station faded jarringly into a screeching alert to start shopping for all those perfect Christmas gifts. It was way too soon for me to think about that problem. As far as I was concerned, there was no perfect present for Lee. Besides, I dreaded Christmas, even under the best circumstances.

I gave up pretending to enjoy the holiday season after my grandmother died ten years ago. I just threw in the towel and admitted that the whole Yuletide deal bummed me out, probably because I didn't come from a Disney-American-Girl kind of family.

It wasn't the divorce that preceded my father's decision to go live on the other side of the continent, nor the car accident that turned my mother into a memory before I was twelve years old. Sure, that pain was always with me, sometimes dull, sometimes acute. Other times I didn't know it was there at all. It was like having a tooth with a cracked filling. I felt the hurt only when I let a sweet memory seep into the crevice and drip down over the exposed root.

In the thirty-three Christmases that I've spent without my mom and dad, I've had plenty of time to ponder the way parents trundle along, certain that their kids are going to grow up and leave

them. When it happens in reverse, and the parents leave their unsuspecting kids, the abrupt departure blows a cannonball-size hole in those children, leaving a hollow space where faith and happiness are supposed to live. I went through life ignoring that hole until someone I cared about threatened to leave me.

I owed a lot to my grandmother. She always made sure I had good holidays, and she used to tell me I'd given her happy ones, too. Probably because I never asked her for anything. Early on I discovered if I didn't request much, I couldn't be disappointed when I didn't receive it. Christmas for me wasn't very different from any other day.

In fact, Christmas day itself was a relief because it put an end to all the anticipation. The run-up to December twenty-fifth was a pain in the ass. I had a problem with the jolly surround-sound atmosphere engineered by the same colonels of commerce who brought us giant Valentine's day chocolate hearts, pink and purple foil-clad bunnies a month later, phony fireworks bursting out of the ends of hot dogs in early July, and dead force-fed-turkeys in November.

All of these events shared the universal expectation that families had fun; the kind of Technicolor familial joy that must have been invented by some Hollywood director. That fiction hadn't worked for me, ever. Not when I was a child making excuses for all the disappointments I should have been too young to understand. Not during my adolescence when I was charged with the full guardianship of my mother's dependent heart. Not all the years that my grandmother and I tried to pretend we were only one generation apart, not two. And not when I was a young woman searching in lesbian clubs and parties for someone to take care of my somewhat needy soul.

Four years ago when I began my romance with Lee, I thought I caught a vague glimpse of a happy Christmas. But that nebulous flash lasted as long as a snowflake pattern does once it lands in the center of a warm upturned hand. It was a mirage.

Eager to put an end to the radio ad's jingling Yuletide reminder, I eased the key out of the ignition and left the car. I disarmed the building's security system and walked inside, locking the entrance door behind me. The lobby and hallway leading to my office were bathed in a muted glow, bright enough to see everything, yet subtle enough to suggest that the business day had ended.

When I opened the door and turned on the overhead lights in my office, all of the subtlety disappeared. At night those florescent fixtures showed no mercy. They blanketed every surface with an unforgiving glare, washing away the shadows that concealed my exhaustion and sadness. On this particular night, I knew without glancing at the mirror that the white lights illuminated every worry line on my face. That my jaw was tight and my forehead furrowed with the growing anger I felt toward Lee after she pushed my laptop off of my desk and cut my slacks. I was pissed with myself for allowing inertia to keep me sticking around and enduring all the crap she was sending my way.

Despite the stark silence in the office, I knew this place was my haven tonight. I'd arrived with ten minutes to spare before the auction's opening bid. As soon as I entered the room, I noticed

the red light pulsing on my answering machine, so I decided to give in to my curiosity and push the "play" button. I wondered who had called me after I'd left for the day.

"Hello." A woman's silky voice left its imprint on the tape. "This is Avery Sloan and I'm leaving a message for Sasha Lewis. Sasha, I met with Clive Whittingham today, and he suggested I phone you to set up a meeting. I hope he's spoken to you about the Josephine Baker Rainbow Agency and our group home project. Uh...at any rate, I realize it's late in the day, but I thought I'd try to catch you. Sorry I missed you. When you get a chance, please call me at 215...."

I got so caught up in the surprise of hearing from this woman so soon after Clive had spoken to me about her, that I neglected to grab a pen and paper to jot down her phone number. I'd have to play the tape again, but not now. The auction was about to begin.

I zapped my desktop computer out of 'stand-by' and typed in my new password. Patiently I waited for two items to be auctioned before the lots of floorboard came up for bid. My first offer was challenged. I upped my bid and that one was trumped, too. The third offer did the trick. Whittingham Builders was now the owner of enough reclaimed pine boards to provide flooring for several rather large houses, and I'd redeemed myself, if only partially.

After logging off, I phoned Clive to tell him the good news. Then, I just sat there for a few minutes, proud of my work and reluctant to go home. I picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number, Julie's.

"Hello?"

"Hey, stranger." Pushing the speakerphone button, I sat back in my chair.

"Sasha, where are you?" I could hear the pleased surprise come zinging through the phone line.

"I'm at the office."

"This late at night?"

"Whoa, you sound just like Lee." I sighed, and even though I wasn't holding the receiver to my ear, Julie must have heard me expel the breath of air.

"Well, I don't want to go there. Are you okay?"

"Well let's see. I'm here working in the office at night to compensate for my screw up in Portland. Earlier in the day I discovered Lee had cut a pair of my slacks into smithereens, and an hour and a half ago she accidentally dropped my laptop on the floor, smashing it into a million little pieces." My recitation almost left me out of breath.

"Oh my God, Sasha. Why did she do that?"

"I don't know." My eyes focused on the flow-charts set up on the other side of my office. "Guess she was annoyed with me."

"How much longer are you going to put up with her?" Julie asked.

"I don't know the answer to that either."

We both fell silent.

"I guess she hasn't hurt you enough." My friend's voice took on a flat emotionless quality.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if she had, either she'd be gone or you'd be out of there."

I'd heard this advice before, and I hadn't taken it. "Hey. I called you for sympathy, girlfriend."

"Sympathy isn't doing a thing for you, Sasha." It was Julie's turn to take a deep breath. "Look, you don't know what that woman might do. One night she says she's going to burn down your house. Another day she slices and dices your clothes. What are you waiting for?"

"I'm afraid for her to leave me." I felt like I was choking.

"It's okay to be afraid, Sasha. I'm afraid, too. I fear Lee might hurt you. I don't want to lose a good friend."

I stared down at my hands, fixating on the engraved initial ring that I wore on my pinkie. It's dulled patina, a reminder that some things can be renewed, while others need to be disposed of.

"Hey, you're not going to lose me. Don't worry."

"Then promise that you'll start figuring out how to extricate yourself from Lee's clutches?"

"That's a promise." Or at least I wanted it to be a vow I'd keep.

"Okay, I'm holding you to that. Take care of yourself." Julie sounded serious.

"You too. Bye."

I prepared to leave the office. The weary part of me was tempted to go into my boss'quarters and spend the night on the sectional sofa in there. The realistic part of me knew I had to go home, clean out the storage area of my car, clear the computer pieces off my desk, and try to avoid Lee for the rest of the evening. I guessed I'd be able to do three of those things successfully, but probably not the fourth.

Before turning out the overhead light, I gave in to the lure of playing the social worker's phone message once again. Ms. Sloan's voice intrigued me. Maybe because Lee's harsh, accusatory tone and the sickening sound of my computer crashing to the floor were still ringing in my ears. Or perhaps it was just the warmth and peacefulness in Avery's inflection that pulled me toward it, like a slow love song drawing me to the dance floor.

Avery Sloan was the woman whose voice had roused me from my fake nap as the flight from Portland landed in Philadelphia. Moments later she'd left the airplane before we could introduce ourselves to each other. So tonight wasn't the first time that I'd heard Avery speak. It was my first chance however, to really listen to her.

## Chapter Fourteen

EVERY WAS RUNNING behind schedule. She hadn't expected to be this late, but an important phone call demanded her attention just as she was getting ready to leave the office and meet two friends for dinner.

Clive Whittingham's general manager, Sasha Lewis, was calling again; this time to set up an appointment.

Even though Avery wasn't overly confident that Whittingham Builders was a lock for her project, more and more she'd begun to count on it. Now she had an appointment at the construction company's office the next morning, and she intended to be fully prepared for the meeting with this Ms. Lewis. She recalled with interest and curiosity Clive's mentioning how sharp-as-a-whip and skillful his assistant was.

Avery stuffed her briefcase with the project proposal, the minutes from the last Board of Directors' meeting, the few permits that they'd applied for, and photos of the Mt. Airy house her agency had purchased. Her mind raced, anticipating the next day's meeting. Would she have a chance to speak with Clive again, or only with Ms. Lewis?

A female general manager of a construction company. That fit perfectly with the spirit of the feminist philosophy of the Baker Center. And if this manager were a lesbian on top of being female...

Avery spun through her office building's door and walked at break-neck speed along the few blocks that lay between her agency and the restaurant. The early evening chill was more biting than usual for mid-November, encouraging her to take long rapid strides. The streets were filled with rush hour pedestrians who seemed to skitter out of her way as she overtook them.

Fortunately, the eatery came into view just as Avery began to feel the cold air wrap itself around her hands.

She entered the restaurant and spied her dinner dates. Jessie Bowen and Karyn Armstrong, their glasses raised, were poised to take their first sips of wine. Jessie, the more talkative of the two, must have said something amusing because Karyn threw back her headful of braids and laughed. Avery, eager to be in on the humor, hurried to the table and slid into her chair.

"Hey, ladies. Sorry I'm late. I had to take care of an important phone call just as I was about to leave the office." Avery wiped away a cold wind induced tear that coursed its way down her cheek.

"What's her name, and does she have a sister?" Jessie winked at Karyn.

"Her name is Sasha Lewis." Avery sent Jessie an exaggerated smirk and rubbed her hands together in an effort to warm them.

"Well, aren't you bold? Damn. I was just teasing you, Avery."

"It's not what you think." Avery explained the nature of the call to her friends. "Ms. Lewis is the general manager for Whittingham Builders. That's the company that might, and I do mean might, help us rehab the house in Mt. Airy."

Jessie said, "Your new group home?"

"Yes. Thanks for paying attention to me, Jessie, even though I'm not always talking about women."

The three friends laughed so much at Avery's remark that they failed to notice the waitress standing next to their table.

"Can I bring you something to drink?" She directed her question to the only one of them who didn't have her hand wrapped around the stem of a glass.

Avery looked up at the young woman and then back at her dinner companions. "What are you two drinking tonight?"

Karyn pointed to their drinks. "I have a Beaujolais and Jessie has a Shiraz."

Avery turned to the waitress and smiled sweetly. "Could I please have a glass of your best Australian Shiraz?"

"Sure, right away."



Watching the waitress walk away from them, Karyn mimicked Avery. "May I please have a glass of your best Australian Shiraz? Is that how you're flirting these days, now that you're footloose and fancy-free?"

"No." Avery paused, and then continued her thought. "Come to think of it, I'm not flirting much at all these days. And our waitress is a bit on the young side, wouldn't you say?"

"I wouldn't know. I haven't checked her out as closely as you obviously have." Karyn turned her head toward the waitress's wake, and then smiled at her friend.

"Well, I've checked her out. And yes, she is too young for Avery." Jessie threw her two cents in. She leaned back in her chair. "But not for me."

Karyn slapped her dinner mate playfully on her arm and gazed affectionately at her. "What's up with you, Jess? Tired of being dateless with all of these fine young things around?"

"Who says I'm dateless? Just goes to show you how much you know, sister." Jessie looked over the top of her rimless eyeglasses, daring Karyn to make another comment about her social life.

Avery was deep in thought. Trusting her friends' reactions, she murmured a confession. "Well I'm dateless, and I'm tired of the situation."

The teasing ceased momentarily. Karyn tilted her head toward Avery. "I've been thinking about you, girlfriend, and wondering how it's going."

"Let's just say that I'm getting a lot of work done." Avery said.

"I hear you. Sometimes there's nothing wrong with being real busy on your job, you know."

Jessie broke in. "For a little while, anyway. Until something else fine and sexy that needs a little bit of lovin' pops up."

Karyn frowned and waved her hand at Jessie, dismissing her friend's remark. "You have a one-track mind, Jessie." She resumed questioning Avery. "You ever hear from Norma? Not that that's a good idea."

"Yeah, only once in a while. And that's exactly the way that I want it."

The waitress, bearing Avery's glass of wine, approached the three women. She took their dinner orders and left them to continue their discussion.

"You know what, Avery? Maybe it's too soon for you to be dating anyone. You and Norma haven't been broken up for that long." Jessie, suddenly more serious, took a sip of her wine.

"Norma's been gone longer than you might guess. She and I hadn't been together for well over a year before she moved out. We lived under the same roof, but she was constantly dating other people."

Karyn cut in. "We knew that, but we didn't know for sure if you knew it. We used to run into Norma at the club, and she was always wrapped around a different chick. But we never mentioned it because we didn't want to be the ones to tell you."

Avery reached out and touched both of her friends' hands. "I know you did what you thought was best. I'm only bringing this up to explain that I've been solo for a long time, trust me."

"And you need some lovin', huh?" Jessie broke the somber mood and took the trio back to a lighter one.

"Hell yes. So if you know anyone who's eligible, give me her name and phone number."

Karyn drew close to Avery and looked carefully at her. "Babe, if I knew someone who was eligible, I'd be hitting on her."

A strange look passed over Jessie's face as she gazed at Karyn.

Avery noticed it and felt the rhythm of their music change just the slightest bit. She remembered feeling that subtle tempo change once before. But where? With whom? This was not one of those *deja-vu* sensations. This was real, concrete. But for now, the memory was a lost one.

Fragrant wisps of steam wafting from the dinner plates in front of them interrupted their chat for a few moments. Avery enjoyed every mouthful of her food. Happy to be sharing a meal with someone other than the television in her kitchen, Avery felt content for as long as the meal lasted. She knew the evening would end as most of her evenings had been ending recently. Try as she might, she couldn't keep the thoughts of loneliness at bay.

"Well, winter is coming, ladies. And unless we get lucky, it's going to be a cold one for all three of us." Avery pursed her lips in anticipation of the fact she'd uttered.

"In that case, we'd better ask Santa for new vibrators." Jessie offered her palm for high five's and the three friends laughed between sips of their coffee.

Karyn turned to Avery. "So you think your agency is really going to open a second group home?"

"I do indeed." Avery accepted a second cup of java. "But tell me how you're doing, Karyn? How is the real estate business treating you?"

"It's slowing down a little, like it always does this time of year. Soon the traffic will really slow to a crawl and it won't pick up again until the holidays are over." Karyn grimaced.

"Yeah. I guess no one wants to put money on a house when they're facing Christmas shopping."

"If things get too slow, I might shop my salesperson's skills to a residential developer, like that Whittingham Builders company that you mentioned earlier."

Jessie ran her hand through her short-cropped reddish-brown hair. "That's not a bad idea, Karyn. Judging by the money some of those guys spend in newsprint ads, they must be making bucks hand over fist."

Karyn agreed. "Most of them have several developments springing up at the same time, so they need staff to sell the houses."

"I guess I never thought about that, Karyn. Maybe you should pursue it." Jessie nodded, and then looked at Avery.

"Why don't you help this sister out and ask that general manager you're going to meet tomorrow. She might have the information that Karyn needs."

"I don't have a problem with that if you want me to ask her."

"I guess so, if you could. But don't let my question distract you from your business."

Jessie lowered her voice. "Do you all know that the guy who runs Whittingham Builders is a brother?"

"Yes and your point is?" Karyn challenged Jessie.

"I'm just saying maybe his general manager is gay, also."

"You were doing okay there for a while, Jess. But your ipso facto train just jumped the track." Avery found it easier to rib Jessie about her reasoning ability than to admit she'd had the same thought as she spoke to Sasha Lewis on the telephone. She'd found herself wondering who would be more likely to manage a crew of males working for a construction company, a straight woman or a lesbian?

"Well, you talked to her, Avery. What did her voice sound like?" Jessie ignored Avery's criticism of her logic.

"What did she sound like? She sounded like a woman. Jeez, Jessie."

"Okay, okay. Calm down already. I was just saying..."

Karyn pushed her playfulness into high gear. "You weren't saying shit, Jessie. Sometimes I swear I don't know how you can hold down such a responsible job at that newspaper. They actually trust you to make editorial decisions over there?"

"Yeah, but they don't pay me crap." Jessie winked at both of her buddies. "And that's why I have to get out of here before the bill comes."

"We already have the bill, and you know it. Pay up, you little scoundrel." Avery laughed.

The three women arose from the table, put their jackets on, and grabbed their respective bags and brief cases. They exited the restaurant but lingered near its doorway, extending their good-byes to each other.

"Girls, this was a good time, as always." Karyn smiled warmly. "Jessie, I see you got your usual lucky parking spot, as close to the restaurant as possible without being at a table."

Jessie laughed. "I sure did. You know me, darlin'."

Karyn whispered. "Yeah, I do."

Avery felt it again, stronger than the cold breeze that telegraphed winter's approach. That nameless suggestion of an extra note playing between Karyn and Jessie fluttered by.

"Avery, want a lift to the train station?" Karyn tugged on Avery's arm.

"No thanks, Karyn. I drove into town today because I knew I had a dinner date with you characters. I'm parked in the high rise lot a block from here. All I need is a week's salary to bail out my car."

"All right. Take care, women." Jessie hugged Avery and Karyn. "See you next time."

The three friends walked away from each other, each one moving in a different direction. Avery pulled her unzipped jacket close to her body and shivered involuntarily. She arrived at the parking garage, found the claim ticket in her pocket, and felt grateful it was one of those places where an attendant parked and retrieved your car for you. Paying a gratuity was well worth the cost to avoid walking alone through the lot with its muted lights and exaggerated shadows. It might have been a different story if she'd been walking to the garage with someone. But she wasn't. She was alone, headed to an empty home. Although she was getting used to that, she wasn't at peace with it.

## Chapter Fifteen

WHAT WOULD I do without a cell phone? I'd have a more normal life; less exciting, but more routine and on schedule. I was ten minutes away from the office when my phone rang, interrupting one of my favorite CD's, the one with the old-school sexy songs.

I lowered the music's volume and paid attention to the annoying plastic plug sticking in my ear.

"Good morning. This is Sasha Lewis -- Oh good morning, Clive -- No, I'm almost there, though -- Sure, I can put my hands on both of those documents -- Should I get someone to run them to the site? But I have a nine-thirty appointment with Avery Sloan from that non-profit social service agency. I probably can't drive out there and back without being late -- Did he look in every possible place? -- Okay, I understand. I'm on it. Talk to you later."

Damn it! The least I expect of myself is to be prompt for an appointment. If a client thinks you can't be on time to meet with her, she'll doubt very seriously that you can deliver a completed house by its contractual finish-date. Being late for an appointment is a bad business practice; one that I don't engage in if I can help it. Why couldn't Clive find someone else to do this errand?

The truth is I can't be everything to everyone all the time. Whenever I think I have all of the details nailed down at work, something unexpected happens. I know that's the way the construction business goes. You can't micromanage every little thing. I accept that and usually I can roll with it. Now though, I have to balance the unexpected at work with the unknown at home.

More and more, I've needed my days at work to have a sameness about them. I've craved depending upon a routine; building projects that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Tasks that are sequential with a steady organized flow of paperwork. Not building material deliveries that go to the wrong site, or project supervisors who lose permits the day before an important inspection is to take place, or appointments that have to be rescheduled an hour before they're set to begin. I've had enough confusion in my life with Lee's popping off when I least expect it. I didn't need things to go wrong at the office.

I was beginning to lose my grip trying to manage my relationship and a construction firm. Lately I'd spied the glimmer of the inevitable, of having to decide which one I'd rather manage, an ever-growing business or my life with a woman who was imploding under the pressure of her unfounded suspicions. I knew I could manage the former. I needed to feel a hell of a lot of love to keep the second thing going. And I could no longer swear I felt that.

I parked in my usual spot, flung open the door to our office building, and trotted past Nona.

"Morning, I'm on the run. Have to go out to Laurel Ridge with the sewer permits. Salazar managed to misplace them and the inspector is on his way over there." I was talking to Nona over my shoulder. "Clive wants me to be there to speak with the inspector. He's not one hundred per cent comfortable with Salazar's ability to shmooze a township code enforcement officer."

Nona aimed her answer at my back. "I heard. I pulled the permits out of the file and made copies. They're on your desk."

"God bless you, Nona." I really hoped that Nona heard my blessing, even though that meant being able to decipher my muffled voice as I rested my new laptop on my desk and picked up the manila folder containing the permit copies.

Somewhat amused, Nona watched me race back toward her. "You have a nine-thirty appointment. Want me to reschedule it?"

"No, no. Don't do that." My answer shot out of me with the speed of a bullet. I glanced at Nona's startled face as I zoomed past her on my way to the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Make Ms. Sloan a cup of your famous flavored coffee. Chat her up until I get back. And please apologize for me."

"You got it, Sasha." Once again Nona was left talking to my back.

I'm not quite sure how I was able to drive all the way out to the Laurel Ridge job site, talk tactfully with the township's sewer inspector, reassure Luis Salazar that losing the sewer permit didn't mean he'd lose his job, and return to the office only fifteen minutes late for my appointment.

All the way to the site and back I kept asking myself why I'd been so insistent that Nona not reschedule the appointment. A few times since the flight from Portland, I'd examined Ms. Sloan's business card and replayed my sliver of a memory of her. The recollection was nothing more than a quick impression which might have faded if Clive hadn't met her and talked her back to life in my mind. I'd recorded the vision of Avery's height, and her casual but well put together outfit. I remembered her hair, lively brown with a few strands of gray, every curl threatening a rebellion. I could see her smile, so self-assured until the moment she'd dropped her gay-themed magazines on the seat next to mine. My ears were acquainted with her voice. Its rich fullness remained embedded on my answering machine's tape.

Here I was, a woman who already had a partner. And I was so compelled to see Avery Sloan again, that I had said 'no' to a secretary's logical offer to reschedule an appointment for which I was bound to be late.

I saw her the second I entered my office. I smelled her fragrance a moment before. Avery stood at the window, her back to me. Briefly, I wondered if she was really here or if she was still that dream-like memory of a few moments spent together on a plane.

"Ms. Sloan? Sorry to have kept you waiting." I approached her, my hand extended.

"Hello. Nice to meet you." She covered the distance that separated us in three strides, and she took my hand in hers. She looked at me quizzically. "Have we met before?"

I nodded, smiling as warmly as I could. "Not formally. We sat next to each other on a flight from Maine, about three weeks ago."

"Of course." She covered our handshake with her other hand and held on, even after we stopped acknowledging our introduction. "Now I remember. You were the sleeping seatmate."

I felt a tinge of embarrassment even though she didn't say this with any reproach in her voice. "I don't usually do that. Believe it or not, I have trouble sleeping on airplanes."

"That is hard to believe. But then, I don't usually stumble forward in the aisle or drop my belongings on the seat."

So, she did recollect giving up some of her anonymity to me. I felt warmth overtaking my cheeks, and I knew I'd better conceal it with conversation.

"I appreciate your putting up with my late arrival. I had an emergency to attend to."

"Don't worry about it. I understand what emergencies are all about."

I smiled at her, noticing we were the same height. She had looked a bit taller when I last saw her standing and gazing down at me.

"Sasha, here's the packet Clive left for your meeting with Ms. Sloan." Nona entered my office and handed me a ringed presentation binder labeled "Josephine Baker Rainbow Center Residential Project."

"Thanks, Nona. You're a step ahead of me." I took the binder from Nona and walked over to a large table where we'd have room to work. I pointed to two chairs. "Why don't you have a seat, Ms. Sloan?"

"Thanks." Avery tugged at one of the chairs, pulling it close to the table. "Would it be okay with you if I called you Sasha? After all, we did travel from Portland to Philly together."

I knew I couldn't stop the wide grin that was spreading itself across my face like a geisha's fan, so I didn't even try. "That's fine with me, Avery."

I opened Clive's notebook and thought I saw Avery checking out my hands. I couldn't be positive, because the lush darkness of her eyelashes provided a safe haven for her glances. The only time I knew for sure what Avery was looking at was when she directed her stare dead center into my eyes. And then, I had to look away quickly. I didn't feel totally comfortable after more than a couple of seconds spent glancing at her.

"If you'll examine the overall plan, Avery, you'll see Clive has set up three different levels. There's the first one he calls 'Livable,' then the second one he's labeled 'Livable with comforts and modcons,' and finally there's the third one that's titled 'So livable you'll want to sell your home and reside there with the clients.'"

Avery chuckled. "Your boss has a real sense of humor, doesn't he?"

I liked hearing her laughter. It was spontaneous, guileless, unpracticed. "Yes, that he does ..."

"I have a question." Avery looked puzzled.

I grinned at her. "Only one?"

"Well, only one so far." She grinned back at me. "What are modcons?"

"That's Brit slang for modern conveniences. You know, state of the art appliances, heated floors, attached garages..."

She nodded. "Okay. I'm with you now."

The phone rang, and I regretted not telling Nona to hold all of my calls and take the messages. "Sorry, but I should take this call."

"No problem. I know this is a busy office." Avery turned her attention to the binder and she began studying the rehab proposal.

"Sasha Lewis speaking. How can I help you?" I stole a glance at Avery's profile. Attractive. Just as I had remembered her. She may have checked out my hand jewelry, but not without my checking hers also. I was curious about their ring-less state. No long-term partner? No short-term lover claiming ownership of her heart and her fingers?

"That's fine, Mike. No, you're the carpentry super and it's your call. Yup, yup, go for it. Great. I'll tell Mr. Whittingham -- Thanks for letting me know -- Bye."

I put the phone down and returned to the work table. "Thanks for your patience. The pace never slows down here."

Avery reached over and tapped the back of my hand ever so lightly. "Don't give it a second thought. The phone rings constantly in our office, too."

Her touch surprised me. Its spontaneity threw me slightly off balance until I figured out that if she was a social worker, she might be one of those touchy-feely types who are comfortable with physical contact. A casual tap on the back of the hand was impersonal. It didn't mean anything more than putting a period at the end of a sentence.

I recouped my equilibrium as I thumbed through the pages of the rehab proposal.

"Clive told me that he designed three different tiers in an effort to accommodate your budget. He didn't have a handle on your economic resources."

Avery's broad smile faded. "I appreciate that. Frankly, I won't know how far our budget will stretch until I have some idea of the cost of the whole project."



"Well, Clive has made it relatively easy for you. Why don't you take a look at this chart?" I gave her a chance to examine the material while I took the moment to more slowly examine her. She appeared to be a confident woman, comfortable in her skin. She projected a level of serenity that comes only after years of finding one's own way in the world, and being at peace with one's identity.

"See how Clive color-coded the three levels?" I pointed to the three columns. "You have blue, silver and gold. All three have the same basics: the plumbing upgrades, the electrical work, the drywall replacement, the new bathrooms, the enlarged kitchen, the fire and safety code additions."

Avery interrupted. "I see that. So do the different levels represent 'good-better-best' in the quality of the materials?"

"In some cases, but not all. The structural and system upgrade materials are identical." I indicated the color differentiated charts and showed Avery where the text was the same on all three plans. Then I turned to a page with the flooring choices on it, and showed her the upgrades.

"So the flooring and the fixtures and the appliances in the gold plan are far more expensive than the ones in the blue and silver plans."

I nodded at her. "Exactly. They're a higher quality, and they'll probably last longer than the basic models would."

Avery skimmed the rest of the notebook until she arrived at the price lists, the sample contracts, and the permit information. She graced me with one of her wide-eyed glances. "I'm going to need some time to review all of this."

"Certainly. Take all of the time that you need." I smiled, imagining I wouldn't mind at all if this project and my association with it took months and months.

"And I have to share all of the information with our Board of Directors."

"Of course."

"But the real delay will be in getting at least two more competitive bids." The notion of going through this process dampened her mood.

"Clive knows how that goes. Waiting will be more of a problem for you than it will be for him. He and his business will be here for you. We're not going anywhere." I was tempted to reach over and take my turn tapping the back of her hand.

Avery gazed steadily at me. "And what about you? You have a million other projects to oversee. Would you still be our go-to person?"

"Oh, I'll be here too." I felt flattered, though I didn't know why my presence was so important to her. Any one of our project managers could handle the rehab job.

Avery closed the presentation notebook and stood up from the table. She smiled, offering her hand to mine. "This has been informative. Thank you so much for meeting with me, Sasha. And please thank Clive for getting all of this together so quickly."

"It was my pleasure. And I know Clive feels the same way. He's eager to get your business. He was very impressed with the work that your agency is doing."

"I'm impressed with him. There aren't many black-owned construction companies, not to mention gay-owned."

"You're absolutely right about that." Halleluiah! We were out in the open.

Avery lowered her voice and smiled a dimple-punctuated grin. "And I enjoyed meeting with the 'awake' Sasha Lewis."

I laughed self-consciously. Totally charmed by her attempts to tease me, I winked. "Yes. Being awake does have its advantages. The next time that..."

The jarring sound of the phone cut me off in mid-sentence. As I looked toward my desk at the contraption ringing itself silly, I felt caught in an impossible situation. I realized I didn't want to end this appointment and see Avery leave. But I couldn't ignore my phone's persistence.

"Why don't you get that? I can see myself out."

I held my hand up. "No. Wait. If you have another minute, don't leave yet."

Avery mouthed "Okay."

I walked to my desk and ripped the phone from its resting position. "Sasha Lewis speaking. How may I...What's up, Lee? -- What phone numbers?" I found myself staring down at the carpet in anticipation of trouble. "No...Lee, I haven't memorized all of the phone numbers in my cell. That's why they're in the phone's memory -- This isn't a good time...because I'm in a meeting."

I was afraid to meet Avery's eyes, afraid that she'd know I was embroiled in a difficult personal conversation, excuse herself and leave my office. So I kept focusing on that spot near my foot where days ago I'd spilled some coffee drops on the rug.

"Lee, Lee, I'll call you back in a few minutes. Good-bye."

I'd been right to guess Avery might disappear. She left my office the same way she'd exited the airplane three weeks ago, unobtrusively. She left me behind, forced to tamp down my curiosity about her. I hurried into the hallway and toward the reception area. Nona peered up at me.

"Ms. Sloan said to tell you she would be in touch soon. She didn't want to interrupt your phone conversation."

"Thanks, Nona." I guess I must have stared at the entrance a few seconds too long.

"Mr. Whittingham was right."

"About what?"

"He said Avery Sloan was a stunner and that she's a smart woman. He said she's doing a brilliant job running such a worthwhile program."

I weighed what Nona was saying. "Yeah. Clive is probably right on all counts."

"But do you know what I found interesting?" I could tell Nona was eager to share some information.

"What's that?"

"Well, while she was waiting for you to get back to the office, I fixed her a cup of my famous coffee, just as you asked me to, and we kind of struck up a conversation. She told me how Clive had described you to her."

This was going to be interesting. "Okay, Nona. I'm holding my breath."

"The boss told her, and I quote, you are '--stunning and smart and you do a brilliant job helping him run this business.'"

I shook my head and laughed. "So now we know something else about him, don't we? We know Clive Whittingham is a wonderful builder, a quality human being and woefully lacking in verbal imagination."

I returned to my office with the sound of Nona's laughter echoing in the hallway. Once again, I needed to intervene and stop my telephone from ringing its head off.

"Sasha Lewis speaking. How can I help you?"

"Sasha, it's Avery Sloan."

"Oh, hi."

"I wanted to thank you again."

"You're very welcome. I wish you had stayed for a moment longer."

"Was there more information that I needed?"

"Uh, no. But you may have had some questions I could have answered."

"No. You did a great job with the ones I did have. And I didn't want to interrupt an important phone call."

I grimaced. "Well, that was polite of you."

"Actually, Sasha, I do have another question to ask. Is this a good time? Are you busy with anything?"

"No, feel free to ask me what you wish." Ask me a hundred questions. I'll answer all of them.

"It's not about the rehab job. It's another matter all together."

"Ask away."

"One of my best friends, Karyn Armstrong, is a realtor. She's exploring the possibility of selling houses for a developer, and she asked me to find out if there were any sales positions open in your company."

"I don't think we have any openings right now, but tell Karyn to send us her resume. She can email it directly to me and I'll make sure that our sales coordinator receives it."

"Oh, thank you, Sasha."

"No problem." I was grinning mindlessly.

"I feel a little strange asking you about this."

"Please don't feel awkward. I think that's what they call 'networking', right?"

"I guess so. But I'm not used to being a job broker."

"Don't give it a second thought. Friendships are important, and I hope I can help."

"Well, thanks again. I'll be in touch."

"It was my pleasure, Avery. I'll look forward to hearing from you. Bye."

"Good-bye, Sasha."

I stood in front of my desk for a few seconds longer, continuing to hold the phone up to my ear. Checking the calendar, I searched for the rest of today's schedule. Whatever else I had to do would be anti-climactic. I knew in my gut the best part of my day was over; that what I'd felt during my meeting with Avery Sloan couldn't be topped. If Luis Salazar phoned and told me his crew had just hit a vein of diamonds or tapped into an oil geyser while excavating a foundation, I

wouldn't know the same quiet excitement that had surrounded me for the duration of my ninety-three meeting.

## Chapter Sixteen

EVERY CHANGED HER car radio's station in time to hear the traffic report. Thanks to having missed the rush hour, she had clear sailing all the way from the Expressway's Conshohocken on-ramp to the Spring Garden exit. From there, threading her way to a parking lot near her office wouldn't take more than five minutes.

She glanced at the notebook containing the rehab project proposal. Eager to get the ball rolling, she knew what had to be done. She'd line up two more contractors and plan to meet with them in order to gather the number of estimates her funding sources required. She wondered how long it would take to get those estimates. How long would Whittingham Builders be willing to wait for her agency's okay to do the project?

She imagined the delay could take weeks, perhaps months. No one would be as responsive as Clive Whittingham had been. And would Sasha Lewis still be interested in working with the Center if the wait stretched to more than a month or two?

Avery left her car in a self-park lot far enough away from her Center City office to be inexpensive and give her a chance to take a long walk. She strode past noisy jackhammers, crushing their way through cement sidewalks. When she breathed in the cold air she smelled the city's oleo of mustard pretzels, gasoline fumes and the occasional stench of urine-infused steam puffing out of some of the sewer vents.

Grateful for the extra time to be alone to think about the proposal that she carried under her arm, Avery focused on the woman who had just presented it to her. What a coincidence it was to see her again. Avery remembered the dream she'd had after that flight with the sleeping seatmate. How she had resented awakening from it just as the nebulous stranger was about to kiss her. Now the stranger had a name, Sasha Lewis. And the fully-alert Sasha had shaken Avery's hand and spoken more words to her during today's meeting than she had during the entire time they spent sitting next to each other on a plane ride from Maine.

Avery pondered how Sasha had become the general manager of a construction company. The handsome penny-colored woman appeared to be as professional and competent as her boss had described. With a start, Avery realized that Sasha looked a little like Clive Whittingham. Perhaps they were related, and that's why she had this position with his company. Well, what did it matter? If another contractor's bid came in lower than Whittingham's, she wouldn't be working with Clive or Sasha Lewis, and all of her curiosity might remain just that, idle speculation.

Avery arrived at her agency's office. Eager to leave the cold air outside, she entered the building and smiled at her secretary. "Hi, Pat! Did I miss anything?"

Pat shook her head. "Not a thing, darlin'. We've had a routine morning." She pointed to the large notebook that Avery now held in her arms. "Looks like you brought back a souvenir from your meeting out in the 'burbs."

"Yes I did. It's an exciting souvenir, too." Avery rested the binder on Pat's desk and hung up her jacket. "Do I have any messages?"

"Your favorite P.O., Loretta Jones, called and wants you to call her back. And your buddy Karyn called to remind you that you have a late lunch date with her at that cafe around the corner."

Avery nodded. "I remember. I'm not quite senile yet." She picked up the notebook and headed to her office. "But here's something I can't remember. Do you know where I put that list of city-approved building contractors?"

"I think I saw you put it in your file cabinet."

"Thanks."

"Aren't you pleased with the plans that Mr. Whittingham drew up?" Pat frowned.

"Oh, I love his ideas. And I'd love for us to give him the contract. But he may not be the lowest bidder."

"I forgot about that detail." Pat said.

"I didn't. I have to get at least two more estimates before I ask the Board of Directors to approve a contract. And they'll probably want to interview the lowest bidder about every single detail." Avery's facial expression matched Pat's discouraged affect. "I guess I can't blame them. They would all be liable if any part of the building failed to pass code."

"Yeah, I know, sweetie. But somehow, I was hoping this group home could be up and running during my lifetime."

Avery let a laugh escape from her lips, despite her head being filled with a looming feeling of frustration and impatience. She checked her watch. It was twelve-thirty, one hour before she had to meet Karyn for lunch. Opening the top drawer of her file cabinet, she quickly flipped each file folder forward as she searched for the one containing the information about contractors. Was the information filed under "approved", "city" or "contractors"? Miraculously, after only a few seconds of looking, she hit paydirt.

Avery removed the contents of the file folder and walked to her desk. Randomly, she chose two of the names from the list of builders and rehabbers. She called each one and left messages on their answering machines. Determined to actually speak to a human being, she selected two

additional names and numbers. This time she was lucky. One contractor promised to meet her at the house early next week, and the other's secretary pledged that her boss would call Avery no later than the next day.

Years of owning an older house in a city that was old by American standards, had taught Avery the wisdom of getting as much information about home repairs from as many different sources as possible. She phoned the fifth and sixth contractors. Bingo. Another promised site visit in the middle of the next week, and another planned return phone call later in the day.

With a half hour before lunch, Avery surveyed the hill of paperwork on her desk. She decided to tackle the day's incoming mail, figuring that she could reduce that small mountain of envelopes faster than she could review the monthly reports that were required from each case worker at the Center. One by one, she exposed the envelopes' contents.

One grant request had been rejected, but a second one was in the running. One of the parole officers who had worked with Avery's clients was on sick leave and might not be returning to her job. That kind of thing happened repeatedly. A P.O.'s job was a burn-out position. One long term client, a woman who had been incarcerated for armed robbery, wrote a note of thanks and included a recent photo of herself with her partner and their oldest daughter. Avery read the note twice and smiled at the picture. A piece of mail like this is what makes my job worthwhile, she thought.

"Avery?" Pat was at her boss'door.

"Yeah, Pat."

"I know you're not senile yet, but you're going to be late for your lunch with your friend, Karyn."

"Ooh, thanks Pat. The time got away from me." Avery jumped up and almost pushed her secretary out of the way as she dashed past her. "I'll be back in an hour! If a contractor calls while I'm gone, please assure him that I'll return the call before the day is over."

"Sure thing."

The late lunch crowd at the Montparnasse Café was sparse. Avery and Karyn converged at the same moment, giggling at the coincidence and hugging their greetings to one another.

"Can we please sit far away from the door? I am freezing! Why is it so friggin'cold? It's only November." Karyn shivered and refused to take off her coat right away.

"It is cold, isn't it? I hate to think what it's going to be like in January and February."

"Don't even mention it, girl. Hey, did you get my message?"

"As soon as I got to the office. I hadn't forgotten our lunch date today."

"Just wanted to make sure. We're all starting to forget stuff once in a while."

"Well, here's something else I didn't forget. I asked Whittingham Builder's General Manager if they needed a sales associate."

"Oh thanks, Avery. What did she say?"

"She didn't think they needed anyone right now, but she said you could send them your resume." Avery opened her menu.

"Great! Do I send it to their sales division?"

"No. She said you could mail it directly to her, and she would see that the sales division manager received it."

"Okay. What did you say her name was?"

"It's Sasha. Sasha Lewis."

"Oh yeah. That's right." Karyn scribbled the name on the edge of her napkin. "How did your meeting go? Did you see Clive Whittingham again, or did you just meet with his manager?"

Avery's fingers drummed the table. "Just the manager, Ms. Lewis."

Karyn distracted herself with the restaurant's lunchtime offerings. "What's she like? Is she gay, too?"

"We talked about the group home project, not about Ms. Lewis's sexuality."

Karyn refocused on her friend. "Yeah, I'll bet. Especially if you're still calling her Ms. Lewis."

A waitress interrupted their conversation for less than a minute, and the two friends took turns ordering their meals.

"We're on a first name basis." Avery clicked her tongue. "You are such a smart ass. And you have the same one-track mind that Jessie does."

"Interesting observation." Karyn paused, then continued. "Why shouldn't I? I'm in my mid-forties, still hot to trot and relatively attractive. Exactly like you, sister. So, are you going to describe this Sasha Lewis for me?"

"She appears to be in our age group, more than relatively attractive and judging by the serious looking ring she's sporting on her finger, a little less hot to trot than we are."

"Oh, shit. Really? Married?"



"I don't know for sure, but I'm betting that she has a wife."

"So, she's gay?" Karyn wore a triumphant expression on her face.

Avery nodded. "I'm sure of it." Avery wanted to drop the topic right there. She figured that Clive Whittingham's assistant was not in the dating pool. Although, when Avery thought about the snatches of phone conversation she'd overheard before leaving Sasha's office, she knew Sasha's union was not a happy one. That sad fact made Sasha Lewis even less available to Avery.

"What does Sasha look like, aside from married?"

"She's a little taller than I am, although I could have sworn she was shorter the last time I saw her."

"You saw her before today?" Karyn was puzzled.

"Actually, yes. Remember that conference I had to go to three weeks ago?" Avery gave her buddy a chance to recall the out of state trip.

"Yes, I remember."

"Sasha sat in the seat next to mine on the return flight from Portland."

"Get out of town!"

Avery always laughed when Karyn used this expression. It was always unexpected, out of the blue.

"So, did she remember you?"

"I think so. Remember I told you how the plane lurched to a stop and everybody fell forward? And remember my saying how clumsy I felt when I dropped all of my reading material--all of my gay reading material?"

"Oh my God! Yeah, now I remember! You said you didn't know if the sister who handed you your mags knew what she was looking at, and that she rolled everything together for you."

The two friends began eating their lunch

"It turns out the sister was Sasha Lewis."

"It's one small friggin'world." Karyn kept shaking her head in disbelief. "You know what else I remember?"

"What?"

"You told me you were sorry that woman slept for the entire flight, because when she woke up she looked at you with this little lesbian vibe about her. And you thought she was fine."

Now it was Avery's turn to feign protest. "I didn't say that. You're making it up."

"You said every word of that, Avery. Why would I make that up?"

"I have no idea." Avery raised one eyebrow and cast a look of suspicion at her friend.

"So when are you going to meet with her again?"

"Not for a while. Maybe not ever." Avery explained the situation in between bites of her lunch. "I have to meet with some other contractors to get competitive bids. If another builder underbids the Whittingham company we won't be doing business with Ms. Lewis--uh Clive."

Karyn gave Avery's salad the once over. "Is that as good as it looks?"

"Yes. And no, you can't have any. Look at that huge sandwich sitting in front of you! And you have the nerve to..."

"Avery? Hi!"

With Avery's fork perched in mid-air and Karyn's sandwich halfway to its destiny of becoming a fond memory, they looked up to see a young woman beaming at them.

"Hello, Loretta." Avery put down her fork and turned to Karyn. "Karyn, this is Loretta Jones. She's a parole officer who works with a couple of my agency's clients."

Karyn released her grip on the uneaten portion of her sandwich. "Nice to meet you."

"Same here." Loretta directed her gaze at Avery. "Did you get my message? I phoned you this morning."

"Yes I did. I was out of the office for a meeting, but I received it as soon as I arrived. Sorry I haven't had a chance to return your call. It's been a busy day."

"That's okay." Loretta stood there, bubbling with her obvious joy at running into Avery in a semi-social situation.

"Was it an emergency? Is there a problem with Nia Quarles?"

"No, not at all. I, uh, wanted to give you an update on her, and..." Loretta hesitated.

Avery continued to smile at Loretta, although she wasn't crazy about discussing client issues in front of a friend. "Okay. Could I call you later this afternoon?"

"Sure. Or I could call you on your cell or at home this evening." The young woman rushed through her torrent of words.

Avery answered her, slowly and deliberately. "How about if I get back to you before the end of the day?"

"That'll work." Loretta kept standing there, staring at the two friends, spending the currency that was her magnificent grin.

"It's been good running into you, Loretta. I'll phone you when I get back to my office." Avery was tactful but firm and Loretta got the message.

"Okay, Avery." She smiled at her before glancing quickly at Karyn. "Nice to have met you."

"Likewise." An amused Karyn scooped up the second half of her sandwich and took little nibbles of it. She waited all of five seconds before assaulting Avery verbally. "Lord, does that little girl have a giant crush on you, or what?"

"She's not that little."

"Well I'm glad you noticed." Karyn grinned. "Has she asked you out yet?"

"No, but our paths almost crossed at Sandy and Helen's house"

"That dinner party I advised you to go to." Karyn pointed her forefinger at Avery.

"Yup."

"You should have gone. You could be dating that woman by now."

"You're right, but..." Avery hesitated.

"But what?"

Avery's expression was flat. "She doesn't do it for me."

"Who does do it for you, sweetie?" Karyn cocked her head to one side.

Sasha Lewis' image floated through Avery's mind. "I don't know. Who does it for you?"

"Jessie." Karyn supplied the two-syllable answer in a heartbeat.

Avery was speechless.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Karyn implored her buddy to respond.

"Karyn, I had no idea. All of this time, you two are..."

"Friends." Karyn completed Avery's sentence. "I know. We're real good friends. We know each other so well we can complete each other's thoughts. That's one of the problems. I know everything about Jessie, what she likes and doesn't like, who she likes and doesn't like, who she's been with."

"Does Jessie have any idea you're in love with her?" Avery searched Karyn's face for an answer.

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Why haven't you told her?"

"Because Jessie plays around too much, and she's not ready for me." Karyn's tone, bright at the beginning of their lunch meeting, had become hushed and serious.

"She may be if you give her a chance. You won't know if you don't tell her how you're feeling, Karyn."

"And what if she's not feeling that way about me? I'm not willing to take that chance."

Avery thought about the last time she'd met Jessie and Karyn for dinner. She remembered the strange flutter-stop of motion that had happened twice that evening. Until now, she hadn't been able to identify the cause of that haunting interruption. Now it was clear to her. What she had witnessed was an opportunity not taken; a chance for one hand to touch another. The seconds had passed without one person being able to stop and speak to the other about her desire and her longing.

"Karyn, listen to me." Avery leaned forward. "Jessie won't hurt you. She can't wound you as much as you're damaging yourself by refusing to let her know what you're feeling. Be honest with yourself and with her. Talk to her."

"Thanks for your advice, Avery. But I don't know. If Jessie feels the same way, great. But if she doesn't, I've screwed up a wonderful friendship."

Avery nodded, fully understanding her friend's plight.

"I'll tell you what." Karyn recovered her playful teasing spirit. "If I follow your advice, will you promise to follow it also?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's clear that you're completely over Norma." Karyn paused. "And it's past time that you stopped turning down dinner party invitations and phone calls from a parole officer who clearly has a case on you. So promise me when someone interesting and available comes along, you'll be honest and you'll act on your feelings."

"It's a deal." Avery reached across the table and shook Karyn's hand.

"It's more than a deal, girl. It's a pact. Now let's pay this bill and get back to work. You have to return a phone call to a certain Loretta Jones. She's probably sitting somewhere staring at her cell phone."

"I wouldn't assume that."

Avery put on her jacket and steeled herself for the short walk back to her office. She wondered if she'd have a phone message from one of the rehab contractors. *I gotta get these bids submitted as soon as possible. I can't keep Sasha, uh Clive Whittingham dangling in the wind*, she thought.

## Chapter Seventeen

ANGELA JACKMAN FELT elated because her husband had a two day business trip to Washington, DC. She was determined to do anything and everything she wanted, after finishing all the assignments her spouse had left for her. Dutifully, she interviewed representatives of two different moving companies, guiding the men through her substantially furnished house and gathering prices for their packing and transportation services. Of course, Richard would be the one to finesse the final price and sign the contract.

Angela oversaw all of the housekeeper's tasks and on the second day of Richard's absence, she urged Sandrine to finish her work more quickly than usual. She composed her list of questions for the law firm's event planner, Lee Simpson, and then she conducted a three way conference call with Helen Cawley and Betsy Scott Price. She wanted her Social Committee mavens to weigh in with their concerns before she contacted Lee.

In the early afternoon she had one of those "how-you-doin', sistah-are-you-gettin'-any? raunchy phone calls with her buddy, Kahleah. From time to time, she needed to touch base with this friend who'd known her forever. Kahleah was without pretense, and Angela found herself craving that kind of relaxed conversation today.

Angela was bilingual. She could speak Philadelphia Main Line patois one moment, and street-wise sistah lingo the next. She was as comfortable exchanging pleasantries with the chancellor of the Bar Association as she was sidling up to the do-rag wearing brother manning the take-out window at the rib joint in the not-quitegentrified section of South Philly. Her real voice, traded years ago in exchange for one luxury or another, lay somewhere in between the two dialects.

When she was satisfied she'd heard Sandrine's half destroyed muffler announce its good-bye to her driveway, Angela climbed the turned staircase, retreated to the master bedroom suite, and sat

on Richard's side of the bed. She picked up the phone, and felt herself sinking into the lush duvet as she dialed the number that would connect her to a level of pleasure that had been no more than a fantasy a month ago. The conversation was short, bereft of unnecessary details.

Angela walked to the windows and closed their heavy drapes, shutting out the late afternoon sun. Then she returned to the first floor family room's built in bar. She fingered several bottles of wine, turning them over and reading their labels. Satisfied with one bottle in particular, she pulled it from its storage bin. She slid two wine glasses along the wooden overhead track, and almost as an afterthought, she plucked the steel and ivory corkscrew from its nest atop the bar.

Her first floor tasks almost completed, Angela left the family room and glided across the wide foyer. When she reached the door she turned the lock, releasing the deadbolt. Although she realized doing this could enable anyone to enter her house, she needed to make it easy for a certain someone to get in without having to use a key.

Angela then climbed the stairs and went directly to the master bedroom's adjoining bathroom, where she turned on the faucet perched above the two-person whirlpool tub. She loaded a jazz CD into the heart of the small but powerful music system housed on the top shelf of a cabinet. Methodically, she sprayed puffs of her favorite perfume into the air.

Moments later, Angela stepped out of her slacks and silk blouse. Carefully she hung each garment in the closet before removing her bra and panties. Then, walking out to the hallway, Angela placed her bra on the top step, arranging it in a way that formed a gesture pointing toward the entrance to the bedroom. She left the sheer black lace panties on the strip of marble that separated the bedroom from the bathroom.

As she tip-toed toward the bathroom, Angela became aware of her guest's arrival. She heard the front door opening and boot-clad feet pacing the length of the tiled foyer.

"Angela?" The visitor's voice grew faint as it disappeared into the interior of the first level.

Angela hesitated for only a second before stepping into the tub and submerging her body in the vibrating ripples of the water. Her skin adjusted to the water's warmth and a smile spread across her lips as she anticipated her visitor's presence.

"Angela! Where the hell are you?" The visitor's voice grew loud with impatience. She was close to Angela now. Very close.

"I'm in here, baby."

The warm moisture rising from the water misted Angela's eyelids, lending her a seductive appearance. She focused on the entry to the room just as the houseguest found her prey. The jean and boot-clad woman stopped at the edge of the bathroom and let the doorway frame her instant desire.

"You really did it. You left your front door unlocked for me." She parted her lips, but delayed stepping into the room.

"I told you I had an open-door policy as far as you're concerned."

"And I told you I wasn't coming back here again." Lee entered the steamy room and closed the door. She leaned her back against it and stared at Angela's nude form.

"Yeah, I remember. You said 'one and done' five visits ago. But we're both enjoying ourselves with this little affair, and I'm not ready for it to end. Besides, you've got to deliver what you've promised me in your latest instant message." Angela slid down further into the pulsating water.

"Don't you know you shouldn't believe everything you read?" The mirror in the generously appointed bathroom was fogged, masking the smirk on Lee's face.

"It's steamy in here. Why don't you come closer so that I can see you, baby?"

"You can see me fine right where I am."

"Are you afraid to give up some of that control to me?" Angela's tone didn't waver. She was supremely confident she was going to end her afternoon wrapped in Lee's lustful embraces.

"I'm not afraid of any part of you. Not even a little bit."

"Then come closer, Lee. Because every bit of me wants you right now." Angela thought she could see Lee relax her posture and move an inch or so away from the door.

"How much do you want me?" Lee slinked through the steam, ghost-like, toward the woman in the tub.

"More than I can stand."

Still out of Angela's reach, Lee sat on the side of the whirlpool and tugged at her boots. She unbuttoned her shirt and unzipped her pants slowly, delaying the gratification for both of them. Grinning at her lover, she peeled off her underwear and stepped into the water, easing herself down until she was staring directly into Angela's eyes. She used her hands to brace her body as she slid closer to the tub's owner.

"Shit!"

"What's the matter, baby?"

"I left my fucking watch on. It's not waterproof."

"Baby, you don't need to worry about the time, not now."

Angela laid back in the tub as Lee moved closer to her. The water jets bubbled against the outside surface of her thighs while Lee's foot paid attention to the inside of Angela's upper legs.

Filtered sunlight streamed through the half moon shaped window behind and above the tub.

Angela cooed, "Just relax, baby. You're not thinking about your live-in friend, are you?"

Lee mumbled. "Hell no. I'm here with you. If Sasha and her weight losing self can come home late from her damn job, I can come home late after getting some of the sweetest sex I've had in four years."

## Chapter Eighteen

I WASN'T DISAPPOINTED to find Lee's side of the garage empty when I came home tonight. I'd had a mind numbing day that left me with zero energy. The most I wanted to do for the next few hours was swallow a microwave dinner and stare mindlessly at the TV. I wasn't up to Lee's unpredictable games. Relieved, I wondered if she was having dinner with one of her few friends. Or perhaps she was meeting with that social committee from Richard Jackman's bigwig law firm.

I felt grateful Lee had won that contract, because organizing the two mid-February events occupied a lot of her time and energy. Whenever she was busy with a job's minutiae, she took her foot off my neck. And this job was keeping her very busy. Night after night, she'd been isolating herself in the den, emailing or instant messaging the caterer or the florist or the furniture rental people. I didn't complain about her absences. In fact, I'd been grateful to be out of the line of fire ever since mid-November until now, early December.

My days have accelerated from busy to hectic. In the midst of building two sizable residential developments and three custom homes, Clive's started negotiating to buy a huge tract of land south of the city, in a county where no black developer has ever built houses. My boss's plate was full, and mine was overflowing.

Our company has been riding the crest of a housing industry boom, although Clive claims that he's begun hearing the hiss of air leaking from the prosperity balloon. Just this morning, three different home buyers panicked and quit their deals, happy to sacrifice their hefty down payments if that meant avoiding mortgage defaults somewhere down the pike.

This afternoon, we got word that labor problems were on the horizon. The electrical workers union was threatening a walkout that could shut down every construction site in the area. No building project would be spared. Although Clive dreaded a crippling strike, I'd heard him say repeatedly that he'd refuse to build as much as a tree house without the help of organized



laborers. With the news of an impending job action spreading across the media, we'd had nervous customers ringing our phones all afternoon.

And there was the Jackman house, where nothing pleased the prospective owner. Mr. Jackman, whom I'd renamed Richard Jackass, moaned and groaned about each detail, as if Clive's company had never built a custom home before this one. Jackass was habitually rude, especially to women. If I were as straight as an arrow, I couldn't be married to him for a minute. I didn't know how his wife put up with his shit. Maybe she was getting a little something on the side.

Late in the day, one of our accountants stuck his head in my office and murmured something about a problem with the third quarter tax payment. By then I was trying to wade my way through a swamp of issues, so I suggested that he write a detailed memo for Clive. What we didn't need was to become embroiled in an IRS situation. I wondered however, if a certain pro bono rehab job might neutralize the pain of a tax bill. But perhaps there was little need to speculate about that, as we hadn't heard anything from Avery Sloan in the last three weeks. I was curious about the status of her group home project, so I weighed the wisdom of giving her a call. I probably didn't need to do that. She would have called us if the Baker Center Board of Directors wanted to hire Whittingham Builders.

At home finally and given the gift of Lee's temporary absence, I could see the light in the forest. A peaceful dinner, a drink and TV awaited me. I slung my workbag over my shoulder and trudged slowly along the driveway's edge until I reached the mailbox. The cold metal cylinder gave up a fistful of envelopes and circulars.

Eager to get inside, I fumbled through my pockets and found my keys. The whole house was pitch black, so I guessed Lee had been gone for some time. The second I took off my jacket, I realized the house was as cold as it was dark. Lee had refused to let me install a timer for the thermostat, preferring instead to keep the temperature set at an unreasonable fifty-five degrees. We'd had that argument so many times that I finally gave in to her illogical protests.

I put my jacket back on, walked over to the little metal rectangle on the wall, and adjusted the temperature setting. By the time I turned on some lights and opened the mail, the rooms would be warmer. Lord! Who could survive in this cold house?

"Randi! Randi!" I stood by the stairs, yelling for our cat. I knew that her fur coat was warmer than my leather jacket, but for a moment I pictured her frozen in place somewhere up on the second floor. She must have been ready to be rescued, because down she pranced. Her front paws hit the bottom step at the same moment I heard the doorbell's chimes. Randi bolted right back up to her survival shelter, wherever that had been, and I strode to the front door and peered through the sidelight.

"Clive?" I was more than surprised to see my boss standing on the porch. I couldn't imagine why he was here.

"Hello, Sasha! Sorry to be a bother..."

"Come on in. You're never a bother."

He must have noticed that I was still wearing my jacket. "Looks as if you've just gotten home, and I know that you had a horrid day. But I've come with a bit of good news."

"Sit down. Take off your coat." I lead him into the living room.

Clive followed me, glancing around appreciatively. "Thanks. I've always loved your lounge, you know."

I nodded my thanks and felt my usual amusement with Clive whenever he used a Britishism, like calling the living room the "lounge" or the master bathroom the "ensuite."

"It's a little cold in the lounge, so if you want to keep your coat on for a while, I'll understand. Lee turned the heat off before she left."

By now Clive was carrying his coat over his arm.

"You must be used to the cold, love, because you're still with her." Clive's way of handling his frustration about my remaining in my "one-way relationship" was to call it that, and then to refrain from talking about Lee.

"Damn, Clive."

"Sorry. That wasn't kind of me, was it?"

"I'll ignore your remark." My answer sounded serious, although I smiled when I gave it.

Clive adjusted his tie, loosening its knot. "By the way, this is not truly cold."

I remembered Clive describing the damp English chill that enveloped him during his childhood. That weather made our Philadelphia-area winters mild in comparison.

"If you say so." I couldn't hide my curiosity. "What's up?"

"Well first, I got your memo about the three cancellations, and while that's a disappointment, frankly I've been expecting it. I had long chats with two of my competitors, and they've been experiencing call-offs for weeks now. We're lucky that ours are just starting."

I was slightly puzzled by Clive's nonchalance. "What should we do about it?"

"Nothing, straight away." Clive looked off into the distance, thoughtful. "Give me a chance to talk to our marketing and sales division. Maybe we'll offer those three homes at a reduced price.

Two of them are on premium lots."

"Okay." I nodded. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Reanimated, Clive beamed at me. "That would be great, love. While you're brewing it up, I'll tell you the really good news."

I went to the kitchen, filled the kettle with water, and located the box of loose tea. Impatient to hear about Clive's latest development, I returned to the living room before the water came to a boil.

"So, what's going on?"

"Very late this afternoon I received a phone call from our Avery Sloan." Clive paused long enough to look for my reaction.

"I wondered what became of that project." I labored to keep my face expressionless.

"Hmm...The Baker Rainbow Center has decided to go with another contractor who has underbid us."

"That's too bad." I responded robotically to my boss'news. "Oops, I hear the kettle." Grateful to hear its high pitched whistle, I jumped up from my seat and walked back toward the kitchen. Obviously, Clive wasn't finished with his story about the rejected rehab project. He kept talking even though I had left the room.

"So I underbid the competitor!"

I stood there out of Clive's view, pouring boiling water into the teacups, and making no effort to stop the smile that had come out to play with the corners of my mouth.

"How did you manage to do that?"

"It was very easy. I simply told Avery that if her organization could purchase the materials at our contractors'cost, we could donate all of the time and the labor."

I went back into the living room, cautiously balancing the two cups of steeping orange pekoe. The day's news about the slow down in the construction industry flitted through my mind. Was this the best time for us to tackle a pro-bono project? "Clive, how are we going to do that?"

"Quite frankly, I need the tax write-off. We can begin as soon as her board signs off on the contracts. That way, we'll have a few days of work under our belts before the end of the tax year. The rest will be in the next quarter. What do you think?"

Now it was Avery Sloan's image filtering everything else in my consciousness. I smiled at my boss. "I'm glad that we got the contract."

"Yes, so am I." Clive reached inside his attaché case and withdrew a proposal notebook. "I'd like you to meet with Avery and the chairperson of her Board of Directors tomorrow morning at ten." Clive passed the packet to me.

"At her office or ours?"

"Neither. At the project site. Avery said they like elements of all three of my proposals." Clive smiled proudly. "They need to decide precisely what they want in the house before we can draw up the final contract."

I nodded.

"So take the notebook with you. They'll have plenty of questions, and I've told Avery how experienced you are. She'll be depending upon you for wise advice." Clive winked at me.

"That's the only kind of advice that I dispense, Clive."

"Oh, I'm aware of that, love." He closed his business case and sat there beaming at me.

"And you can thank me anytime you want."

"For what?"

"For giving you a chance to work with the lovely Avery Sloan."

I did think she was lovely, but I wasn't admitting that to Clive. "That rehab is one little job among several huge ones. I won't be working all that much with her."

Clive chuckled. "I'll see what I can do about that. I was telling Eddie just the other day about how attractive and what a go-getter she is."

"You were, were you?" I knew where this was going, and that it couldn't go very far, because I heard the garage door opening and the sound of Lee's car door slamming shut.

"Yes I was. You have to admit that Ms. Sloan is quite sharp." Clive sat forward in his seat.

"Clive, it sounds like you have a crush on her."

"Oh not I, love."

It must be true that timing is everything, because at that very moment, Lee entered the house. She was as surprised to see Clive there as I had been half an hour earlier. And a surprised Lee is not always a pleasure to deal with.

"Clive. Nice to see you." She stood in front of him, smileless, and offered her hand.

"Good to see you as well, Lee." Clive's demeanor stiffened.

"Have you had dinner?" Lee's lips brushed my cheek. I didn't know what grabbed my attention the most; the fact that she was showing off in front of Clive with this gesture of physical intimacy that very seldom occurred between us any more, or the distinct odor of wine that escaped through her pores.

"No, I'd just gotten home when Clive arrived."

"She didn't work hard enough for you at the office, Clive? Got to follow her home and give her another assignment?" Lee's temporary cordiality cooled quickly.

"Quite the contrary. Sasha had a trying day, so I stopped by with some good news for her."

"Let me guess. You're ordering her to go on a vacation immediately, so that she can repair things with her neglected partner?" Lee's sarcasm oozed onto the floor.

"Uh, no. We've submitted the winning bid for an important project. I wanted her to be the first to know because she did some of the ground work." Clive shrugged into his coat. "Time for me to go, love. Eddie is waiting, I'm sure."

Lee stood her ground, as if she were guarding a fortress.

I began walking with him toward the door. "Thanks for the news, Clive. I'll pull the file for the Baker Center rehab tomorrow morning."

"Right." Clive winked at me, subtly. "I like to call it the Sloan project. What do you think?"

"I think of it as the Baker Center project."

"What matters is that we have a chance to do this, right?" Clive spoke quickly. He turned slightly and aimed his next sentence at the living room. "Lee, take care of yourself."

"I always do, Clive."

The door was barely closed before Lee discharged her first volley. "What the hell did he want? And why did he bother you here at home?"

"He told you why he was here. He wanted to give me a heads-up about a rehab project we've gotten."

"Why does he call it the Sloan project and you call it something else?"

"Sloan is the name of the person who's organizing the project. The Baker Center is the organization that's sponsoring the job. They're rehabilitating an old house to convert into a group home facility."

"For retarded people or drug addicts?"

"It's for formerly incarcerated women who need a place to stay while they get their lives back on track." I concentrated on answering Lee's first question. To explain who Avery Sloan was would have stoked up the embers in Lee's jealousy-furnace and I didn't want to do that.

"Where is the house? In the city?"

"Yeah. In Mt. Airy." Lee was asking more questions about my work than she had in the past two months.

"Better there than here. I'll bet these suburban types wouldn't let a group home for ex-convicts settle in their neighborhood."

I nodded, relieved to be talking about residential politics instead of Avery Sloan or the Baker Center. "I was surprised to see you were out when I got home. Did you have to meet with a client?"

"Do I have to account for every minute of my day?" Lee's short fuse sparked.

I breathed deeply. "No, Lee, you don't. I was concerned, that's all."

"You were probably annoyed that I wasn't here fixing dinner as usual."

"No I wasn't annoyed."

Lee continued, either because she hadn't heard me or because she chose to ignore what I'd said. "I have a business life of my own, you know. And a private life too."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The thinnest edge of resentment slipped past my lips.

"Figure it out yourself."

Lee's bitter tone suggested a chapter of our relationship book I'd thought about, but never wanted to read. I preferred to leave it there undisturbed, in a place where it wouldn't overtake and hurt me.

I made a move to go upstairs while Lee walked toward the den and disappeared behind its closed door. I could have given in and done something mindless, like watch the news talkers on TV. Or I could have done some homework, like reviewing the three proposals in the notebook Clive left for me. Instead, I crossed the room, following Lee into the den. She sat at her desk, facing her computer's screen. I could see the colorful image of her business homepage filling the large square. A smaller instant message rectangle hovered in the upper left hand corner. Lee's fingers remained poised above her keyboard, waiting for incoming text to scroll its way across the next dialogue space.

"Lee, I was wondering if..."

My partner jerked the cursor to the "X" that cancels IM, and the unfinished sentence disappeared. Lee swung around in her chair.

"Why the fuck did you sneak up on me?"

"I didn't sneak up on you. I just walked into the room."

"Why didn't you say something?" Lee's accusatory glare burned through me like a laser beam.

"Because I don't talk to doors. Why was it closed, anyway?" My fatigue had lowered my tolerance level and accelerated my response time.

Lee stammered. "Because I, uh, wanted to keep the room warm."

There was something about the furtive glint in her eye that pulled back the curtain and let me take a peak at Lee's dishonesty. If the sly expression in her eyes was act one of her deception, her comment about her mysterious "private life" was the play's rising action. Everything about this moment telegraphed that my lover had been unfaithful to us. The entire time I'd been trying to convince myself to be patient with her rollercoaster moods and tantrums, Lee had left the arms of our relationship and had wrapped herself around someone else.

We stared at each other for an eternity. For once, Lee was without words. She realized I knew she'd invited another person into our bed. Refusing to abandon eye contact with her, I recovered my voice.

"Who are you sleeping with, Lee?"

"Nobody you know."

Though wounded, I felt grateful for her admission of infidelity. "How long have you been seeing her?"

For some reason, I couldn't get past the euphemisms. I couldn't give myself permission to say "having sex" or "fucking" or "making love." "Seeing her" was as graphic as I could get.

"For a while, Sasha." She answered me without contrition.

"When did it begin?" What was the point of that question? Did it really matter if Lee was bedding another woman all those times that I called her from the office in the middle of the work day, only to find her not at home, or the times when she'd insisted that I phone to let her know if I had to work late?

"Were you with her when I was in Maine, when you threatened to burn down the house because I was away on a business trip?" There had to be some connection between her disloyalty and her rash acts and mad threats.

"No." Lee regarded me calmly. She folded her arms across her chest.

Even though I figured she wouldn't tell me her lover's name, I wanted to see as much of the picture as I could. "Is this serious?"

"Is it serious?" Lee unfolded her arms and dragged her fingernails through her hair. "What the hell does that mean, Sasha? I'm fuckin'someone regularly, you've found out about it, and you want to know if it's serious?"

I just stood there in the middle of the room half way between my desk and hers, feeling like I was in the middle of a bad dream. The brittle anger in her voice awakened me. Was I not the wronged party here? The aggrieved one? Where was the crushing pain? Where was the panicky fear of impending loss? Where was the booming fury that should have been shaking hands with the bitterness of discovering betrayal? I didn't feel any of those emotions. In their place, I felt a huge emptiness along with a sense of incurable exhaustion.

I shook my head from side to side. "I can't believe this is happening, Lee. I know we haven't been close for..."

"You don't know the half of it!" Her rage had no end.

"I'm sure I don't. And I'm not going to find out about it tonight." Instead of backing out of the den, I turned around, casually glancing at the wall above my desk.

"Oh, my God!" I gasped and looked back at a glaring Lee. "Why did you do this?"

"Because I needed to find out whose phone numbers these are." Lee answered defiantly.

I approached my desk, reached over it, and touched the wall's cold flat surface. Looking down I saw a fleet of spent fireplace matches littering the carpet. Lee had used the darkened, burnt heads to write three telephone numbers and a message on the formerly cream colored wall. I recognized the numbers, because I'd been dialing them a lot lately.

The terse missive read:

**"WHO THE FUCK BELONGS TO THESE NUMBERS AND WHICH ONE OF THESE WOMEN ARE YOU SCREWING?"**

I stepped back from my desk. Too stunned to say much else, I muttered, "I'm going out for a while."

"Before answering the questions on the wall?"



This was too crazy to believe. Lee was having an affair with some unnamed woman, and she felt justified in demanding I account for three of my work related contacts. If she were that deranged, then I had the guts to answer her with the cloying patience of a dayroom attendant in a friggin'mental institution.

I pointed to the first phone number and spoke quietly but deliberately. "That number up there belongs to a new site manager Clive hired recently." Then I gestured toward the other two numbers. "This one is a new cement subcontractor we've just started using. And that one belongs to a guy who does the hardscaping at the custom homesites."

With less than no fight left in me, I picked my jacket up from the living room sofa where I'd deposited it during Clive's abbreviated visit. I walked into the kitchen and bent down to drop some food into Randi's bowl. Then I left the house.

It took me an hour's worth of driving before I figured out where I was going. I headed to the office, thinking I could spend the night on Clive's sectional, huddled under my jacket. I could sleep there and leave for home early enough to get a shower, a change of clothing and a cup of coffee before any staffers arrived for work the next morning. I had to hope my house and clothing would still be there, and I prayed Lee would be gone.

The once hazy notion that changes in my life were on the way had come out of its soft-focus blur. It was now a crisp and clearly defined image. That possibility that I could leave Lee and survive surged through me.

I parked in Clive's spot, the closest one to the entrance. Then, I disarmed the security system and entered the building. Stopping in my darkened office, I pulled out the Baker Center folder from the file cabinet and I did something out of pure need and want. I phoned the Baker Center's office to leave a voice message for Avery Sloan. What I had to say was not earth shattering nor terribly important. It was no different from any message I routinely left for new Whittingham clients. But I knew that before the tape gave me permission to speak, I'd hear Avery's calm rich voice urging me to express myself. It never occurred to me that she'd be in her office at that time of night.

"Good evening. Josephine Baker Rainbow Center. How may I help you?"

"Avery? It's Sasha Lewis at Whittingham Builders."

"I know. I recognize your voice. How are you?"

"I'm fine." And, for some reason, pleased that she recognized my voice. "I was ready to leave a message on your machine. I can't believe you're still in your office."

"We had an emergency late in the day, and I'm getting ready to leave now." Avery paused, hesitating. "Are you calling me from home?"

"No. I'm in my office, too. I had some issues to deal with." I didn't want to tell her that my biggest issue had happened an hour ago in my den, not here at work.

"So, what message were you going to leave?"

Still recovering from the surprise of hearing Avery herself answer the phone, I struggled to remember why I had called her. "Oh, Clive told me you'd accepted his amended bid, so in my role of General Manager of Whittingham Builders, I was calling to welcome you as our client, and to say I know we'll have a smooth working relationship."

"Okay. As the coordinator of the Baker Rainbow Center, I say thank you."

I could feel the imprint of amusement in Avery's voice. Was she teasing me? Had I been too formal? Not knowing what to say next, I stared down at my desk and willed another sentence to leave my lips.

"Uh, there's one more thing. I can meet with you and your Board of Directors person at the house tomorrow morning. Is ten o'clock okay?"

"That's perfect, Sasha."

For some reason, it felt like Avery had more to say to me.

"Listen, if you have one more minute, could I ask you something?" Avery continued.

"What's that?"

"What message would you have left for me if you'd been calling for yourself and not in the role of your company's general manager?"

A thousand answers zipped through my mind, and most of them were inappropriate when I thought about the shitty place I was in with Lee. I wouldn't be doing any of us any favors if what I really wanted to say tumbled out of me. So I swallowed my thoughts and cleared my throat.

"I'd leave the same message. I'd welcome you, and say that I hope we'll enjoy working with each other."

Avery responded slowly. "I see."

*Not really, Avery, I thought. I'm not letting you see much of anything.*

An awkward silence wedged itself between us.

"Well, after we tour the house tomorrow and make some final decisions, the next step is getting the Board of Directors to meet with Clive to sign the contract." Avery shifted abruptly to her business mode.

"That sounds about right." I felt awkward and clumsy. "I'll see you in the morning, then. Good-night, Avery."

"Good-night, Sasha. Good talking to you."

I hung up the phone and trekked down the hallway to Clive's office, totally convinced that Avery Sloan had no idea at all how good it had been for me to hear her voice tonight. As troubled as I was, I fell asleep thinking about why she had asked me her question, and brainstorming the messages that I might have left, had I been phoning her simply as me, and not Whittingham's General Manager.

Waking up early was not a problem because I didn't sleep well. It was cold in Clive's quarters, and I must have been tensing my leg muscles in an effort to stay warm. They kept cramping painfully.

After using the restroom, I made sure Clive's office door was locked. I tip-toed through the hallway, reluctantly leaving my footprints on the freshly vacuumed carpets. Before leaving, I reset the building's alarm system and prepared to be assaulted by the cold morning air. My car, accustomed to its warm berth in my garage, wore a thin cover of frost on its windows. As much as I needed to get home to a hot shower and fresh clothes, I realized if I wanted to see the road in the faint pre-sunrise daybreak, I had no choice other than taking enough time to clear the windshield. I scraped every inch of the car's glass, free-associating the entire time.

When I finally finished and got into the car, I checked my watch. Ten after five. I'd be home and preparing to travel to Mt. Airy before Clive arrived at the office to begin his work day. What if he had come in earlier than ever and discovered me sleeping on his couch? I was certain that once again, he'd show me his friendship and entreat me to end my relationship with Lee.

It was all so ironic because Clive knew Lee long before I met her. When Lee and I first got together after that business trip to England, it was Clive who encouraged our love affair. He coached our long distance romance, and he rooted like a cheerleader when he convinced Lee to relocate, telling her that the business climate in the Philadelphia area was perfect for an event planner. Now he was counseling me to leave the union.

"Get out before you get hurt any further, Sasha. I was mistaken about Lee. Clearly she's not the best person for you." His cajoling, while delivered in his gentle accented voice, had become more frequent, more insistent. He claimed he chided me for his own business related reasons; that every day I was preoccupied with my relationship problems was a day I couldn't give one hundred percent to my job. I bought that until one evening not long ago when I sat down and talked with his partner. Eddie claimed that Clive was afraid for me; that he knew how destructive Lee could be, even if I couldn't see that.

I turned into my driveway, and quickly glanced to my left. The army of stark gray and brown tree trunks lining my neighbor's property offered their leafless limbs up to the sky. At some point, probably when I'd been too preoccupied to pay attention, they had discarded their quilts of oranges, reds, and purples. I supposed winter's official start was little more than two weeks away.

As far as I was concerned, the unofficial kick-off of winter had already arrived, freezing me to the core with its bone chilling reality.

## Chapter Nineteen

EVERY SLOAN STOOD on the porch of the large three-story house on Mt. Airy Avenue, clutching the proposal-filled notebook. She peered through the un-curtained living room window, checking on the whereabouts of Margaret Zelinskie, the Chairperson of The Baker Rainbow Center's Board of Directors. Margaret, a no-nonsense person, was taking a self-guided tour of the building. She couldn't afford to waste any minutes this morning because she had sandwiched this meeting between two of her own job obligations. One hour was all the time she could spare before returning to her Center City law office.

Avery noticed a late model Honda SUV slow down and then pull into the property's driveway. After another moment passed, she saw Sasha Lewis emerge from the burgundy-hued vehicle and pause to take a long look at the driveway before climbing the steps to the front porch. Avery was curious about the reason for Sasha's driveway inspection.

"Good morning, Avery. Good to see you again." Sasha shifted her notebook and shook Avery's hand.

"Good morning. Same here." Avery smiled at her. She enjoyed the warmth that lingered on her hand, after Sasha withdrew hers. "I know you burned the midnight oil last night, so I hope you got enough rest."

"Uh, actually, I didn't sleep that well last night." Sasha responded.

Avery's smile changed to a look of concern. "Are you all right?"

"It's probably a peri-menopausal thing. It happens from time to time." Sasha explained.

"Yeah, I know what you mean, unfortunately."

The two women exchanged understanding nods. Sasha waved her hand the length of the porch.

"Well, shall we go inside or start out here?"

"We'd better start on the inside." Avery pursed her lips. "My board chairperson is waiting for us."

Avery entered the house a step ahead of Sasha.

"Since we both have the three proposals here, why don't we go room by room and put a check next to each item that your agency wants? Then I'll send you a detailed contract that you can review before it's signed by all of the parties." Sasha offered.

"That sounds like an efficient way to do things." Margaret Zelinskie strutted forward, extending her hand. "Hi. I'm Margaret Zelinskie. You must be Sasha Lewis, the builder's rep."

"Yes, I am." Sasha accepted Margaret's rapid handshake.

"Do you think this process will take more than an hour?" Margaret glanced at her watch. "Because that's all the time I have."

"Yes, it may take more than sixty minutes." Sasha sneaked a look at Avery. "This is a big house and there are a lot of choices to discuss and decisions to be made."

Avery watched Ms. Zelinskie steal another quick glance at her time piece. She sought to appease her. "We'll work as quickly as we can."

"Great. Let's start here in the living room." Margaret commandeered the tour. "Avery, we don't need to do anything other than paint and refinish the floor in here, right?"

"I suppose so." Avery nodded in agreement.

"You indicated the windows need to be replaced, and you may want to either clean and service the fireplace, or convert it to a vent-free gas-burner. Definitely install heat saving glass doors." Sasha said.

"Good idea. The house does have gas service coming into it, and that way no one has to be bothered with firewood and all of the problems associated with burning it. Thanks, Sasha." Avery smiled her appreciation for Sasha's suggestion. She felt comfortable with Sasha's building know-how.

"Moving right along, let's go into the dining room. Any changes here other than fresh paint and redoing the floors?" Margaret fairly pulled Avery into the next room.

"I liked Clive's idea of taking away the top half of the wall between this room and the kitchen. He thought a pass-through would be practical as well as give the impression of a larger space." Clearly Avery had thought about this change.

Sasha agreed. "And it's not a load-bearing wall, so we wouldn't have to bolster it with a secondary support structure."

"Let's put a check next to that, please. Sounds like a good idea." Margaret began tapping her foot as Sasha and Avery discussed adding electrical outlets and heating and cooling vents. She interrupted the two women. "Do you mind if we skip the kitchen until later? That's going to take a major amount of time. Can we go to the second and third floors now?"

"If you're sure about that, Margaret. I did want you to be in on the choices for the kitchen upgrades." Avery spoke to Margaret's back as the harried lawyer had already begun her ascent to the next level.

Sasha and Avery traded frowns and Sasha mouthed, "Don't worry. We'll do this the right way."

When they reached the top of the stairs, Sasha spoke louder. "Shall we put a check beside the new fuel efficient furnace and the duct cleaning?"

"Yes, that's a must. I had a new heating system installed in my house two years ago. What a difference it's made in our bills." Margaret answered without looking at her two companions. She gazed at the hallway ceiling. "I'm sure we've saved a couple hundred dollars already."

The women surveyed the first bedroom. Assuming a general's pose, Margaret fired off an order. "Now, you two will decide what changes, if any, you want the carpenters to make in the bedrooms. My concern is with the bathrooms, especially the spaces where you want to add two of them."

"Walk down here, Ms. Zelinskie." Sasha pointed to a large walled area in the hallway.

"Oh please call me Margaret, Sasha."

Sasha smiled. "Okay. That'll take less time than 'Ms. Zelinskie, won't it?'"

Avery concealed a grin by putting her hand over her mouth. She regarded Sasha, admiring her sense of humor as well as her building expertise.

"Do you see this wall space between the two bedrooms?" Sasha ran her hand over the expanse of wall. Renegade paint chips loosened and fell to the floor. "It's covering unused space that's structurally sound and large enough for us to open up and create a small bathroom with a shower, a toilet and a pedestal sink. Since you've already got one large bathroom at the end of this hallway, the additional one will give you two bathrooms on this floor. Avery and I can work out the details about the placement of the fixtures you want us to install."

Steamrolling along, Sasha kept narrating. "Now we have exactly the same configuration on the third floor. If we put a second bathroom up there, we can keep the plumbing lines in a straight run. You'll have a four bathroom, six bedroom structure with plenty of room for your clients. The women won't be bumping into each other and struggling to find enough time for each one to use the bathroom."

Margaret beamed at Avery. "You were right, kiddo. She knows her stuff." Then she turned to Sasha. "I'm impressed with your knowledge."

"Thanks. If you had more time, I could really dazzle you."

Avery didn't know Sasha well enough to be able to decipher whether her remarks were sarcastic or genuine. Whichever they were, Avery did know that she appreciated the way Sasha patiently handled the type-A chairperson of her Board of Directors.

Checking her watch with the regularity of a nervous tic, Margaret yelped a frantic, "I have to get going or I'll be late for a meeting downtown." She stuck out her hand toward Sasha. "It was good to finally meet you. Avery has mentioned your name so many times. I'm sure that you two will make the best decisions about the renovations. And I'll support whatever plans you finalize."

Avery shouted after her, her voice echoing as it bounced from one side of the staircase to the other. "Margaret, I'll send you an e-mail with an update. Can you let the other board members know we have to meet to sign the contract with Mr. Whittingham?"

"Sure! Consider it done. I'll phone you with a date and time."

Avery remained standing at the top of the steps, still looking down but seeing no one. Sasha stood a few yards away, her notebook resting on the floor against the baseboard and her arms folded across her chest.

"Whew! It looks like Margaret Zelinskie is just a fading memory."

Avery laughed at Sasha's remark. She gazed directly into Sasha's eyes. "Margaret is always in a rip-roaring hurry. You handled her very well, though. I've noticed she does slow down whenever anyone talks faster than she does."

"Well, I'm glad my strategy worked, but running down the bathroom plans at hyperspeed is not the best way for a client to understand things. It takes a while to explain a whole house renovation." Sasha paused.

Avery was more than happy to have been at this meeting with Sasha. She had no clue however, about how determined Sasha had been to keep this morning's appointment. She had no idea that Sasha's lack of sleep last night, and her struggle earlier today to get away from a one-sided scream fest with an unstable woman had stood in her way. When Avery looked at Sasha, she saw a strong independent figure. She never suspected this same woman was so close to abandoning a future with a partner who had betrayed her for the last time.

"Uh, Avery, do you want to go up to the third floor and give the bedrooms a once-over?"

Avery agreed. "Sure."

They climbed the stairs and, one by one, went into each of the three bedrooms. The only items they both checked off in the proposal pages concerned repairing the floor boards where dripping water from a past leak in the roof had left liquid scars. Avery agreed to decide on room colors when she consulted with the painting contractor. Both the existing bathroom and the proposed one needed fixtures, but there was plenty of time to examine the range of choices.

Avery speculated the house would need additional cable outlets for future televisions as well as more electrical outlets. She appreciated listening to Sasha's suggestions, and she felt proud of Sasha's confidence in her ability to make certain decisions as she met with the subcontractors. The two women returned to the first floor.

Avery couldn't contain her admiration for Sasha. "How did you learn all of this stuff? Was your father a builder?"

Sasha smiled proudly. "No, not at all. My grandmother raised me, and she was a nurse's assistant."

"Did you study architecture, or anything related to building?"

"No, I was an English major. Then I got a graduate degree in business." Sasha paused to tug on the handrail and then the newel post at the bottom of the stairs.

"That's interesting."

"I don't see anything in the proposal about this old post, so if you don't mind, I'm going to add that it should be shored up or replaced." Sasha tapped the old wooden limb.

Avery smiled slightly. "I don't mind at all. We have to have this house up to code and safe for the residents."

Sasha led Avery into the kitchen.

"Shall we tackle this major time taker'?"

"Do we have enough time?" Avery mimicked Margaret.

"I do if you do, lady." Sasha said and flashed Avery a broad smile.

"I definitely have the time, especially if you'll fill in the gaps about your journey from a grad degree in business to becoming the general manager of a construction company. Sort of hard-hat, isn't it?" Avery realized her comments made her sound as if she was flirting with Sasha. Unabashed, she made no effort to retract what she had said.

Sasha affected her best construction worker voice. She put her notebook on the counter closest to where she was standing, placed her hands on her hips authoritatively, and rocked back on her heels. "Well actually, Ma'am, I may not look hard-hat, but I am in my soul."

Avery couldn't staunch the warm blush that spread across her face. She was intrigued by Sasha Lewis. And she wanted to know more about this woman with the powerful demeanor, quick wit, and deep brown, penetrating eyes that communicated all kinds of intelligence.



"I went to Penn for my master's degree. That's where I met Clive. He was earning his degree in architecture and we kept bumping into each other at LGBT events. I wasn't a raging success as a free-lance journalist trying to break into the world of advertising, and I was sort of kicking around from one job to another."

"Did Clive start his company right after he got his degree?"

Sasha laughed. "Not by a long shot. First he worked for a megabucks builder. He did everything to get experience." Sasha stopped talking and gazed at Avery. "Why am I telling you all of this? Are you sure you have the time?"

Avery, biting her lower lip slightly, gazed back at Sasha. "I definitely have the time."

Sasha nodded. "Okay. Back to Clive. He helped dig and pour foundations, he did framing, interior trim carpentry, all kinds of labor. And in time, that megabucks builder promoted him to building superintendent at one of his largest developments."

Avery leaned against the counter as she listened, mesmerized. "And what were you doing while Clive was learning the building business?"

"I got a real estate license and passed the realtor's certification exam. The money was good, and I had decent people skills."

"And by then, Clive was ready to leave Mr. Manydollars and strike out on his own?" Avery speculated.

"By then Clive had fallen in love with Mr. Manydollars' handsome gay son."

"This is a wonderful story." Avery's smile broadened.

"Believe me, it has its ups and downs. The handsome son, Mr. Manydollars, Jr., convinced his father that his dalliance with Clive was only a same-sex phase, and that his dad needed to fire Clive so that said son would no longer be tempted to give in to his misguided impulses."

"Well that's crappy, isn't it?"

"Extremely. I held Clive's hand many a night when he cried into his beer. Then, I introduced him to a realtor buddy of mine named Eddie. He turned out to be the real love of Clive's life."

"A story with a happy ending. Great." Avery treated herself to the gift of seeing Sasha's face glow in the morning light streaming through the kitchen window.

"Yeah. And Mr. Manydollars Sr. wasn't all bad. He gave Clive a first rate job reference and a lead on getting a start-up loan when Clive decided to take the brave step of beginning his own enterprise. He asked me if I wanted to work part-time selling houses for him, and the rest, as they say, is history."

"And a lot of hard work, I imagine." Avery beamed at Sasha.

"Now I see why Clive speaks so highly of you."

"If I'm not mistaken, according to Margaret Zelinskie, you've spoken highly of me, also."

Avery wondered if Sasha was now flirting with her. "And every word appears to have been earned."

"Well, you might be taking a chance on that one." Sasha blushed, then walked around the perimeter of the kitchen. "So which appliances should we upgrade? The stove, the dishwasher, the fridge?"

Avery was calm and confident. She watched Sasha's every move. "Our budget will cover all of the above, especially if we buy the medium grade equipment."

Sasha opened a couple of the cabinet doors and examined the hinges. "I think you can get away with refacing these cabinets, putting in new drawers and hardware, and installing a new counter surface."

"And how about the floor?"

"It's time for a new one. Looks like a herd of elephants did one too many line dances in here."

Both women laughed.

After referring to her notebook, Sasha walked over to the large pantry at the other end of the kitchen. "This served the original owners well, I'm sure, but for your clients' benefit I'd suggest converting the space to a laundry room." She pointed to the sink and faucets. "There's water service in here already."

"That's a wonderful idea. Then no one will have to go down to the basement to wash clothes."

"Exactly." Sasha closed her proposal book. "Speaking of the basement, our structural guy already filed his report about the support beams and the condition of the floor. Did you have any questions, or did you want to go down there?"

Avery shook her head. She imagined being in the dark space of the basement with Sasha, and she wondered if she'd be able to resist the urge to touch her. "No. That's not necessary. We know the basement needs waterproofing and the main beams are sound. I think I remember we want a few of the joists to get those thingies that stop any squeaking in the floor boards."

"Yeah, I recall reading that in the report." Sasha smiled generously.

"So, I guess we're finished?" Avery was relieved and somber at the same time.

"Yes, that does it. Any questions?"

"Not right now, but probably as soon as we both drive away I'll have a million of them."

"Hey, I'm as close as the phone." Sasha smiled.

Avery wanted to add she'd like to call Sasha sometime soon, but not necessarily to ask about the remodeling project.

The women walked back through the dining and living rooms. Once they exited the house, they stood on the porch facing each other.

"Are you headed into town to your office?" Sasha zipped her jacket.

"No, I'm going to work from home for the rest of the day."

"Good for you. Is your home nearby?" Sasha asked.

"Home is about seven minutes away from where we're standing."

Sasha nodded. She put one step between them, and then spoke in a hushed but reassuring voice. "Avery, your agency has purchased a good house. It has strong sturdy bones."

"Thanks Sasha. I trust your judgment. We searched for a long time before we found this one, and even though it needs to be renovated, we know it will serve our clients well."

"Oh, you can be sure of that."

Sasha began walking away when Avery reached out to her. "I do have one question."

"What's that?"

"When you parked and got out of your car, you appeared to be measuring the driveway. Were you?"

"I was indeed. I wanted to see if there was enough space to leave a dumpster or two during the tear down period of the project."

"Oh. That makes sense." After a second, Avery floated a second question. "And is that why you drove by the property so slowly? To see if there was enough room for the construction vehicles?"

Sasha gazed at Avery. She hesitated, and then answered. "Yes. I wanted to see how many trucks could park here. Our guys rack up the tickets when we give them jobs to do in the city."

"You think of everything, don't you, Sasha?" Avery smiled slightly as she looked at Sasha.

"I do my best for all of our clients."

"Then the Baker Center is in good hands."

"You can put money on that." Sasha winked.

"We already did." Avery cocked her head sassily.

Avery stood in the driveway and watched Sasha start her SUV's engine. Then, she got into her own car and sat there for a few moments longer. She visualized a totally rehabbed group home, some comfortable chairs on the porch, brand new shrubs installed as per a new landscaping plan, and how it might feel to kiss Sasha Lewis.

## Chapter Twenty

EVERY LOOKED OUT of her kitchen window at the late afternoon sky. It had been eight days since her on site meeting with Sasha. A slender speck of silver raced high above her, leaving a white vapor trail, sharply defined at one end and then broken into soft cloud pillows at the other. Light pink and purple streaks interrupted the blue sky as a chilly Saturday prepared to fade into an even chillier Saturday night.

Avery lifted the lid from the crockpot. She knew the dinner ingredients would simmer along just fine without having to baby-sit them, but the wonderful fragrances playing inside the cooker were a mighty temptation. Her entire house was filled with the aroma of chicken, garlic, mustard, lemon, and pungent spices. Waves of sweet smells rushing out of the pot had the power to catch Avery in their undertow and pull her and her appetite away from the rest of her hosting duties.

Not giving in to her hunger, Avery gathered what she needed to complete the meal she was preparing for her friends. Marie and Ameerah loved French green beans, and Avery and her other guest, Loretta Jones, loved salad. Avery scrapped her plan to serve the twice-baked and stuffed potatoes Karyn and Jessie both adored. Each one had phoned her separately, apologizing for not being able to join the party tonight. Their absence annoyed Avery somewhat because she had invited Loretta purely to quiet Karyn's needling her about the young woman's crush. Now that Karyn wouldn't be there, Avery wanted to scrap Loretta along with her aborted plans to fix the potato recipe. It was too late though, and Avery was too gracious a hostess to do that. She was willing to put up with Loretta's flirtatious gestures, because she surmised that Karyn and Jessie were spending the evening getting to know each other as lovers, and not simply good friends.

Avery filled her arms with the green beans and salad fixings she took out of the vegetable crisper. She ventured back to the fridge to find the dressing she'd made that morning. Holding the cruet up to the fading sunlight, she swirled the liquid around before letting a drop of it touch her fingertip. She tasted the sample and then smiled confidently. She was sure the dressing had rested long enough to be extra good.

Suddenly aware of the music that was sharing air time with the crockpot's wafting odors, Avery listened to another one of the string of upbeat dance tunes that poured from her favorite radio station. Before she knew it, the song lured her to the kitchen floor, an impromptu dance area. She realized this was the first time in a long while that she'd felt like moving her body to music, and the realization spurred her to move even more joyously. She caught the rhythm and flowed with it freely, snapping her fingers like they were a percussive instrument. Avery sang out with the lead singer, stopping only when she had trouble remembering the rest of the lyrics. When that happened, she added her own words, chanting her contentment most emphatically.

The lettuce got shredded, the carrots found themselves sliced, the cukes ended up chopped and the peppers diced in time to The Whispers "Keep On Loving You." Moments later Avery steered her dance steps over to the ringing telephone.

"Hello. Sloan kitchen. Chef Avery speaking." The hostess sang into the phone.

"Uh, hello. Avery?"

"Margaret? Hi." Avery shook her head and smiled. What were the odds that the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Josephine Baker Rainbow Center would call her this late on a Saturday afternoon?

"It is you. What's this about the Sloan kitchen?"

"Just a joke. I'm having company for dinner, and when the phone rang, I thought it might be one of my guests." Avery remembered last week's walk-through at the house when Margaret Zelinskie's haste had robbed her sense of humor. Not even Sasha had been able to charm her. Avery guessed if you could escape Sasha's infectious smiles, it meant you were devoid of all fun.

"Oh, I see. Well I won't keep you long since you're busy. I wanted you to know I can't get the entire board together until Friday around one o'clock."

Avery was eager to get the group home rehab started, so she was disappointed to hear this news. "All right, Margaret. Thanks for letting me know. I'll phone Clive Whittingham because suspect he'll want to be present to sign the contract and to answer any questions we have."

"Well that's why I've interrupted your weekend. I knew you'd need to notify him. And I assume he'll fax us the completed contract in plenty of time for us to review it before the meeting."

"I'm certain he will." The contractor and his associates had given Avery every reason to feel confident about his business habits.

"Good. Now get back to your preparations. I'll talk to you soon."

"Thanks, Margaret. Good-bye."

Avery thought about her phone call from Margaret and strolled over to the radio. Still feeling happy, but in a mellower mood, she switched the station from the pulsing dance club beats to a quieter jazz format. She figured the slower paced music would be appropriate for her dinner guests also. At least that was the case for Loretta Jones. She had shared that bit of unsolicited information about her likes and dislikes during a phone conversation that started about a Baker Center client, and then veered off in a more personal direction.

Avery thought about the women who would share her home tonight, and about her friendship with Marie St. John and Ameerah Kirkpatrick. It was only a few weeks ago that Avery had turned down a dinner invitation in their home, and she recalled appreciating their graceful way of accepting her excuse for not being able to keep that date. When they first phoned her to offer their hospitality, she'd been so enthusiastic about spending time with them, as well as seeing their home which was located in a regentrified section of South Philadelphia. Someone, Avery didn't remember who, had told her the St. John-Kirkpatrick house was an art-filled stunner of a residence.

Marie, who Avery estimated was in her early fifties, was a retired federal government employee who was well into her second career as an assistant to the curator of the city's African-American Cultural Museum. Ameerah was somewhat younger than her partner. She managed an art gallery in Olde City. In the years they'd been together, the two women had amassed enough precious paintings and cultural artifacts to open their own display place.

Satisfied that she'd done everything there was to do before her company arrived, Avery climbed the stairs to the second floor of her modest, three-bedroom Northwest Philadelphia row house. She made a bee-line for her bedroom closet, shedding her "cooking outfit" along the way, and then continuing into the black and gray tiled bathroom that adjoined her bedroom. In one motion she swept open the shower curtain and brought the sunflower shaped faucet head to life.

Ordinarily she wouldn't have jetted through this. She might even have taken the time for a relaxing bath. But she had a premonition that Loretta Jones would arrive early. And Avery never ignored her premonitions. Barely drying herself, she used the edges of the damp towel to banish the excess water from her hair.

She dressed quickly and returned to examine her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Yup, the lines that were starting to take up residence on her forehead were still there. She calculated now was the time to up the ante in the drugstore's cosmetic aisle, and move a step beyond the facial moisturizer to reach for that anti-aging cream Karyn confessed she used.

Of course, Karyn had a romantic motive for smoothing away her maturity lines. Jessie. There was nothing resembling romance hovering above Avery's horizon. Nothing that compelled her to stop at her local Oil of Olay dealership in an attempt to deny nature its course.

She paid homage to the mirror for a few seconds more and then Avery's "premonition" rang the doorbell. Twice.

"Damn it!" Avery cursed softly. "I knew she'd get here before the others."

Overall, Avery was pleased to welcome friends into her home. But there was something less than comfortable in her spirit when she imagined the on-the-edge-of-pushy Loretta's presence in her space. She rushed down the stairs, barely giving her feet a chance to make contact with the steps.

"Hi Avery." Loretta didn't wait for an invitation to step into the foyer. She thrust a small bouquet of flowers into Avery's arms. "Here. I thought you'd like these."

"Thank you, Loretta. Let me take your coat."

Loretta removed her outerwear and peeked beyond the foyer into the living room "Don't tell me I'm the first one here."

"In fact, you are." Avery felt as humorless as Margaret Zelinskie always was. She led Loretta into the living room. "Sit anywhere you'd like and make yourself at home. I'll get a vase for these flowers."

"Thanks." Loretta raised her voice. "I like your house. It's cozy."

"Pardon me?" Avery returned, carrying the floral arrangement. She put it on an end table to the right of the sofa, near Loretta's chosen seat.

"I said I like your house." Loretta stared at Avery with the attentiveness of a starving woman who's just been offered a meal.

"Thanks." Avery stole a quick look at her watch.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Oh, let's see." Avery cast her glance at the room's ceiling, trying to calculate the years. "It's been about twelve years now."

"That long, huh?" Loretta leaned back and whistled softly. "I knew black folks lived all over Mt. Airy, but I didn't know we'd moved into Chestnut Hill, too."

"Yeah. Actually there are quite a few of us here."

Her query about residential demographics ended, Loretta cocked her head to one side, pausing to listen to the music flowing from the two compact speakers perched in the bookcase on the other side of the room.

Loretta gestured toward the shelves. "Nice. I like that song. It's Foreplay, isn't it?"

Avery nodded.

"Want to dance?" Avery's guest shifted in her seat, ready to spring into action.

"Uh, no thanks." Avery knew she had enjoyed her afternoon solo dance in the kitchen more than she'd enjoy dancing with as a duo now. She smiled slightly and shifted gears. "So how are things going with all of your clients?"

"Oh, you know. The usual. About half of them are headed down the wrong path. They don't have the skills they need to keep a decent job. Then their bad habits jump up and bite them in the ass. Before they know it, most of their positive relationships go to hell and they go back to their old destructive ones. More than half of them end up back in prison. But I'm sure you already know the statistics, Avery." Loretta finally ran out of steam.

"Yeah, I am aware of them." Not wanting to give in to Loretta's negativism, Avery's expression brightened. "That's why we try to do a good job with our clients at the Baker Center. We work very hard to support the women. And we have a good track record."

Loretta's voice boomed with misplaced enthusiasm. "You deserve to be proud, Avery. That's why I like having Baker Center clients in my caseload. You guys run a good solid program."

"Thanks for the compliment."

Loretta leaned forward, compacting the edge of the sofa's cushion. "Oh, any time, sweetie."

An awkward but inevitable pause reminded Avery to fulfill one of her hosting duties. "Could I offer you a glass of wine or fruit juice?"

Loretta settled in. "Wine would be great!"

If Avery had ever wanted to spend a moment alone in her kitchen, this was it. She silently wished that she had a subterranean wine cellar where she could get lost until her other guests arrived. "Would you like white or red?"

"Whichever is open."

"I can open either one, really." Or run out to the liquor store and stay there until Ameerah and Marie get here, she thought. Dammit, Jessie. You and Karyn had better be with each other this very minute.

"Okay. Then white, please."

The heavy brass knocker thudded against the front door, announcing the arrival of Avery's rescuers. She dismissed her habit of looking through the sidelights to check who was standing on the other side of the entrance, and flung open the colonial paneled door.



"Hey, Lady! How are you?" The compact bundle of high energy that was Marie St. John rushed into the house and folded Avery into her arms.

Avery returned the embrace with an equal measure of warmth. "I'm happy to see you; that's how I am."

Peering over Marie's shoulder, Avery included Ameerah Kirkpatrick in her greeting. She reached out with her free hand and grabbed Ameerah's coat sleeve.

"How are you, girlfriend?"

"Just fine, Avery."

Hugs completed, the three women beamed at one another. "Let me take your coats."

Ameerah handed her coat and her lover's to Avery. "Just throw them anywhere."

Avery held onto the rich looking full length leather garments. "I don't think so. Not only should I hang these up in the closet, but these coats deserve my best wooden hangers."

Ameerah and Marie laughed their way into the living room while Avery took custody of their outerwear. Far from shy, Marie strode right over to Loretta and offered her hand. "Hi. It's good to see you again, Loretta."

Loretta stood and shook Marie's hand energetically. "Same here."

Ameerah, less outgoing and more serious than her partner, took her turn greeting Loretta.

Avery entered the living room and spoke to her recently arrived guests. "I was getting ready to open a bottle of wine when you guys arrived. Can I offer you some, or a glass of something else?"

"Wine sounds good." Ameerah answered softly.

Marie chimed in. "For me also."

"Would you like white or red?"

"I'd like red." Marie put in her order.

"Red is okay for me, too." She sat down on the sofa. "You know, Marie's been on a red kick for a few weeks now. She read somewhere that it's good for your cardio-vascular system."

"I've heard that, too." Loretta was pensive for a brief second. "Avery, could I change my mind? Could I have red also?"

"Sure. That makes it unanimous."

As the women settled into a comfortable pre-dinner conversation, Marie picked up a small, heavily lacquered box that was on the coffee table. She turned it over, examining its design and colorings.

"Avery, is this box from Brazil?"

"Yes it is. My favorite aunt gave it to me."

"I thought so. We bought a very similar one last year during our trip to Bahia."

Loretta asked if she could hold the little wooden container. "There are so many different colors."

Marie nodded. "Look at the back of it. Each one of those colors is a different kind of wood. That box represents all the varied species of trees that are found in Brazil."

"Get out. That's fantastic!" Loretta exclaimed.

Amused with Loretta's admiration for Marie and somewhat bemused by Ameerah's quiet demeanor this evening, Avery excused herself so that she could light some candles in the dining room and put the meal on the table. When everything was ready, she summoned her friends. "Dinner's on!"

Loretta was the first one to sit down at the table. "You don't have to call me twice."

*Why doesn't that surprise me?* Avery smiled wanly before she began serving everyone. "I hope you brought your appetites with you, because I cooked a lot of food."

"And it all looks and smells so good, girl." Marie gazed lovingly at the food on her plate. "If it tastes as good as it looks, we may have to ask you for some containers for the leftovers. That is, if there are any leftovers."

"Oh man, this chicken dish is fantastic. And the salad is fantastic. Avery, you're a fantastic cook." There was no end to Loretta's zealous praise. There was an end, however, to her vocabulary. It seemed to Avery that "fantastic" was the only acclamation Loretta knew.

Ameerah, who until now had been following the course of the conversations by looking first at one person and then another, fixed her gaze on Loretta. "So how often do you work with Avery?"

"Not often enough. She's such a fantastic problem solver. Whenever one of my parolees is in trouble, I pray she's hooked up with the Baker Rainbow Center. I know I can give Avery a phone call, and she'll get to the bottom of the mess, whatever it is." Loretta continued her adoring praise of Avery.

"So you're just that good, are you?" Marie teased Avery.

"It depends upon the day and the problem. I can't solve all of them."

"Well you've solved every problem I've ever brought to your front door." Loretta challenged Avery.

Avery batted her eyelashes at Loretta, embarrassed that Loretta appeared to have a huge crush on her. "Shucks. I guess I just got lucky."

Encouraged by Avery's reaction to her compliment, Loretta continued. "Remember the crisis with Nia Quarles?" She focused on Ameerah and Marie. "This woman was thrown out of her parents'house because they found out that she's a lesbian. And her parents even made her leave her baby with them. This girl was about to go crazy and do something that would get her thrown right back into prison. I called Avery and she arranged for Nia to be placed in her agency's group home."

"That turned out to be temporary." Avery interrupted, holding up her hands. "Nia had several problems, and she couldn't take the structure of a group home situation. In addition, that particular residential site is entirely too crowded right now. That's why we're going to open another one as soon as we can."

"Yes. You've mentioned that to us." Marie helped herself to more chicken. "What's going on with that project?"

"It's my major preoccupation right now. The good news is we purchased a house and it's big. The bad news is that it's old and in need of repairs and renovation."

"That will be a bill and a half." Loretta eyed the salad bowl.

"Don't even mention it." Avery agreed. "However, I've saved the best news for last."

Marie rested her fork. "What's that, doll?"

"We've hired a black, gay contractor with a wonderful reputation and his company is going to do the renovations."

"Who did you hire?" Ameerah questioned Avery.

"Clive Whittingham of Whittingham Builders."

Marie clasped her hands together. "That's great, Avery. We know Clive. He's a good businessman and an even better person."

Ameerah agreed with her partner. "I like his politics. If you've got him working for you, then you've got other gay folks on the job, also. He tries to employ as many minority and gay and lesbian subcontractors as he can."

"And half of his office staff is gay and lesbian." Marie nodded enthusiastically.

Avery felt a certain urgency creep into her next question. "Speaking of his staff, do you ladies know his general manager, Sasha Lewis?"

"We've met her once, maybe twice..." Marie's voice trailed off, clearly with more unsaid than said. "Why? Have you dealt with her?"

"Yeah. A couple of times. She's knowledgeable and very pleasant."

Marie stood up and walked around the table, stopping behind Ameerah's seat. She lowered her voice and placed her hands over Ameerah's ears. "To hell with knowledgeable and pleasant. That sister is as sexy as she wants to be... if you like them slightly butch." Marie lifted her hands from Ameerah's ears, and squeezed the younger woman's shoulders. "And clearly you can see that I do."

Ameerah looked up at her lover. "You do what?"

Marie whispered to Ameerah, "I love you, baby."

Marie's dramatics delivered laughs to all four of the women sitting around the dining table. Avery shared her laughter with her interest in Marie's description of Sasha Lewis. Until that moment, Avery hadn't labeled Sasha's attractiveness one way or another.

She knew Sasha was gay and good looking. She'd paid attention to that. And she remembered the entire time they spent together in the house on Mt. Airy Avenue, she had wanted to touch Sasha. She'd thought about reaching out to feel her capable hands as they moved through the air, sketching the layout for the new bathrooms. Avery had visualized herself touching Sasha's expressive mouth as it formed a wry grin in response to Margaret Zelinskie's premature exit. Each day since then, she'd imagined feeling the softness of Sasha's natural, closely cut curls as the two women stood on the porch with the cold wind sweeping past them.

"But you know something? Sasha might be too pleasant." Marie's conjecture jolted Avery back to the here and now.

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm acquainted with her girlfriend, Lee Simpson. She's the event planner that the Cultural Center hires whenever there's a big to-do."

Avery tried to ignore any disappointment that threatened to surface. She recalled a telephone call ending her first meeting with Sasha at the Whittingham Builders' office. She overheard the

agitation in Sasha's voice as she spoke to someone named Lee. The conversation had sounded painful and obviously needed to be private. She remembered thinking it was so personal that she'd felt compelled to slip out of the office without Sasha realizing she'd left.

Avery looked at Marie. "Is that how you met Sasha?"

Ameerah and Loretta listened to Avery's and Marie's dialogue in silence.

"Actually, the first time I met her was at a fund raiser. She was there with Clive. I remember enjoying their company until Lee showed up late and wrong." Marie's brows knit under the weight of the memory.

"What do you mean by wrong?" Avery hoped that her nonchalance concealed her curiosity.

Marie shook her head and continued relating what had happened. "Lee was the one who had arrived late, but she kept accusing Sasha of telling her the wrong time to be there."

"Is it possible that Lee was right and Sasha was wrong?" Avery played devil's advocate for the sake of her subterfuge.

"I considered that. But then Clive swore up and down that he had heard Sasha tell Lee the correct time when she phoned her from his office. It was clear Clive was trying to smooth the waters, but it was also clear that he felt the need to defend Sasha. The whole thing was uncalled for and embarrassing, and I felt sorry for her."

"I didn't feel sorry for the sister. In fact, Sasha impressed me." Ameerah added her information. "She was so dignified the whole time Lee was acting like a fool. Frankly, I don't know why that girl is still with Lee. Why would she be willing to take that kind of rude treatment?"

Marie stared directly at Ameerah. "She's a grown woman, and she doesn't have to stay with her. Nobody's holding a gun to her head."

"Maybe Sasha believes in working to hold onto a relationship." Avery offered an explanation.

"Well, there must be something that's keeping her there. Maybe this Lee person owns the house where they live." Loretta shook off her silence and attempted to join the conversation.

"That's not what I understand." Marie continued telling what she knew about Clive Whittingham's employee. "Sasha bought an older house somewhere in the northwestern suburbs, and Clive and his company renovated it. I've heard them joking that Clive had his crew used Sasha's house as a training site to learn how to do a rehab."

Loretta delved further into Lee's and Sasha's saga. "So if Sasha has her own place, putting Lee out should be a no-brainer."

Avery leveled her gaze at Loretta. "Sometimes a situation is more complicated than it appears to be, especially to outsiders."

She turned toward Marie and Ameerah. "So I guess it's safe to say Lee Simpson is not a good friend of yours?"

Marie answered instantly. "I imagine Lee doesn't have many friends, just a succession of lovers, ex-lovers, and enemies. And I do mean to infer that Lee has the women lined up all the time."

"Even though she's in a relationship with Sasha?" A cloud of disbelief passed over Avery's face.

"I'll repeat myself. All lined up, all the time. And the sad thing is, it looks as if Sasha has given up all of her good friends, one by one." Marie gestured to Ameerah. "We're just acquainted with her, but we know a couple of women who used to be real tight with Sasha before Lee came on the scene."

Ameerah nodded. "I think Lee told them Sasha didn't need or want their friendship. That she was number one in Sasha's life."

Avery grimaced. It was difficult for her to imagine the Sasha Lewis she'd met recently was in such a painful relationship.

"Damn." Loretta stretched her vocabulary beyond the word 'fantastic.'

Marie, her face blooming with a smile, looked at Avery. "But on to something more positive! Sasha will love working with you, girl. You're appreciative, you're sweet..."

"Not to mention good looking." Loretta added.

"And available, in case Ms. Sasha is able to tear herself away from the wicked witch of the east." Marie laughed at her own remark. Loretta, Ameerah and Avery simply smiled.

"So when does the construction on the house begin?" Ameerah tried to redirect the conversation.

"Soon I hope. We're supposed to sign the contract next Friday."

Ameerah nodded. "Keep us posted on the progress, Avery."

"Which progress? The house rehab or Avery's starting a little something with Sasha?" Marie shot an amused look at her lover.

"I'll keep you ladies in the loop about the rehab. Now let's change the subject." Avery felt her cheeks begin to burn. She arose from the table. "Does anyone want coffee?"

Three hands shot up into the air.

Moments later, Avery returned to the dining room carrying a carafe of the dark hot liquid and a stack of cups and saucers. "The dessert is almost ready. I put it in the oven to heat up."

"Are you allowed to tell us what it is?" Marie rubbed her hands together.

"Sure. It's an old family recipe, apple crisp with French vanilla ice-cream."

Ameerah simulated loosening her belt. "Oh Lord. Promise me you'll dish out a little serving, please."

Loretta joined in. "A small amount for me too, please."

"Look at you. You can afford to eat a big helping, with your tall slender self." Avery challenged her guest's request.

"Well I'm flattered that you've noticed, what with all of this talk about Sasha Lewis who does have a partner already." Loretta said.

"Ooooh, Loretta. Take those claws back in, girl." Marie wagged her finger back and forth at Loretta. "I'm sure Avery wouldn't do anything unethical as far as Sasha is concerned. You don't know our Avery very well, do you?"

"Not as well as I'd like to." Loretta gazed at Avery who became unnecessarily engrossed in filling the cups with coffee.

Marie continued instructing. "Well, if you do get to know her better, you'll find out that she's very principled. That's why you don't hear her gossiping about Lee Simpson and Sasha Lewis."

*No, Avery thought to herself. But I am extremely interested in listening to everything you have to say about her.*

Avery curtsied. "Thank you, Marie. And I'd like to thank the Academy...and all of my fans..."

Marie howled. "Bring in the dessert, woman, and stop fooling around!"

The dinner party ended shortly after the last of the apple crisp disappeared. Loretta stood and patted her stomach. She gazed at her hostess. "Avery, you know your way around the kitchen. Everything was great. Thank you."

"You're very welcome, Loretta. I'm glad that you could be here. And thank you for the lovely flowers."

"Don't mention it." Loretta paused. "Well, as much as I hate to end the evening, I guess I'd better leave."

Just as Loretta was slipping on her jacket, Ameerah groaned. "Marie. How did we do this? We spent the entire evening without giving Avery the little hostess gift we brought for her."

Marie grabbed Ameerah's arm. "Oh, for Christ's sake. I've got CRS, but I don't know what your excuse is, baby."

Avery and Loretta stared at the two women. Ameerah turned to the coat closet, rummaged through her coat pockets and pulled out a small pastel colored envelope. She offered it to Avery. "I would have felt terrible if we'd forgotten to give this to you."

Avery opened the envelope and extracted two tickets. Reading the text on the passes, she smiled broadly. "Wow! Two All-Events passes for the Hurston-Hughes Film Festival." She hugged her two friends. "Thank you, ladies. I'm going to look forward to this. I've already gone to the festival website and read about some of the films."

"The Cultural Center received some of these, and we know how much you love going to film festivals, Avery. So enjoy."

Marie lowered her voice, practically whispering. "There are two passes, you know? That means you can take someone with you. After all, it's no fun going to see a movie all by yourself."

Loretta tried to stare dead into Avery's eyes, but she missed her target.

"Thank you very much, Ms. St. John. I'll see who I can scare up to go with me."

Loretta turned and headed toward the front door. "Well, gotta run. Good seeing everyone again."

"Same here, Loretta. You take care of yourself." Ameerah offered her a hug.

The front door had barely closed when Ameerah faced Marie and placed both of her hands on her lover's shoulders. "You sure know how to embarrass the hell out of a woman."

"What do you mean?"

"Avery could see we were giving her two passes to the festival. You didn't need to put her on the spot about who she was going to take with her."

Marie covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, Avery. Did I embarrass you?"

"You didn't embarrass me, but Loretta might have felt weird."

"Do you think she was counting on your inviting her to go?" Clearly, Marie regretted what she had said.

"For a minute." Avery wore the social faux pas lightly.



Ameerah loosened her grip on Marie and pulled the short package of energy into a full body hug. She murmured in her ear, "Marie, I bet I know who Avery could take to the festival."

Marie returned her partner's hug and smiled seductively, whispering about Avery as if she weren't standing right there. "Yeah, I bet I know, too."

They opened their hug and pulled Avery into it.

The sometimes quiet Ameerah grinned and spoke. "Hey Avery, once your rehab gets up and going, you should ask Sasha Lewis how she feels about going to the movies."

Marie patted Avery's back. "Yes darlin'. I'll bet that Sasha loves LGBT films as much as you do."

Avery cocked her head to one side and raised an eyebrow cynically. She didn't say a word, knowing that sometimes silence speaks volumes.

## Chapter Twenty-One

I KNOW THE calendar's never lied. Here it was the middle of December and I'd bought exactly three Christmas gifts: one for our secretary, Nona, one for Clive and Eddie, and one for the company's annual children's mittens and hats drive. It was time for me to get my shopping chores in gear, as unenthusiastic as I felt.

Every time I tried to come up with an idea for Lee, I hit a stone wall. By the time I pulled into my parking spot at work this morning though, I'd had a brainstorm. I could give Lee a gift certificate for a local moving company. Four years ago the thought of Lee leaving me had been unbearable. Now, the notion of her continued presence in my life was barely tolerable.

I knew we would coexist in the same house for the duration of the holiday. I knew also that our relationship was over. I couldn't continue making excuses for the hurtful things she kept doing, especially her destructive acts that bordered on violence. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that in Lee's mind, seconds before she smashed it, my old computer represented me. And it was time for me to stop feigning ignorance about all of the women she had been with during our years together. For Lee, monogamy was pure fiction.

I needed to find myself. I had to recover the Sasha Lewis who wouldn't let a lover lay shit at her feet and then tell her it was honey. I don't know why, but I must have been lost four years ago when Lee noticed me resting at the bottom of a glass of scotch in that English hotel bar.

I walked into our office building, shook my head and focused on skipping both the pastries and the eye-opening coffee that always tempted me each morning. Nona chirped her daily greeting.

"Hi, Sasha."

"Good-morning, Nona. Any emergencies yet?"

Our office anchor plucked a sheet of paper from her "In" box and handed it to me. "No emergencies. In fact, here's some good news."

I took the paper from her without reading it, and simply trusted her evaluation of its contents.

"Great. Any messages from Clive?"

"Only a reminder that he'll be in the city today to sign the contract with that social service agency." Nona reached to answer her ringing telephone.

"Oh, that's right. It is today, isn't it?" My boss was scheduled to put pen to paper with the Baker Rainbow Center. Not a big deal for Clive and definitely not a money maker, but it was important for the agency.

I thought about the chairperson of their Board of Directors, and I wondered if she would take the five or ten minutes necessary to show up at their office and sign the contract. Maybe she'd be there, especially if she could multi-task by bringing one of her law firm's clients along with her.

"It's Clive. He wants you to pick this call up in your office." Our secretary peered at me over her eyeglasses. She pressed the phone's mute button and began to whistle "On the Road Again."

In the four seconds it took me to enter my office and deposit my work bag on the desk, I'd started to hope that wherever Clive was sending me, I'd be able to find some stores and pick up at least a couple of holiday gifts. I pushed the control button for the speaker-phone.

"Good morning, Clive"

"Good morning, Sasha. How's the coffee today?"

"I have no idea. I skipped it." I answered him smugly.

"I did as well. Listen, this is the day that I have to meet the people downtown at the Baker Center. It's contract signing day." Clive always managed to sound so crisp and bright each morning.

"Yes, I remember." I glanced at my desk calendar, absentmindedly. "Did you forget your copy of the contract?"

"No, I have it right here with me." Clive cleared his throat. "Sasha, I'm facing a bit of a sticky situation. Our Mr. Jackman wants to meet with me about the impending labor action. Would it be a bother if you went to the Baker Center in my place?"

"No, I don't mind subbing for you."

"Thanks. It's either that or sort things out for me with Jackman."

"Perish the thought." That choice was a no-brainer. I was still halfway peeved about Richard Jackman's rude behavior.

"The signing is merely ceremonial, you know. We've already agreed to each others'terms."

"I don't mind driving into town for the signing, Clive. Clearly, it's better for you to meet with Jackass than it would be for me to run into him again."

"Oh, he's not that bad. He simply overestimates his power to direct every aspect of his building project." Clive lowered his voice, something he's prone to do when he has to grapple with the ridiculous. "You know about the latest, don't you? He's insisting that if the electrical workers stage a job action, I hire non-unionized personnel to continue working on his house."

"He can't do that. What a jerk!" In fact, I had heard about the blistering phone message the attorney had left for Clive.

"So you agree it's best that I meet with him?"

Clive had to be kidding. "Better you than me."

"Good! That's set. You have another copy of the Sloan contract in your file. Right?"

"Yes I do." I knew better than to bite Clive's bait when he used Avery's name to refer to the project. I'd fallen into that trap once. I wouldn't tumble a second time.

"The meeting starts at three. Will that fit your schedule?"

"Sure, I'll be there."

"You met with Avery at her office before, didn't you?"

"No, I met with her and her board's chairperson at the house."

"Oh, that's right. Do you know where the office is located?"

If I couldn't find the Baker Center's office, I had no business being the General Manager of Clive's company. "I have the address, and I'm sure I can find it without any trouble."

"You'll be able to find her?" My boss must have been preoccupied. Did he think that I'd suddenly become an idiot?

"I said I could find it, Clive. The office not her."

"Hmmm. Did you read the memo I emailed early this morning?"

I looked to my right where I'd dropped the notice Nona had handed to me. Skimming it at warp speed, I quickly got the gist of its message. "This is great news."

"Exactly. The electricians' union has agreed to a cool down period of a month. After that, if there isn't a settlement, we'll be in the soup once more."

"But at least this negotiation period will buy us some time. That should defuse Mr. Jackman."

"Well, only temporarily. We need more than a month to complete his house. But we will be able to bring a few of the Laurel Ridge homes to the settlement table."

I squinted at the schedule board on the other side of my office. "Yes. We've got four closings next week, and two the week after that."

"Super. And I'd like us to begin some of the tear-down in the Sloan project."

I rolled my eyes at Clive's insistently mentioning Avery's last name. "We can start the demolition immediately. I've filed the application for the building permit and I can have the dumpsters delivered on the site in a couple of days."

"Splendid! Well, good luck with the contract signing. They'll probably have someone there with a camera. Perhaps a reporter from one of the media will be present as well. Are you dressed smartly?"

Considering how long I've known Clive, I still never knew exactly what he meant when he talked about being "smartly" dressed. I didn't know if this expression sprang from his British sensibility or his gay sense of style.

"No more smartly than I'm ever dressed when I come to work not knowing if I'll spend the day in the office, at a muddy home site, or in an unroofed house under construction."

Wisely, Clive waited until I ran out of fuel. "Right. Well, the meeting's not until three. You have ample time to go back home and change your outfit."

I had to laugh. "You've got everything figured out, haven't you?"

"Not quite everything. But I'm working on it."

"I'll give you a call as I'm leaving the city, Clive."

"Do that only if there's a problem. It is Friday, after all. You and Lee may have plans for the weekend."

I took a deep breath. "Both of us have plans, but not together."

"Really?" Clive paused, obviously searching for the next thing to say. "That may be a good thing, love."

"It's starting to look that way." I tried in vain to match his enthusiasm.

"Eddie and I expect to be at home tomorrow and Sunday. Give a call if you'd like to come over for dinner or a movie."

"Thanks, Clive. And thank Eddie for me also."

"Okay. Take care."

Friday was the day I always received a detailed progress report from each of the site superintendents before I updated the job schedules for the next week. I usually spent at least fifteen to twenty minutes on the phone per superintendent, and another half hour figuring out the revised schedules and sketching in the updates. Then, I had to enter all of the information in the files on the company's networked website.

How I'd be able to do this while answering my emails, responding to my phone messages, and taking care of any emergencies was beyond me. Surely I had to take care of any messages that were waiting for me, so the only thing I could hope for was a minimum of crises.

One thing I intended to do was return home to trade in my drab brown slacks for a different pair. Not because I was vain, but because Clive had mentioned that I might have to pose for a photo this afternoon. After all, I did represent Whittingham Builders, and didn't know who else, other than that workaholic attorney, Margaret Zelinskie, was on the Baker Center's Board of Directors. I did know I had an unquenchable need to make a good first impression.

I could always phone Avery Sloan to ask for a heads-up about the characters that were planning to be there. It was more than a week ago when I last saw her. I'd driven away from the Mt. Airy house cursing at myself for having disclosed so many personal things about Clive. I'd had no business blabbing like that; especially when I'd been so careful to avoid telling her anything meaningful about my personal affairs. What gave me the right to share information about Clive's first romantic experience when I wasn't willing to share anything about my past lovers nor about the state of my crumbling alliance with Lee?

And what would I have told her? That being with Lee was a mistake I couldn't correct, no matter how hard I tried? That Lee had some unstable behaviors that would have chased away most level-headed women? And it must be some sort of neediness that has kept me battling to maintain our relationship?

Calendars never lie. I should have shown Lee the door three Christmases ago. If I'd done that, by now I could have found my way to a woman who wanted to love me, not hurt me. I'm not saying I could have found Avery Sloan. For all I knew, Avery was in a relationship of her own. And if that were true, I hoped her lover treated her with the beauty and tenderness I could see in Avery's eyes and hear in her voice.

If only I hadn't glimpsed that beauty and tenderness each time she'd gazed at me. I wouldn't be in such a state of want right now if I didn't know a woman like Avery existed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

ANGELA JACKMAN DUTIFULLY phoned her Partner's Wives Social Committee colleagues, Helen Cawley, Siggy Robertson, Betsy Scott Price and Josette Zimmer. She told Betsy and Josette that all of the plans had been made for the firm's cocktail party and brunch. When she spoke to Helen and Siggy, she described every detail of the two February social events, asking the two patricians for their opinions. Angela could hear Siggy sucking on a cigarette. She imagined the habitual smoker's already narrow cheeks becoming even narrower with each intake of air. In her bored-with-life craggy voice that was forever skating on the edge of a dry cough, Siggy okayed the proposal.

Helen Cawley conducted a long wordless pause designed to leave Angela hanging in suspense, before she dispersed a meager "thank you" to the younger woman for having sought her consent. Angela pictured the senior law partner's wife straightening her already erect posture. Summoning a tone that Angela labeled more of a command than a request, Helen proffered two suggestions that she stated should not be ignored. Wisely, Angela praised the woman's ideas.

Then with that pain-in-the-ass chore done, Angela put the phone down and brushed away nonexistent flecks of dust from the instrument. She continued to sit at her desk in the far end of the spacious kitchen, thinking aloud.

"Are you satisfied, Richard? I did your bowing and scraping act and phoned the Masters'wives so that you can keep working in the big house." She slammed the desk with the flat of her hand. "Fuck you!"

Angela walked through the dining room on her way to the front of the house. She stopped for a few seconds, long enough to admire herself in the mirror that covered one entire wall of the room, and she spoke aloud to the air once again. But this time, her one sentence was drawn out languorously, and without any trace of the anger that had ignited her short monologue just moments before. Smoothing her cream colored slacks over her hips and thighs, she purred.

"You look damn good, Angela."

She needed to run a quick errand, so she secured her red and gold woven poncho around her shoulders, picked up her car keys from the foyer table and walked out the door. Her cell phone primed, Angela called her confidante as she turned the key in the ignition.

"Hey, Marla. How are you?-- I'm fine. I know it's been a while, girl, but I've been busy." Angela's lips formed an expression of annoyance. "No, that house is Richard's baby-- Yeah, he still checks on it every day. Those workers must be tired of him showing up all the time--I guess it's on schedule. Now he's threatening to sue the builder if there's some kind of strike."

With only one hand on the steering wheel, the poncho-clad driver negotiated the twisting road. "So what's new?-- Well, you better go for it, then-- What do you mean you're not in love with him? You could fall in love with his six digit income, couldn't you?" Angela checked her reflection in the car's rearview mirror. "No, I'm not at home. I'm in the car-- None of your business-- Yeah, well it's one of the reasons I've been so busy-- His name? Are you ready for a news flash?-- Her name is Lee."

Fully prepared to defend her choice of lover, Angela engaged her long time friend in a verbal duel. "And don't pretend that you've never thought about being with a woman. I know you. We go way back, sister." Satisfied that this short offensive was all that was necessary to justify her current infidelity, Angela relaxed her grip on the steering wheel and felt herself breaking out in a full smile. "It's good like you wouldn't believe. I can't keep myself away from her-- Hell no! I said it's good, but I'm not about to lose my mind over it. I'm sure Richard gets his on the side, and that's all I'm doing. But divorce court is out of the question, girlfriend." Angela slowed her car in front of the modest two-story colonial. "Look, I have to hang up now. I'm here-- Okay. I'll talk to you soon. Bye."

The svelte woman hooked her arm through her handbag and got out of her car. She couldn't wait to see the expression on her lover's face when she opened her front door and found her standing there. She stuck out one of her meticulously manicured fingers and pushed the doorbell.

Lee opened the door. "And you're here because--?" She rewarded Angela's brief wait by hurrying her into the house.

Weeks ago, when Angela made a house call, Lee had issued her strict instructions to never again appear at her front door.

"I'm here because we both want me to be here." Angela saw a mixture of desire and cool disinterest on her lover's face.

She imagined it was becoming increasingly difficult for Lee to keep from smiling whenever she thought about their trysts. Although Angela had started out as a quick sex-infused conquest for Lee, by now she was something more. Angela knew for sure she ignited a dangerous excitement that was both daring and addictive; an excitement that made Lee willing to do just about anything to be with her one more time, always one more time.

Angela walked into the living room and dropped her handbag onto the closest chair. Lee followed her and stood at her back for a second, before forcing Angela around so that they faced one another.

"Aren't you going to ask me to take this off?" Angela gestured toward her poncho.

"No. I'm going to take it off of you myself."

This answer satisfied Angela. She rested her arms over her lover's shoulders and pressed her body against Lee's. Both women started what had become a ritual for them. They moaned into each other's throats and they began their sexual dance. Lee tore at the poncho, lifting it from Angela's shoulders and over her head. She grabbed a fistful of Angela's hair, winding it around her fingers, and then forced Angela's head down at the same time as she worked awkwardly to unfasten the belt that held her slacks in place. She used both of her hands to push her slacks and panties toward her knees as she positioned herself, ready to accept her lover's mouth where it would make her feel the best.

"Come on, baby. Show me what you've got." Lee coached Angela.

"Show you what she's got?"

A startled and bare-assed Lee Simpson spun around, leaving an equally stunned Angela Jackman posed on her knees.

"God damn you, Lee!" Sasha spat her anger.

Lee slowly pulled up her underwear and pants and fastened the zipper. In an unflustered voice she introduced her guest. "Sasha, this is Angela Jackman, one of my business clients. Angela, this is Sasha Lewis."

Angela stood up and nodded at Sasha. Although unaccustomed to being caught in the act, she knew her script called for silence.

Lee broke through the quiet. "I didn't hear you come in, Sasha."

"That's obvious. Or would my arrival have stopped you?"

Ignoring her partner's question, Lee asked one of her own. "Why are you here?"

Sasha folded her arms in front of her chest. "I can't believe you're questioning my comings and goings."

"Yeah, I am. But we can talk about that later."

"There won't be a later." Sasha glared at the illicit lovers and then left the room to go upstairs.



"Now what, sweetie?" Angela smirked, pleased that she and Lee had been discovered.

"Now what? Now you finish getting dressed and you leave." Lee's eyes blazed with anger. After a moment, she walked to the staircase, stood on the first step, and listened carefully for any noise from the second floor.

"What's she doing? Crying?" Angela asked.

Lee waved her arm in annoyance. "Shut the hell up. How am I supposed to hear what she's doing if you keep talking?"

Angela smoothed her clothing. She retrieved her handbag, blew Lee a kiss, and headed to the front door. "Call me when things calm down. I'm sure you and I can get together again."

Lee stared at her lover, willing her to exit.

"Call me soon, lover. Before I move and get a new phone number."

"Don't hold your breath, Angela."

Angela slipped through the open door. Her lips formed a broad, self-satisfied smile and she spoke aloud.

"That was as good as coming. Twice."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

I WENT INTO the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. Then I wet my fingertips and raked them through my hair, down to the surface of my scalp. The frigid liquid warmed instantly upon contact with my skin. Propelling a comb through my skullcap of tight curls, I noticed my reflection in the bathroom's mirror. A woman's desperately unhappy countenance stared back at me.

I held a towel up to my face, and resisted the urge to scream into it. I breathed deeply, knowing I had to confront Lee. Edgy with the gradual awakening of my anger, I was tempted to descend the stairs two steps at a time. Instead, I walked down slowly and carefully. I was certain the sounds I heard of a car door closing meant Angela had left. I peered into the empty living room as I walked past it, steadily moving toward the den where I knew I'd find Lee.

She sat at her desk tapping her computer's keyboard. She heard me come in and she wheeled around in her chair, ready for an argument.

"Look, Sasha, you knew I was fooling around with someone. The only thing you didn't know was her name. So now you know who she is. What's the big deal?" Lee's defense was to launch an offense.

"It's a huge deal, Lee." I answered her, my rage under enough control for me to speak in a steady calm voice.

"What? Because you caught us here in our living room?"

I stood my ground. I hadn't had a lot of time to think about what I wanted to say to Lee, but I proudly owned the next words that left my mouth.

"It's not our living room, Lee. It's mine. This is my house, and you've been a guest here for the past four years. But you're no longer welcome." I glared at a quiet Lee who was no doubt preparing for her next attack. Then I continued. "I have to go to a meeting in the city. By the time I get back, I want you out of here. Take enough of your belongings to last through the weekend, and start looking for another place to live."

Lee's smile twisted into a sardonic grin. "Are you serious?"

"Completely."

I walked away from the den and then outside to the driveway and to my car. I felt like my heart and lungs weren't working, like I'd stopped breathing and couldn't start again until I was miles from home, headed east on the Expressway toward Philadelphia. Instinctively, I placed my fingertips on my throat, searching for the pulse that reassured me that I was alive and would be all right. A few moments later I removed my cell phone from my bag and speed dialed the office.

"Nona? It's me. Could you do me a favor, please?-- Could you phone Jacobs Brothers and arrange for a locksmith to be at my house early tomorrow morning?-- I know it's extra on the weekend, but that's the best time for me-- Okay, thanks. I'm on my way to the contract signing.-- Oh, one more thing. Could you bring up the Jackman file on your computer and check Mr. and Mrs. Jackman's first names, please?-- That's what I thought I'd remembered. Thanks, Nona.-- No, I'll see you on Monday morning. Have a good weekend."

After I ended my phone call to Nona, I turned off the radio and talked to myself for the entire drive into the city. I couldn't believe Lee was involved with Richard Jackman's wife. The woman who had hired her to plan an event for her husband's law firm? Damn it! Even though I'd ceased loving Lee a few abuses ago, discovering her and Angela Jackman having sex in my living room wasn't easy for me to stomach.

What had I done to convince Lee she could crap all over me? When was the moment I lost her respect? Did she stop loving me because I spent a lot of hours working at the office? Or did I spend a lot of hours working there because she'd stopped loving me?

I steered my car into an indoor parking lot that was so crowded I had to drive clear up to the roof before I saw a vacant slot. That was fine with me, though. I was in no danger of being late, and I looked forward to spending the next few minutes walking in the cold. I grabbed my work bag, followed the sign for the elevator, and took it down to the street level. The temperature in the city was a couple of degrees warmer than it was at home. I wanted it to be bone chilling cold; so cold that my feelings would become as numb as my ungloved fingers. The short walk conspired against me, however. I arrived at the Josephine Baker Rainbow Center's office moments before I was really ready to be there.

"Hello. I'm Sasha Lewis, representing Clive Whittingham and Whittingham Builders." I stepped forward and addressed a pleasant looking woman sitting behind a well-worn desk.

"Oh yes, Ms. Lewis. We've been expecting you. Everyone is in the conference room. Let me take your jacket." The older woman sprang to her feet. "Can I get you anything? A cup of coffee or tea?"

"No thanks. I'm fine."

"All right. Why don't you follow me then?"

She lead me through a long high-ceilinged hallway, toward a room whose door was open. As we approached, I could hear voices talking animatedly.

"Go right on in, Ms. Lewis." The secretary pointed to two women who were standing in a corner. "That's Margaret Zelinskie, the Chairperson of our Board of Directors, and Elizabeth Hogarth, the Vice-Chair. They'll be running the show this afternoon."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I didn't get your name." Not that I'd remember it a moment after she told me.

"I'm Pat Hawthorn. Our coordinator, Avery Sloan calls me her administrative assistant. But I'm really the secretary-receptionist and all-around go-fer."

I smiled. There was something about this woman that made her instantly likable. "Before you leave me here with all of these strangers, Ms. Hawthorn, could you tell me where Ms. Sloan is? I don't see her." I scanned the room, searching in vain for Avery.

Pat looked at her watch. "It's only a quarter to three. Avery is always on the dot, so she's probably still in her office." The secretary gave me the once over, no doubt trying to decide if I were a suitable interruption to her boss. "Come on with me. They won't need you in here for a few more minutes, unless you'd rather stay and chit chat."

"I'd rather come with you." I winked at my new comrade.

We both shot a quick look around the conference room, making sure that no one had spotted us. Then Pat tugged on my arm. "Follow me."

Once again I was led down the hallway, but this time we stopped at a closed door. A slit of light played with the shadows under it. Pat knocked softly.

"Avery? It's Pat."

"Come on in."

Pat glanced over her shoulder at me and her eyes crinkled as she smiled slyly. She opened the door and we saw Avery, her profile facing us. She held a phone in one hand and gestured dramatically with the other.

"That's not acceptable. My client needs to see the doctor sooner than that.-- She does have proof of insurance.-- That's because she has trouble filling out forms.-- Right.-- When?-- That's fine. Thank you.-- No, I'll let her know. Good-bye."

Avery exhaled a puff of frustration and turned around to speak to her administrative assistant. "Pat, would you believe-- Sasha. Hello."

"I thought it would be okay to bring Ms. Lewis in to see you." Pat advocated for my presence in Avery's office.

"Of course it's okay." Avery smiled warmly. "How are you?"

"I'm just fine, Avery." I didn't know when I'd been so happy to see someone. I wanted to walk right over and hug her, I was so glad. Instead, I extended my arms in a gesture that took in the entire room before speaking the obvious. "So this is your office?"

"You got it." There was something about Avery's confident tone that let me know that she could sense my nervousness, and that she could calm it. "And you're playing the role of Clive Whittingham today?"

"Yeah. I'm his stand-in, once again." I hoped I was concealing the angst I felt as I remembered I was here because Clive needed to meet with Lee's lover's husband to iron out some problem with the handsome home we were building for them.

"Well, we'll miss your boss. But you're much better looking than he is."

For just a second, I thought I saw a look of surprised regret cross Avery's face. Maybe she hadn't intended to toss out the flirtatious comment.

"Thanks for the compliment." I didn't want Avery to feel one bit sorry for her remark. "Of course, we won't tell him what you said."

"Of course not." She recovered from her embarrassment.

"Ladies, they're waiting for you in the conference room." Pat reappeared

"Thanks, Pat. Pat? Could you do me a favor? Could you call Christine Allen and tell her that she has a doctor's appointment at six tonight?"

"Sure, Avery. Right away."

I gazed at Avery and pointed in the direction of the conference room. "Looks like we're up at bat, Avery."

"Then let's go."

Clive had been right on target when he told me that a photographer would be there snapping pictures. Well, almost on target. The guy was a videographer and he filmed the whole ceremony, all five minutes of it. That's how long it took for Margaret Zelinskie to deliver the oral history of the Baker Center's support program for formerly incarcerated women and the center's new group home initiative.

I calculated when he viewed his copy of the video, Clive would be pleased with how many times they mentioned his company's name. I'd be pleased to look at the footage, especially if it included images of Avery signing on the dotted line.

As eager as I was to keep the parking lot fee reasonably affordable, I didn't hesitate to accept Avery's invitation to join her for coffee at a local eatery. There was no reason for me to return home promptly. The longer I lingered in the city, the more time Lee had to pack some of her things and vacate the house.

"Do you know the Era Cafe?" Avery handed me my jacket.

"I've heard of it, but I've never been there." Lee had mentioned the gay owned beverage mecca several times, as had Clive.

"I enjoy their coffee and it's nice to keep the money in the community." Avery tucked her royal blue and gray knit scarf under her coat collar.

"I agree. Lead on."

By now it was almost four o'clock, and the sun struggled to send its weakening rays over the peaks of the city's skyscrapers. A light wind had picked up, urging us to walk quickly. I saw Avery pull the sides of her coat closer to her body, and I felt a sense of wonderment when I realized how tempted I was to reach out and pull her close to me. We stopped to obey a traffic

light and I smelled the air; a mixture of automotive fumes, cheap imitation leather from the street corner handbag vendors and Avery's spicy perfume.

Aware that our physical closeness was making me nervous, I asked a mundane question. "Do you think it's going to snow before Christmas?"

Avery looked up at the sky, as if the answer were written on a cloud. She shook her head and answered. "No. Not until January."

As we crossed the street, two women marching in formation with the rest of the pedestrians who found themselves on that corner at that moment, I let myself smile at the authoritative tone of Avery's response to my weather question.

Avery continued our conversation. "Why? Do you have travel plans for Christmas?"

"No, I don't." I had no plans at all, and for some odd reason, that didn't disturb me a bit.

"Here we are." Avery practically whispered as she steered me through a wide door with a rainbow flag decal discreetly adhered to it.

I touched the tingling tips of my ears. "Thank God. It's warm in here."

We stood off to one side of the coffee shop, reading the menu's gigantic lettering above the counter and discussing the calorie count of this brew and the next. Finally we both reached a decision and ordered. The barrista assured us he would serve our drinks when they were ready. We chose two seats clustered around a small bistro table near the rear of the cafe. Like the hallway in Avery's office building, this space was long and narrow. Round tables softened the room's linear dimensions. The tall ceiling had been redone with a material simulating the original tin tiles that had been popular during the early part of the last century. Newly minted Italian and French posters advertising European brands of coffees, teas, and sodas covered one of the walls.

"Thanks for suggesting this place. It's nice and cozy in here." I smiled at Avery.

The young man who had taken our order delivered the cups of steaming liquid.

"Since it was my idea, Sasha, let it be my treat." Avery gave me one of those looks that defied any refusal on my part.

"Only if I can treat the next time."

I held up my cup, inviting her to do the same. Carefully, she lifted hers and touched mine with its rim. "Agreed. To the next time."

I felt a happy glow knowing there might be another time for us to get together. "So, tell me about yourself, Avery. What are some of the things you enjoy doing?"

Avery looked up at the faux tin ceiling. "Let's see...I enjoy reading a good novel."

"What kind?"

"Fiction. Lesbian romances and mysteries."

I nodded her. "What else besides reading?"

"I love listening to jazz, R &B, and exploring museums and going to the movies."

"So far we share some of the same interests." I winked at her.

"That's a good thing." Avery continued to look deeply into my eyes. She wore this inscrutable smile that made me curious to know what she was thinking. My gaze kept sweeping from hers to the slight hollows beneath both of her cheekbones. I wanted to touch her there.

"Sasha, do you enjoy film festivals?"

"I love them. I haven't missed a single women's movie at any of the Gay Film Festivals in the past five years."

Avery was delighted. "We've probably been in the same audiences and never knew it."

"That's possible." I was certain I would have remembered seeing Avery if we had been in the same auditorium. First of all, there were very few women of color who attended the festivals, so we always noticed each other. And second, in spite of Lee's presence, I would have looked twice at Avery. And I would have remembered her. I was partnered, but I wasn't blind.

"Two friends of mine gave me all-festival passes to the Hurston-Hughes Fest. Maybe we could check out a couple of the movies, if you'd like."

I returned Avery's tentative smile with a broad one. "I'd like that more than you know."

The woman was just asking me to see a film with her, that's all. No need to get carried away.

"Great! Then we'll do that. Uh...could I ask one more question?"

"Ask away."

"Do you have a partner? Sorry to be so blunt, but I'd never disrespect your relationship by asking you to see a film without including your better half."

I welcomed Avery's question, although I didn't know exactly how to explain Lee to her.

"All I can be is honest with you, Avery. I've been living with someone for four years, but it isn't a good situation and it's in the process of ending. I'm free to go with you to the film festival."

"Then I'll give you a call after you've had a chance to look at the schedule online."

Despite her response to my disclosure, Avery's face telegraphed her reaction to it. She regarded me cautiously, as if she had just confirmed my unavailability. I knew damn well "in the process of ending" sounded like a lame excuse for cheating, and I'd just bought myself little or no chance of going out to see a film with this woman.

"Are you pleased with how the contract signing went?" That's innocuous enough.

"Extremely. I'll be even more pleased when the first clients move into the renovated house. For some of the women, the group home will be the best place they've ever lived. They'll be sheltered, able to have clean clothes all the time, and they'll have the privacy of their own bedroom."

Maybe it was the steam billowing from the top of my mug, clouding my view with moisture, but I could swear that Avery's eyes sparkled when she mentioned her plans for her clients. I blew into my beverage before continuing to sip from it.

"How do you do it, Avery?"

"Do what?"

"How are you able to work with that population? Some of those women must be really hard core. You know, from-the-streets kind of hardened. When I look at you I see a soft, gentle woman. Just the opposite of the clients that you serve."

"That's an interesting observation, Sasha. I guess I believe everybody has a soft and gentle core. Circumstances sometimes force people to hide it."

Avery's answer took me to a thoughtful place. I wondered where Lee had hidden her gentle center. And I wondered if I still had one.

Avery shifted slightly in her seat and rode through a moment of hesitation.

"Sasha, when we were talking last week at the site, you described how you connected with Clive's business. But you didn't really say anything else about yourself."

"You're right. And I'm not sure how I feel about having run off at the mouth about my boss'personal business." I grimaced. "I probably shouldn't have done that."

"That information stays here and here." Avery pointed to her head and then to her heart.

I smiled at her. "For some reason, I already knew that. It was so easy to talk to you that day, Avery. It's just that, I don't usually--" Avery's ringing phone muted my voice.

She looked at me apologetically. "I'm sorry, but I'd better take this. It's the office."



I tried to get lost in the dark swirls that remained at the bottom of my coffee cup instead of listening to Avery's quick phone conversation.

"That's fine, Pat. What's the message?" Avery shot me a surprised look. "Is that all?-- Okay, thank you. I'll tell her. See you on Monday morning. Good-bye."

Avery gazed at me. "Someone phoned our office and wanted to speak to you, so Pat took the message."

"Oh? Was it Clive?"

Avery shook her head. "No. It was a Lee Simpson. She wanted you to know this weekend she was staying at the Executive Suites Hotel near the Turnpike, and you would know how to contact her if you needed to. She asked Pat if she knew where you were, since you weren't in our office. Pat told her we had gone out for coffee and probably wouldn't be back."

"Shit, shit, shit." I usually refrain from a lot of profanity, but there was nothing "usual" about today.

"Pardon me?" Avery didn't know whether she should smile or be alarmed at my gut reaction to the phone message.

"Sorry. It's part of that 'in-the-process-of-ending'that I mentioned to you a few minutes ago."

Avery pursed her lips. "Oh, I see." She swallowed the rest of her drink. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I felt my eyes fill up with unspent tears. "Not particularly."

"Sasha." Avery reached across the table, but withdrew her hand before it reached mine. "Has this person hurt you?"

I willed the tears to return to their source and I managed a weak smile. "For the last time."

Sensing a change in the tide, Avery adjusted the sails of our conversation. "You're upset and it's been a long day." She held her empty cup up in the air. "Want to hit the road?"

"Not particularly, but I guess that's a good idea. I'm not a real fun person right now."

Avery grinned at me. "I'll be the judge of that. You might be too hard on yourself."

We put our coats on and walked out of the cafe and into the late afternoon's dwindling light. Boisterous, in-your-face Christmas decorations filled every store's display windows and cast an eerie cartoonish light onto the streets.

Reacting to the garish lights by blinking more than necessary, I turned to Avery. "I think it's almost time for Christmas."

"Do you?" She laughed at my understatement.

"Where is your car parked?"

"At home. I took the train in today."

"I parked a few blocks from your office. Can I give you a lift home? It's the least I can offer after you've treated me to coffee."

"No, it's out of your way. But you can give me a ride to Suburban Station, if you don't mind."

"I'd be happy to do that."

We picked up our pace, joining the horde of home bound rush hour commuters. When we reached the garage we saw it wasn't any less crowded than the streets had been. A line of tired and impatient people queued up, waiting for one of the two elevators that traveled to the upper levels of the parking lot. Standing in that line would have annoyed the hell out of me under most circumstances. But being close enough to Avery to be able to count the freckles on her right cheek made the wait worth my while.

We took the elevator as far as it would go and stepped out into the open-air sky level. I remembered exactly where I'd parked my car hours ago. Had I been alone, I would have walked quickly and purposefully to it. This evening, though, I found myself wanting to move in slow motion so I could prolong my time with Avery. I felt grateful that there was an endless line of cars with their tired drivers waiting to pay at the garage's exit, and happy the thick traffic out on the streets moved at caterpillar speed. Those sluggish elements, in addition to a conveniently timed red light gave me time to gather some bravery and ask Avery my version of the question she had asked me at the café.

"And what about you, Ms. Sloan? Are you spoken for?" I looked at her intently.

"Nope. I'm completely unencumbered."

"I find that hard to believe. Someone as attractive as you..."

Avery pointed to the traffic signal. "The light's green."

Was that symbolic, I wondered?

"Thanks." I stepped on the gas pedal, trying hard to concentrate on the cars ahead of me. I revisited my question. "You really don't have anyone special in your life?"

"No, not at present." Avery winked at me. "And I like it that way."

As I steered us to the curb in front of the art-deco styled train station, Avery handed me her business card.

"I wrote my home number on the back, just in case you want to give a call and talk about things."

"Thanks." I grinned at her. "This is the second card of yours that I have, you know."

"Oh? I gave you one already?"

"Not exactly. The day we were on the plane together you dropped it near your seat along with your gay and lesbian magazines."

Avery nodded slowly, losing control of a smile that coaxed the dimple on her left cheek out of hiding. She left my car without saying when we'd see each other again. But that didn't matter, because we both knew there would be a next time. I drove on, with the city's silhouette reflected in my rear view mirror, and the traces of Avery's spicy scent lingering beside me in the front passenger seat.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

LEE WAITED UNTIL eight-thirty Monday morning, when she was certain Sasha would be at work. She entered the house stealthily. She was surprised to find the door between the garage and the laundry room unlocked. She thought Sasha must have come unglued since their dramatic parting on Friday afternoon. What else but heartbreak would cause her meticulously careful ex-partner to forget something as routine as locking the door when she left the house?

Lee felt something warm and soft near her feet. Randi wove a path around her, dragging her thick tail over the lower sections of Lee's legs. Lee reached down, roughly pushing the cat away.

"Get the fuck out of here!"

Slowly and on her own terms, Randi complied with her owner's request. She sashayed over to her food dish and began using her paw to scoop up pieces of her breakfast, drop them on the floor and then devour them one bit at a time.

Lee went into the den and turned the power on to her computer. She clicked through her numerous email messages, reading each one and typing answers to a few of them. December was a busy time for her business. This week alone she'd scheduled an open house to celebrate the opening of a beauty salon and a holiday office party at a radio station. She had four other events to supervise before Christmas. Lee shook her head and thought Sasha must have lost her mind

telling her to look for another place to live. Not now. Not when she had so many other things to attend to.

Lee scrolled through the endless list of messages, searching in vain for an email from Angela Jackman. Angela hadn't sent a thing. Nor had she responded to any of the numerous phone messages Lee had left during the past weekend.

Lee remembered the last moments they had spent together in the living room after Sasha had gone upstairs. She helped Angela back into her poncho, and then covered her hips with both hands, pulling her close. Lee whispered a litany of things she would have done to Angela if they hadn't been interrupted. Angela responded by cooing back the plans she had for Lee the next time they met. Angela hadn't been rattled or unduly shaken by their scene with Sasha. In fact, she assured Lee she would call her later. But the phone call never arrived.

The instant message rectangle flashed to life, riveting Lee's attention to the upper left hand portion of the screen. Reading Sasha's screen name instead of Angela's unfurled the fuse inside of Lee's head. Reading her message lit the fuse's frayed end.

Lee screamed at the electronic device. "Check the fucking online apartment rental listings? You check the listings, Goddamn it!"

She typed, "Good idea." and then clicked the "x", sending the rectangle off into the cyberworld. At that moment, Lee was willing to spend a weekend or two in a hotel, but she wasn't going to search for an apartment. If she had to relocate, it would be on her terms, not Sasha's.

Lee left her desk and went to her file cabinet, snatching the "I" file folder from its place. A three by five inch card fluttered to the carpet. Flipping it to the side that bore writing, Lee retrieved it and proceeded to read aloud her hand written notes.

"December fifteenth. Called S. at five o'clock. Cell phone turned off. Called site of meeting. Not there. Told she was on coffee date with Avery Sloan. Baker Rainbow Center Executive Director."

A moment later, Lee climbed the stairs and went directly to the master bedroom. She marched to the dresser and opened its top drawer. Tucked flat against the drawer front, sharing space with Sasha's bras and panties were two small burgundy colored business cards, inscribed with Avery Sloan's contact information. Lee held both of the cards in the palm of her hand. She stared at them intensely as her fuse continued to burn its way toward her explosive center.

Pocketing the little pieces of light weight card stock, she closed the drawer. Then she went downstairs and out to the storage area in the garage. She rummaged through an assortment of boxes until she found the largest one. Dragging it behind her through the kitchen, the dining room, and part of the foyer, Lee set it in the middle of the living room floor.

Then she took herself on a tour of the entire house. In each room she approached certain objects, picking them up, turning them over, and appraising each one. She removed photos and paintings

from their frames. She rehung a few of the frames and replaced those that had been standing on tables back in their places, pictureless. She brought the photos and artwork into the living room where she sliced them with the straight edge razor that she pulled out of her pocket. Then, she threw the slices into the large box planted in the center of the living room.

Returning to the second floor, Lee stopped at the linen closet and removed certain sheets and towels. She found a pair of pinking sheers and took her time making elaborate cut-outs in the fabric. These things she deposited in the box in the middle of the living room floor. Still in the mood to cut, Lee went out to the garage to fetch a can of 10W-30 oil and the hedge clippers. She perused the house plants, selecting about half a dozen. Uprooting each one, she set to work with the clippers. All that remained were bits and pieces of leaves, fronds, blooms, and stems. Lee dumped the soon-to-be-dead plants, as well as all of the potting soil and the containers into the box.

Next in line for alteration were some of Sasha's clothes. One suede jacket, four blouses, two pairs of jeans, a wool Harris tweed jacket, some silk boxers, and an assortment of long and short sleeve tee-shirts joined the items already piled in the box. She upended the can of motor oil and poured the thick liquid in a zigzag pattern over the pieces of clothing.

Lee surveyed the book and CD collections in the various rooms of the house. Methodically she tore entire chapters from the books, and then she scored each CD recording, making it unplayable. Lee smiled a satisfied grin when she peered into the cardboard coffin. She was almost finished. She sat down on the sofa and pondered what she might have missed. What items had she forgotten to deface or destroy, and bury in the box?

Her stomach alerted her that she was hungry. Lee went into the kitchen and fixed herself a thick turkey, lettuce, and tomato sandwich along with a goblet filled with scotch. She picked up the huge meat and bread concoction, and took large tearing bites of it, barely chewing the mouthfuls before forcing them down her throat. Having worked up a thirst, she chugged down the alcohol as if it were chocolate milk. Then, she walked over to the small television on the counter, turned it on and pushed the mute button. She had no patience for the newsreaders'telling her what she was watching.

"Do they think we're idiots? That we don't know what we're looking at?" She poured more of the amber liquor into her glass.

If she had been listening to the newscaster's voice, she might have been distracted. But she wasn't. So the silence allowed her to notice there was something different about the laundry room's door. The knob wore a recessed indentation where a key could be inserted, instead of the smooth antique brass finish it had always had. Suddenly Lee realized why she'd found that door unlocked when she arrived an hour ago.

"Damn it! That bitch changed the locks! I'm out of our house for two days and she's called a locksmith!" Lee stood up unsteadily, rocking back and forth on her feet. Clearly, the fuse had burned its length and reached the bomb that was in her soul. "Okay, Sasha, now you've done it!"

Lee ran to the den where she disassembled her computer. She ferried all of its parts to the trunk of her car. Then she grabbed armfuls of her business files and threw them into the trunk as well. She gathered her winter coats, gloves, boots and scarves and piled them into the back seat.

Racing upstairs, she emptied her closets of the clothes that she would need for the next few weeks. She pulled out her suitcases from the cedar closet at the end of the hallway, and she filled each one with the contents of her bureau drawers. Remembering her bracelets and necklaces, she picked up the entire jewelry box and put it under her arm as she made the first of four trips between the master bedroom and her car. In her rage, Lee never closed the door between the kitchen and the garage. She didn't want anything to get in the way of her work.

Prior to her final trip to the second floor, Lee paid a visit to the pantry from which she extracted the tool chest. There were two hammers resting in the deep cavities inside the chest. Lee took hold of the heavier hammer and put it down on the kitchen table, next to her half eaten turkey sandwich.

She tore up the steps and reentered her former bedroom. She strode over to the night table where Sasha kept the things that meant the most to her. Slowly and fastidiously, Lee reviewed her choices. She didn't want to select just anything. She wanted to choose the pieces that were the most precious.

She made her special selections and pocketed them, along with a bracelet, two necklaces and three pairs of earrings; all gifts that she had bestowed upon Sasha as Christmas or birthday gifts, or when she'd felt guilty about sleeping with some other woman.

Lee went back downstairs to the kitchen, the contents of her pockets jingling a background tune to her destruction. She laid the two priceless items on the hard surfaced counter, and took one last look at each piece before garnering all of her might to smash them. The force of her irrational anger thundered through every swing of the hammer. The crazed glint in her eye flashed brighter than the collective gleam of the precious objects that she was destroying. Lee carried that final handful of metal and glass to the living room dump station.

She closed the box, sealed it, and uncapped a red marker. Leaning over the cardboard container, she wrote a message:

TO SASHA. STUFF THAT I GAVE YOU DURING THE LAST FOUR YEARS, AND A  
COUPLE OF ITEMS

FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD. MERRY CHRISTMAS.

LOVE, LEE.

Lee grabbed her coat. She detached her useless house key from her fob and threw it on top of the closed box. Then she strolled toward the door between the kitchen and the laundry room, arriving a millisecond before Randi. Her rage fueled reflexes quicker than the cat's, Lee bent down and grabbed Randi's tail before the plump animal could scoot away. She picked Randi up

and unceremoniously tossed the cat into the trunk of the car, slamming it shut before Randi could manage a whimper.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

MONDAY MORNING I arrived at the office extra early, eager to get started and certain about two things. First, I had enjoyed being at home this past weekend with no one other than Randi keeping me company. Even she was at more ease than she had been for a long time. Second, I realized I missed my friends. I'd lost their valuable companionship the day I gave Lee free license to drive them away, mistaking her insecurities for devotion to our relationship. I needed to find a path back to those women, and once again hold their friendships close to me.

There were so many routes I needed to follow to recover the parts of me that were dispersed here and there. Fortunately, I'd never lost the "at-work" me. A few times I came close to losing that side of my identity, but I always managed to hang on to it. This first Lee-less workday welcomed me as all Mondays do, with the telephone ringing ceaselessly.

When I entered my office I immediately saw the red fifteen blinking on and off on the answering machine's message display area. I swallowed the last drops of warm coffee, and got down to business. Listening to fifteen messages was going to be a chore, and I could already see my morning flashing by in front of me. I'd be busy fielding questions, buffering complaints, and trying hard to comply with requests.

Sadly, I was mistaken. Instead of having to parry problems from fifteen different sources, I found myself listening to the same message from Lee, thirteen different times. Her late night scotch-thickened voice droned on through variations of the same theme; that I had screwed up and I'd never be happy with anyone else. My index finger wore out the "erase" button. It became a programmed piston, operating on cue whenever I heard Lee begin her diatribe. I jammed the key so automatically that I almost erased the two messages that were legitimate, one left by our waterproofing contractor and another from one of our project superintendents.

After enduring all of Lee's taped messages, I didn't want to hear her voice for a long time to come. At ten o'clock I figured she had probably returned to the house to use her computer, and I wanted to remind her to check the on-line rental ads. If I sent her an instant message, she could scream at her screen instead of at me. I was right about her being there, and I had to admit that her short cooperative reply surprised me. She understood she had to move out of the house.

With my personal problems pushed aside, I dug into the rest of the morning's tasks. After a while Nona appeared at my door.

"Sasha, I know you're busy, but do you have a moment to talk to Mr. and Mrs. George Norriton? They want to renege on their contract, lot twenty in Pine Terrace."

"Sure, Nona. Tell them to come in." I remembered the Norritons. They didn't fit the profile of the typical couple buying a large four-bedroom-plus-den house on a premium lot in a new upscale community. For one thing, they were in their early sixties and had grown children who were scattered across the country. Mrs. Norriton was retired already, and the one time that I met with them, Mr. Norriton referred to his impending retirement at least a half dozen times.

"They're not here. He's at work and she's at home. But they're both on their phones." Nona was amused at my misunderstanding our clients' whereabouts.

"Fine Ms. Smarty, I'll take their call."

I picked up the receiver. "Good morning, this is Sasha Lewis. I'm the general manager of Whittingham Builders."

"Good morning, Ms. Lewis. This is George Norriton. We met back in August when my wife and I attended the open house at Pine Terrace."

I could picture Mr. Norriton. On that hot and humid summer day he appeared to be cool and refreshed in his pressed plaid sport shirt and equally neat khaki slacks.

"Of course. I remember you both. How have you been?"

Nona re-entered my office and placed a folder on my desk. She pointed to the subject tab, and I could see that the envelope contained all of our information about the Norriton's planned house and the terms for its purchase. As we made small talk I skimmed their financial disclosure page.

"We're both fine, thanks." Mrs. Norriton was cordial.

"But we have a major concern." George Norriton sounded eager to get right to the point, perhaps because he was calling from his job.

"How can I help you?"

"We're buying the Annapolis model on lot twenty?" I could hear Mrs. Norriton's anxiety.

"And we're supposed to go to settlement the last day of February."

While her husband filled in more information I checked our completion schedule and saw that he was right. "Yes, you are."

"Well, the problem is our present home. It's been on the market since mid-August, and we've only had one serious offer." Mrs. Norriton completed painting the picture for me



"It's mid-December, and you're both getting worried, right?" I knew exactly where this train was headed, and I wasn't comfortable playing the conductor's role.

"Exactly. Your company wouldn't let us have a contingency clause when we signed the contract. And time is running out. What if our house doesn't sell?" Mr. Norriton's voice gained altitude.

I never liked having this kind of a conversation with customers, because I couldn't offer them any solace or peace of mind. I'd love to tell them not to worry; that if their house didn't sell, we'd buy it. Or they could cancel their contract with us and we would refund every cent of their deposit plus interest. I especially wanted to solve the problem for this couple, because I had a feeling they'd worked hard all of their lives and kept the image of this new house hovering just above their heads in a rainbow colored bubble. I was willing to bet they were putting some of their retirement nest egg at risk in order to achieve their dream.

However, I was not the owner of Whittingham Builders. And no matter how much I wanted to ease the Norriton's apprehension, I couldn't. If I had established the rules here, I'd probably be out of business by now. Clive has told me more than once, in this business an empty wallet rides on the heels of a soft heart.

"I wish I could offer you a palatable solution, I really do. The best advice I can give is to suggest you not make any decisions today." I paused, giving them a chance to protest my advice. They didn't, so I continued. "You spent the weekend reading the real estate articles in the business section of the newspaper, didn't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?" Mr. Norriton was surprised I had figured this out.

"I read those same articles and I knew I'd be speaking with nervous customers today. That always happens when the real estate market slows down. Look, talk with your listing agent and consider lowering your asking price. Then, call here tomorrow and ask to speak with Mr. Whittingham. Call early, around seven-thirty. That's the best time to catch him."

I knew Clive would want my head on a platter for telling clients to phone him the only time of day he had to concentrate undisturbed. But he was the only person who could find wiggle room for his fidgety buyers like the Norritons. If enough clients wanted to break their contracts, Clive would come up with something creative to soothe their nerves and calm their jumpy bank accounts. He had done this in the past, and he'd do it again.

"All right, Ms. Lewis. Thanks for talking to us."

"It was my pleasure. We want you to have as stress free a home buying experience as possible."

"Okay. Thank you." The Norritons spoke in unison.

"You're welcome. Good-bye."

I couldn't tell from their responses if they were relieved or simply resigned that nothing further would happen today.

"Excuse me, Sasha." Nona stood at my door again. "Richard Jackman is on hold."

"Let him stay there." I didn't even look up at our secretary.

"Uh...he sounds agitated."

I stared at Nona. "So am I."

"He's demanding to speak to somebody about his bath and kitchen cabinetry."

I could hear the discomfort in Nona's voice. The idiot lawyer must have chewed her up and spit her out. I breathed deeply and sent her a smile that said I understood.

"Please tell Jackman to hang up, and you'll page Clive, who will call him as soon as possible." I hoped to hell that this suggestion would work. "I have no intention of talking to Jackass today. Because if I do, I may speak out of turn and say something I regret."

Nona nodded and backed away from my doorway. "Gotcha."

I jumped up and grabbed my jacket from the hook on the door. I needed the rush of cold fresh air filling my lungs. Otherwise I might suffocate under the tarp of silence I was keeping about Richard Jackman's wife and her affair with Lee. I walked past Nona's desk and signaled her I'd be back soon. Once outside, I walked the two blocks from our parking lot to a small grocery store.

Our office building is located near the river banks in an old burg once populated by the mills that got their power from the water source. The laborers who worked for the tire maker, the industrial pump manufacturers, the fabric producers, and the nationally known pasta company lived in the narrow row houses that are still standing on the terraced hills of the suburban Philadelphia town. Savvy property developers like Clive, who can smell the scent of new money and who understand the migration habits of their upwardly mobile clientele, have bought up large tracts in this part of the county, one acre at a time.

Walking the short distance to the grocery store gave me quite a few chances to glimpse the neighborhood's transformation. A new apartment complex was taking shape in the middle of one block, and modern carriage homes were rising in the next. Watching a building's growing pains never failed to fascinate me and today wasn't any different. My plastic encased garden salad succumbed to the urge to dawdle. I forgot for just a moment, that I had an afternoon's worth of work to do; and worse than that, an unpredictable evening to endure.

I gazed at the new construction and tried to memorize how many windows were in place in the carriage homes, and what percentage of the steel support beams had been installed in the

partially framed apartment structure. Reluctantly, I picked up my pace after a few minutes. I got back to the office building just in time to meet a relieved Nona sipping a mug of tea.

"Oh Sasha, thank God I was able to reach Clive. That Jackman guy is impossible. How does his wife stand it?"

"I imagine she gets what she deserves." I knew not to say any more. I favored Nona with one of my benign, meaningless smiles, and hurried into my office to answer yet another phone call.

"Good afternoon. Sasha Lewis speaking."

"Sasha?" A familiar and very excited sounding voice spoke my name.

"Avery?"

"Hi. I'm calling from the house. Just wanted you to know that the dumpsters are here. I never thought I'd be happy to see those things, but I am." Avery's joy was contagious and I felt myself smiling into the phone.

"Well, we're happy to accommodate you. I'm glad they were delivered."

"Thanks. Oh, there's a guy in the basement putting thick light-blue stuff on the bottom few inches of the walls."

"That would be the waterproofing material, and that's a good thing." I chuckled, pleased with her enthusiasm for trash receptacles and thick blue stuff. "We're right on schedule, Avery."

"Okay, if you say so."

"And I do." I had a thought. "Hey Avery, do me a favor, please. Look in the living room window and see if there's a permit or two posted there."

"Hold on. I'm walking over there right now...Yes. There are two papers taped to the front window."

"Excellent."

"Don't I get some sort of compensation for checking on that?"

Clearly, Avery was teasing me. She posed her question the way some people pose dares. I didn't usually take dares, but changes in my life were happening so quickly, I could see myself easily taking one.

"What kind of compensation did you have in mind?" I teased back.

"Oh, I don't know. That's up to you. You're the general manager, Sasha."

I was suddenly aware of the way Avery spoke my name. Those two syllables sounded lush and sweet at the same time. The very thought of her saying my name again hushed me into silence.

"Are you okay, Sasha?"

"I'm fine." I had to get a hold of myself.

"Are you sure about that?"

Was Avery recalling the phone message her administrative assistant relayed last Friday afternoon while we were sipping coffee in that center city cafe?

"Yes, I'm fine." If I could convince her of that, maybe I'd be able to convince myself.

"All right. I know you're busy. I was just so pleased to see the work had started at the group home. Thanks for taking my call."

"I'll always take your call." I was the grateful one. "Hey, Avery? Uh, can I call you later on?"

"Any time, Sasha. That's why I gave you my number." Avery's words were a song in my ear.

"Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye."

"Good-bye."

The routine-filled afternoon crept by slowly, as bland as a piece of unbuttered toast. I wasn't complaining. In fact, I was relieved I didn't have any emergencies to deal with. I used the time well, clearing my desk of a ton of paperwork, and by five-thirty I was ready to close shop. I stuffed my workbag with my new laptop and some information about Philadelphia's group home regulations.

Nona had left for the day, but there were still several sales staffers with clients huddled in the smaller rooms off the central hallway. I stopped at each one to speak to the salesperson and be hospitable to the potential buyers. As I made my way closer to the exit, I caught sight of the blinking lights on the artificial holiday tree near the building's entrance. That tree reminded me that Christmas was right around the corner. And in case the tree failed to jog my memory, the holiday music CD on the office's PA system, and the two huge planters overflowing with red and white poinsettias did the trick. It was time for me to hang a wreath on my front door, put the electric candles in the front windows and mail my cards wishing good health, happiness and peace. If only Lee would quickly find another place to live, I'd have peace.

I didn't know where I expected her to go. She couldn't shack up with Angela Jackman, but maybe there was someone else who would board her temperamental self. Anyone. I no longer cared.

When I arrived home, I knew the second I stepped from the garage into the laundry room that something was wrong. I could feel it in the air, although I couldn't see anything amiss. Not immediately, anyway. I wrapped my hand around the cold metal doorknob. I didn't need to use the key because the door was unlocked, just as I'd left it this morning, wanting to make it easy for Lee to come in without discovering she no longer had access to the house.

I put down my workbag and my fist automatically tightened into a ball, ready to mount a defense against the feeling something evil had visited my house. I reached into the next room, and probed the wall until I found the light switch. I flicked it upward and watched the light beams wash over the room. Of all the places in that kitchen that could have caught my eye, it was the counter space to the right of the sink that jumped out at me.

I gasped. There, propped against the tile wall between the countertop and the bottom of the cabinets, stood my hammer. Fissures the shape of thunderbolts marred the countertop's hard surface. Jagged chunks of its gray and black marbled plane must have gone airborne because they were scattered everywhere; in the sink, on the stovetop, on the floor under my feet. I got close to the damaged area and ran my hands over the rough splintered edges.

"What the hell happened here?" I looked up at the cabinets. They were still hung securely in place on the wall.

I picked up the hammer and stared at it in disbelief. How could that tool have desecrated this surface all by itself? In an instant I knew it was Lee's hand that had swung the hammer and crashed it against the counter top. Why? I put the innocent instrument down, releasing it from all blame, and steeled myself to see the rest of my ex-lover's handiwork.

I approached the den and used my foot to open the partially closed door. The file cabinet's drawers yawned open. Two were completely empty. Lee's computer was gone, as was the stack of papers that always laid claim to half of her desk. The little notices and reminders that had been tacked to the bulletin board on the side wall were missing also.

On my way to the stairs, I opened the coat closet and accounted for my jackets, raincoat and heavy cold weather parka. The half dozen newly emptied hangers dangling in front of me announced their former tenants' departure. It was beginning to look like Lee had returned here earlier today and removed her belongings, leaving mine undisturbed. But why the demolition in the kitchen?

The first place I checked in my bedroom was the larger of the two closets and the dresser drawers Lee had used for the past four years. They were empty of everything except her summer weight clothing. Wherever she had gone, she intended to stay until winter was over.

Deciding to change from my office outfit to some sweatpants and a pullover, I opened my closet door and saw my sweaters jumbled together, lying in a heap on the floor. I began picking them up and reshelving them, all the while searching for the black and gray one I wanted to wear tonight. It wasn't there. I knew it wasn't at the cleaners or in the hamper waiting to be laundered because I hadn't worn it for a while.

Reaching down for the sweater at the top of the pile, I pulled it on. It occurred to me to search for other items of clothing; a new pair of jeans, some blouses, a tweed jacket. They were all missing. I stood like a lighthouse in the middle of the bedroom, casting my gaze all around. Suddenly I noticed the empty picture frames hanging haphazardly on the walls.

The ever growing chill accompanying the certainty that Lee had been here sent me back downstairs faster than I'd come up. I sped into the living room, where more vacant frames stared back at me crazily, like something from a rerun of "The Twilight Zone." The used cardboard crate that once contained a large screen television stood in the center of the room. I scanned the red-lettered label that lay on top of it.

Goose pimples exploded over my arms as I steadily eased the ends of the box apart and looked over its edge. A hodgepodge of quasi-unrecognizable objects stared back at me. Dizzy with confusion, I saw things that were at once familiar yet unknown. A piece of wool tweed, a strip of fabric covered with buttons, a compact disc folded at a forty-five degree angle, a shred of patterned silk, some of my underwear. Pages from a book, slivers of photos, a triangular shaped piece of bath towel, plant stems, the sleeve from my suede jacket discolored with something thick and wet that smelled like oil.

"Jesus, Lee!" I sat and wondered what monster had grabbed her by the shoulders and shaken this kind of shit out of her.

I stepped back, trying to make sense of the box's tattered contents. A moment passed before it hit me. Everything in that box had been a present from Lee. The clothing, the CD's, the plants-- every single thing.

They say that insight is only half the battle. There's still a gulf that lies between understanding and doing something proactive or healing. So, while I understood Lee not wanting me to have anything she'd given me, I didn't know where I would go with the knowledge.

I headed to the kitchen. Halfway there I spotted a tiny gold object embedded between the metal threshold strip and the edge of the carpet in the hallway. I got down on all fours to examine the shiny fragment. It looked like an arc-shaped piece of a circle. Patiently, I pried it loose from its hiding place.

I held it up to the light, examining both sides. All of a sudden I felt like I was in the darkest part of a bad dream. Even though I hadn't seen that gold disk for years, I recognized it and with its recognition came the certitude that Lee had crossed a sacred boundary. That little shard of yellow metal was part of the number "twelve" charm that lived on a bracelet, alongside other tokens celebrating my rites of passage. The bracelet was my only tangible proof that my mother had existed in my life.

The pain Lee inflicted by destroying the gift tore through me. I forced myself to rise from my knees and return to the box in the living room. I bent over it, squinting and searching through the plant roots, the torn pages, the shredded fibers of cloth, and the deformed photos with Picasso-like faces that mocked my frantic motions. Buried under an oil soaked section of sheet was the

charm bracelet's twisted chain and the mini Eiffel Tower that my godmother had given me when I won the French Prize in high school. Next to that was half of the face of my grandfather's pocket watch. The antique timepiece had traveled with him daily to his job at the West Philadelphia Post Office. It had signaled the events of his days and nights.

I refused to staunch my rising tears. The drops trembled in the corners of my eyes, deciding whether they would fall or not. When I ran my fingers over the raised numerals on the time piece's scarred face, my tears began to flow. They fell unfettered like springtime rapids as I sat on the floor sobbing loudly. I mourned for what was now torn and cut; what was now sharp and rough to the touch. I grieved knowing I could never touch those whole memories of family again.

It felt like hours went by. Exhausted, and with my tears spent, I called out for Randi. It was strange that she hadn't investigated the noise coming from the living room. I pulled myself up from the floor and went to all of my cat's favorite hiding places. Maybe she'd been afraid to make an appearance. Maybe my sobs had frightened her. After searching each of her haunts on the first floor, my sorrow began to turn to fear. My heart beat furiously and I could taste the faint flavor of metal in my mouth. I took the stairs two steps at a time and dashed into the bedrooms and baths. No Randi. Oh God! Where was she?

The phone rang as I retraced my steps. I let it continue ringing until the answering machine in the den took charge. When the little message light started blinking, I pushed the button and listened to Lee's smug voice.

"You're not home from work yet, Sasha? Or maybe you're out on a date with that social worker from the Baker Center. Whatever! I left a present for you in the living room. Actually quite a few presents. And you'll notice your cat is missing. I know how much you love her. I'll be in touch, sweet baby. Good night."

I walked, zombie-like, back into the kitchen, where I poured myself a glass of wine. I leaned on the trashed countertop, mesmerized by a whirlwind of emotions, and lost myself in the newly forged pattern of cracks and crevices Lee had created.

I knew the counter top could be restored. And I'd never miss most of the stuff in the box. But I did feel lost and alone without the pocket watch and the charm bracelet. I felt untethered to anyone dead or alive. And I knew I'd never feel peace if I didn't find Randi.

I removed every particle of the watch and every bracelet fragment I could find before I packed the hateful hand written message inside the box with the rest of its refuse. Then I pushed it through the front door, and pulled it out to the curb, ready for the Tuesday morning trash collection.

An hour or so later, I emptied my sweatpants'pockets and placed the jagged remnants of my family's jewelry into the small crystal box that lives on top of my dresser. I opened the top drawer, pushed aside the soft pile of underwear, and felt around for what I hoped would bring me solace. I had placed both of Avery Sloan's business cards in this most intimate place. Or had I? They were no longer there.

I closed the drawer and just stood there in front of the furniture, staring at the glass enclosed remains of the pocket watch and bracelet. I willed those two pieces of my past to be a constant reminder of the kind of hurt that can come riding into my life, wearing the disguise of love.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

EVERY STOOD OUTSIDE her house, enjoying the cold brisk air and picking up the fruit from the holiday decor in her window boxes. Slowly, she turned each piece and examined it carefully, searching for the telltale signs of rot. For the most part, the oranges were still in good shape, as were the two pineapples. The soft brown blemishes marring some of the pears and apples warned Avery they were past their prime. She put those specimens in a plastic bag which she intended to empty in her backyard. She knew there were plenty of hungry birds in the area who would be eager to feast on the fruit's remains. Then, Avery proceeded to rearrange the evergreen sprigs and replace the aging pieces with fresh Galas and Anjous.

She was so preoccupied studying her window arrangements, she didn't hear a car pull up and park less than ten feet away from where she was standing.

"Hey, stranger! Christmas is over! You can stop decorating!"

Avery pivoted. "Karyn! What are you doing here?"

"Checking up on you!" Karyn turned off her car's engine. "I had to show a house in Mt. Airy, and I just took a chance you might be here, even though it is the middle of the afternoon."

"You're in luck, girl. I just got here." Tugging on Karyn's car door, Avery beamed at her friend. "Do you have a few minutes? Why don't you come in for some eggnog or a cup of tea?"

"Tea sounds good. I've been hitting the calories pretty tough, what with all of the holiday parties. You know I have to watch my girlish figure if I want Jessie to pay attention to it."

They entered the warm house and Avery hung her friend's coat in the foyer closet. "And how is Jessie these days?"

"She's fine." Karyn stopped and smiled coyly before continuing. "And I'm fine, and we're both fine together."

Avery stood back and nodded her approval. "Well, thank God. You two finally hooked up?"



"You could say that." Karyn followed Avery into the kitchen. Not waiting for an invitation, she sat down at the round oak table.

"We've moved beyond the friendship stage, and now we're dating, if you can believe that."

Avery held the kettle a few inches above the stove, as if putting the flame to the water would distract her from Karyn's testimony. Her inquisitive look invited Karyn to continue.

"You were right, Ave. The minute I told Jessie how I felt about her, she admitted she was interested in me, too. She said she'd been wanting to have a different kind of relationship with me for a long time, but she didn't know how I'd feel. She was afraid I'd reject her and say that I only wanted a platonic friendship."

"Karyn, I'm so glad you spoke what was in your heart." Avery lowered the container of water to the burner.

"I'm glad also." Karyn's face wore a smile of contentment. "But what's going on with you? Working half days until the New Year?"

"Sort of. I went into the office extra early this morning, and then I took off so I could stop by the group home."

Karyn searched through the teabag collection that Avery had placed on the table. "How's that project going?"

"Fine. The contractor was supposed to break through some walls this morning to get the two new bathrooms underway."

"Whew! Sounds like they're working fast. They just started last week, right?"

"Yup. Someone's been working every day. So far, I'm impressed with Whittingham Builders." Avery toted the kettle of boiling water over to the table, and poured some in each tea cup.

"Is anything progressing with that general manager? What's her name?" Karyn grinned as she dunked her teabag into her cup.

Avery seriously doubted her buddy had forgotten Sasha's name, but she reminded her nonetheless. "Her name is Sasha Lewis. And, no. There's nothing going on."

"Well don't you need to call her about the house? Can't you find some problem to ask about?"

Avery laughed at her girlfriend's wiles. "Nope. There aren't any problems. And despite the fact that finding one would give me a legitimate excuse to phone Sasha, I'd really prefer that we didn't run into any obstacles with the project. We need that group home to open on time. I'm running the office and trying to keep abreast of the construction all at the same time, you know."

"Let's see now. You're running an office and keeping on top of a construction project. That sounds familiar. Oh yeah! Isn't that what Sasha Lewis does for a living? See? You've got something in common with her."

Avery cocked her head to one side. "You are too much, Karyn Armstrong."

Attempting to change the subject, Avery directed a new question to her friend. "So what else besides Jessie is going on in your world? I know it's only four days after Christmas, but has the real estate market picked up?"

"Not yet. But the good news is that I've been invited to interview for a sales position with Whittingham Builders."

"Hey, that's wonderful. They got your resume."

"Yup. I sent it to your Ms. Lewis, and I guess she passed it on." Karyn kept a smile on her face.

"When is your interview?"

"The eighth of January." Karyn gazed down at her tea, and then looked back up. "Listen, Avery. If you're not doing anything on New Year's Day, why don't you come over? Jessie, Marie, Ameerah and I plan to watch the football game. You could ask Sasha if she'd like to join us."

Avery stared at Karyn. "Thanks for the invite, but I don't know."

"You don't know about yourself or about bringing Sasha?"

"About Sasha. We really haven't talked to each other on any level other than business." Avery looked off into space. "I called her from the Mt. Airy house because I was thrilled that the darn dumpsters had been delivered and that the project was getting off the ground..."

"And?"

"And nothing. She asked if she could call me later on. Then she never did."

"And you never called her back?"

"No." Avery averted Karyn's eyes for a second. "I didn't want to be too aggressive or desperate."

Karyn bit her bottom lip and paused before continuing. "Look, Avery. You know how I feel about rumors and people who pass them, right? Don't spread 'em, and don't bed 'em."

Avery grinned. She'd heard her friend repeat that particular witticism many times, and then frequently follow it with a choice piece of information. "Okay, girl. What do you have for me?"

"Just that I think it would be okay for you to call Sasha Lewis. She may be lonely right about now."

"Karyn, what are you trying to tell me?" Avery wanted more information before she would risk phoning Sasha for a reason other than business.

"I'm just saying you wouldn't look foolish if you gave the sister a call." Karyn held up her hands, as if she were beseeching Avery to take action. Then she steadied her gaze, staring directly at her.

"You know what, Avery? I think you can come up with some great advice for your friends, but you can't follow that same advice yourself."

"You might be right." Avery acknowledged her buddy's opinion with a nod.

"Of course I'm right." Karyn glanced at her watch and sprang away from the table. "And I'm running late for my next appointment."

Avery pushed her cup aside and stood. "Another property to show?"

"Nope. A date with Jessie." Avery's guest led the way back to the front of the house where both women stopped near the closet. Karyn reached in and removed her coat from a hanger. She put it on quickly and then hugged Avery.

"I'm glad you were here. I've been missing you."

"I've been missing you, too. But somehow I sensed you and Jessie needed some time together; and our little dinner trio could wait until you guys worked out where your relationship was headed."

Karyn hugged Avery a second time. "Thanks for that. And I'll get off your back about the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"Sasha Lewis. You're a grown woman. And you know what you want and how to get it. So I'm going to leave you alone. I promise."

"Yeah, right." Avery playfully jostled Karyn's shoulder. "Say hi to Jessie for me. Tell her I've been missing her too."

Karyn opened the front door. "You bet I will. And think about New Years Day, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

Avery stood in the entryway to her home, watching Karyn's car chug down the street. She checked on her window boxes once again, contemplating adding more snippets of pine and holly. Satisfied that additional greenery wasn't necessary and her restoration work was finished, Avery went back into the house.

She walked to the kitchen, intending to take care of the used tea cups. Halfway there, she decided to call the office to collect any messages that might have come in after she left a few hours ago. Surely nothing terribly important had happened because she hadn't been paged. But maybe a call had come in that she could take care of from home; something minor, like a client needing some information, or a decision about some lesser detail at the group home renovation.

Maybe someone from Whittingham Builders had called about the project's work schedule. Maybe Sasha Lewis had phoned with some questions about the materials for the new bathrooms. Perhaps she needed to call Sasha about the dimensions of the planned pass-through between the dining room and the renovated kitchen. Maybe she could telephone Sasha, just to ask how her holiday had been and to wish her a happy New Year.

Avery retrieved her cell phone from her handbag. She scrolled through its memory until she reached "W." Pressing two buttons, the normally unflustered Avery rehearsed a dozen different scripts in her mind as she waited the four seconds that it took before someone answered.

"Uh, good afternoon. This is Avery Sloan from the Baker Rainbow Center. I'd like to speak with Sasha Lewis, please.-- Oh, all right.-- No, there's no emergency. That won't be necessary. I can call tomorrow.-- Well, yes, that would be fine if you think that it's okay." Avery scrambled to find a piece of paper and a pencil. She switched the phone to her other hand as she braced the slip of paper against the wall and held it in place while she wrote.

"Yes, I have it. Thank you.-- Happy New Year to you too. Good-bye."

Avery put the tiny piece of paper on her kitchen table. She picked up the two tea cups and carried them to the sink where she held each one under a stream of hot water before setting them in their slots in the dishwasher. Avery turned around to make sure the piece of paper was still on the table where she had put it. Then she stared out of the window at the bare branched trees in her backyard. One single bird, a black-capped chickadee, roosted on the fully stocked silo feeder.

Avery watched the little bird and waited for its mate to make an appearance. It was unusual to see only one of these dark gray and white-chested birds at a time. But that single bird ate its fill and then left on its own to continue its solo flight. Struck by the irony of one so lovely being so alone, Avery returned to the table, picked up the paper, and headed toward her telephone.

"Okay, Sasha. Your secretary gave me your home phone number, and I'm going to use it."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

LEE GRABBED THE handle of her briefcase and got out of her car, slamming its door behind her. Immune to the post-Christmas chill, she left her coat on the back seat and proceeded to her client's front door. The presence of the luxury SUV in the circular driveway assured Lee that Angela Jackman was at home. She glued her thumb to the doorbell, pressing it in for seconds at a time. She could hear the chimes repeat themselves, daring the house's occupants to ignore her arrival.

Angela opened the door part-way. She stood in her foyer, glaring at the bell ringer. Then quickly, she darted outside, pulling the door almost completely closed behind her.

"Lee! What are you doing here?" Angela hissed, her voice as raspy as a sheet of fine grit sandpaper.

"Hopefully to do the same thing that I've done here before." Lee was taken aback by Angela's reticent welcome. She grinned slyly. "Aren't you happy to see me, baby?"

"You can't just show up unexpectedly." Angela turned slightly and stole a glance over her shoulder. "Richard's here."

Lee took in a deep breath. "Well tell him we have an appointment. We can go into your study. We've been in there before, remember?" She tried to cajole Angela with the sensual memory of the two of them lustfully conjoined in the wood-paneled room.

"It's his study, not mine." Angela narrowed her lips. "I thought the plan was to wait for me to call you or send you an instant message."

"Oh right. The same way you sent me an instant message before you came over to my house."

Angela's expression shifted from annoyed to somewhat amused. "I thought your girlfriend wouldn't be at home. You told me she went to her office every chance she got. So I thought it was all right to pay you a visit every chance that I got."

"Well now you know why I'm paying you a visit today." Lee forgot that she and Angela were standing outside at the front entrance, in full view of anyone who happened to drive by or who cared to take a good look from the vantage point of the door's sidelights. She reached out with her free arm and circled Angela's waist, pulling the shorter woman toward her.

"Stop it. We can't do that here." Angela hissed. Her response to Lee's behavior was muffled by a man's voice calling out from the interior of the house.

"Who's at the front door, Angela?"

"Is that the master's voice?" Lee couldn't hide her sarcasm. She dropped her hand from Angela's mid-section.

"Oh shit. Now I have to explain who you are."

Reaching around and beyond her lover, Lee pushed the front door open. "I'd like to meet Richard, and I'd love to hear you explain who I am."

As the two lovers stepped inside, one much more reluctantly than the other, the owner of the house appeared. Not a terribly imposing physical presence, Richard used his booming voice to create the impression of filling the foyer. He approached his wife and the female stranger.

"How do you do? I'm Richard Jackman."

He grasped Lee's hand and shook it forcefully, jamming the ring on her third finger into the knuckle of her baby digit. Lee stood erect and returned the hand clasp. She mentally measured the lawyer's stature.

"I'm Lee Simpson." She turned slightly to Angela. "Your wife can explain who I am."

Richard stared at Angela.

"Yes, of course. Richard, this is the young woman the social committee has hired to plan the firm's cocktail party and brunch next month."

Richard's eyes darted from his wife's face back to Lee's.

"Oh, yes. How is that going?"

"It's going better than I expected, Mr. Jackman. We're almost finished. There are just a few details left to iron out. That's why I'm here." Lee shifted course, becoming pleasantly obedient instead of stridently challenging.

Jackman turned to his wife. "Are you continuing to keep the senior committee members involved with all of the decisions?"

"Of course, Richard."

Lee stared at Angela, failing to reconcile her lover's docile response to her husband with the aggressive nuances she'd seen during every other contact with her.

Richard's next question broke Lee's consternation. "So, what's left to decide?"

"The music." The event planner removed two CD's from her briefcase and she handed them to Angela.

"This first one is a recording of the quartet we're considering for the cocktail party, and the second one is the trio we may want for the brunch." She gazed calmly at Richard. "Shall I leave them here for you, or do you want to hear them right now and make a decision?"

Jackman held out his hand, intercepting the music. "Why don't you leave them here, Ms. Simpson? My wife and I will give them a listen and then get back to you."

Lee allowed one of her controlled smiles to surface. "Fine. But please keep in mind that we don't have much time left to book these gentlemen."

"I understand." Jackman returned one of his guile-filled smiles. His hand, on automatic pilot, extended itself toward Lee. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Simpson. See you in February."

Lee spread a beehive's worth of honey over her words. "Nice meeting you also, Mr. Jackman."

"I'll walk you to your car, Lee." At last Angela recovered her voice. The women began walking toward the front door.

"Ms. Simpson!" Richard's baritone thundered, trying in vain to bounce from the wood floor all the way up to the vaulted ceiling.

Lee turned around slowly, one of her eyebrows raised. "Yes?"

"We'll phone you with our decision about the musicians before the day ends."

"Thanks. I'll expect to hear from you." Lee smiled at him.

By the time that the two women stepped into the driveway, Lee's smile had disappeared. She glowered. "Why didn't you tell him we needed to listen to the tapes right now?"

"Trust me, that wouldn't have been a good idea." Angela backed away from Lee. "I'll call you later."

"Well I'm not going to be sitting around waiting for your call." Lee pointed her ignition key at Angela.

"Yes you will." Angela winked. "That's exactly what you've been doing since you met me. I know it and you know it."

"Fuck you, Angela! You don't run anything here." Lee hooked her thumb toward the manse. "He runs you, sister."

Angela shook her head from side to side. "He doesn't run me, sweetheart. Not any more than you do." She began walking back to the front door. She paused, turned around and spoke seductively to Lee. "Now be good, and be near your phone when I call you later on."

Lee cursed under her breath. She opened her car door and threw her briefcase into the back seat. "Fuck!" She yelled the profanity in tandem with starting the engine.

ANGELA ENTERED HER house and went directly into the den. She found Richard there, wearing a pair of earphones and leaning back in his chair. He tapped his fingers on his leather topped desk, keeping rhythm with a tune known only to him. He gazed at his wife languidly, through barely open eyes.

"I'd say hire both of these groups. They're real good, real smooth. But remember to tell Helen Cawley. In fact, ask Mrs. Cawley if she's ever heard of them."

Angela smiled. "Okay, Richard." She started to leave the room, then stopped in her tracks and refocused on her husband's contented face. "I'll call Lee Simpson also, and tell her you like the musicians she wants to hire."

"Angela?" Richard removed the ear plugs. He stood up and advanced quickly toward his wife. With the surprise of a streak of lightening in a pitch-black night sky, the lawyer shot a flat-handed slap across Angela's face, sending her backward into the waiting arms of an over-stuffed chair.

He growled menacingly at his wife.

"I'll take care of that call. But you can let Lee Simpson know you're not ready to leave this marriage. Do you know why?" He didn't give his wife a second to come up with an answer. "Because you're staying around to see me climb to the top, even if she wants to keep fucking you."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

"DAMN SASHA. WHAT did you do here?" Lorenzo Salvano, Clive's ace kitchen remodeler, ran his hands over the counter top and then bent down so that he could be eye-to-eye with its surface.

"I didn't do anything. A hammer got busy with it." I stood close to the damage, my hand on my hip.

"Yeah, but the hammer didn't have a mind of its own." The contractor whistled and unhooked his tape measure from his belt. He pointed at the counter's first wound. "Let me measure from here to the end of the run."



After jotting the figures in his notepad, he unbuttoned the thigh pocket of his pants and took out a digital camera. A half-dozen photos later, Lorenzo gave me the good news.

"I'll get you back in business. Just give me a few days. This solid surface material is a dream to work with, Sasha."

"You can repair all of this damage?"

"In a way. If all you had was a couple of cuts, I could sand 'em down right now. Heck, you could do it yourself."

I nodded, pleased that Lorenzo had confidence in my handyperson skills.

"But this is not so simple." He passed his hands reverently over the devastation. "What I'm gonna do is use a diamond blade wet saw and cut this section out completely. Then I'll get a replacement piece and put it in with epoxy. You won't even know it's not the original slab."

I believed him. I'd seen Lorenzo and his crew tackle huge jobs and execute them seamlessly.

"That sounds great. How soon do you think you can do this for me?"

"I can be back here next Thursday." Lorenzo looked around the room, paying special attention to the floor. "Don't you have a cat? I remember almost stepping on him when we worked in here before."

"I used to have one." I looked down at the kitchen floor.

"Oh, he died? I'm sorry."

"He's a she, and no, Lorenzo. She didn't die. Let's just say she's not on the premises right now."

"Okay. I don't mind cats. I just don't like 'em surprising me." He then gazed at the hammer damaged counter top once again. "So is next Thursday okay? By then you may have a day off anyway."

"What do you mean?" I tried to visualize the remainder of my January calendar.

"The cooling-off period for the electricians ends on Sunday at midnight. I heard that nobody's willing to move off first base. Those guys aren't getting a fair shake, you know. If they walk off the job, everybody else is going to walk with them, and that'll shut the builders down all over the region."

I rubbed my forehead in an effort to erase the vision of a complete work stoppage. "That's why you said I'd have some time off?"

"Yeah, well we can all use a day or two, right?" Lorenzo tapped the counter and winked at me. "But don't worry. I'll show up with the new piece and we'll call this a warranty job."

"Thanks, Lorenzo. I appreciate that." My mind was already speeding through next week's planned schedule of settlements, start-ups and houses in progress. I wondered why Clive hadn't phoned me to discuss his contingency plans in case the strike came to pass.

"Okay, Sasha. I'll be going."

"Thanks for coming out on a Saturday, Lorenzo. I'll see you next week, strike or no strike."

"Sure thing."

I followed him to my front door. "Oh, Lorenzo!"

Lorenzo stopped and turned around.

"Have you or your guys been to the rehab house in Mt. Airy?"

"Yeah. I stopped by there right after the holiday. That'll be a fairly routine job, nothing major and no complications."

I nodded my approval. "That's good news."

"I measured everything up and the lady in charge..." Lorenzo flipped a few pages in his notebook. "Ms. Sloan. She said she'd talk to you about the best kind of counter top. She wants something durable because a lot of different people will be using the kitchen."

Avery's image floated past my mind. I pictured how she must have looked the day she met with Lorenzo. She would have been the consummate professional, standing toe-to-toe with him, a notepad and pen in her hands. She would have smiled and been full of questions; her eyes narrowing slightly the instant one of her questions left her lips, her head of curly tendrils vibrating with liveliness and nodding her assent to each of the subcontractor's answers.

Lorenzo interrupted my daydream. "We're gonna reface the cabinets. You'll let us know when to remove the doors and drawer fronts, right?"

"Yes. I have the project schedule, so I'll call you a couple of days before you need to go out there."

"Great. See you next week then."

I hoped so. But if there were a strike going on, that was doubtful. I'd be up to my eyeballs in who knows what. Lorenzo thought that a job action meant a day off from work? Not for me nor for any of the office staff at Whittingham Builders. I'd had my day and a half off already, from noon

on December twenty-fourth to the end of the day on the twenty-fifth. Because Christmas fell on a Friday, I did manage to eke out a long weekend before I returned to the office.

I'd used those few days well. I started reaching out to old friends. Even though I turned down their offers of dinner or drinks and conversation, I reveled in the new freedom I had to phone them and reforge our connections. My holiday gifts were their voices filling in the parts of their lives I'd missed during the past few years. Corey Lomax's, "Hey, girl. How are you?" and Simone Greene's, "God, I'm so glad you called." They were some of the missing pieces of my weakened foundation.

Once or twice on the twenty-fifth I thought about Avery and wondered how she was spending Christmas. She'd told me she didn't have a partner, but I couldn't imagine her not dating anyone. She was too kind, capable, and all right, flat out fine to be alone on a special holiday. I wanted to call her, but the only phone number I had was the one at her office. I could have left a message on the answering machine, but she wouldn't hear it until the Monday after Christmas.

As it turned out, Avery called me a few days after Christmas. She told me that Nona gave her my home phone number. I planned to speak to our secretary about that; either to bless her out or thank her. Nona rarely missed a trick. She must have sensed something in me I thought I could hide or ignore.

I handled that phone call from Avery with as much skill as a horse trying to play a harp. I got caught in the soft undulations of her voice, blurred by my memory of standing close to her in the crowded parking garage elevator, and confused when I realized how much I wanted to spend time with her. I think she invited me to go with her to a friend's house on New Year's Day. Nothing formal, just a relaxing afternoon of conversation and watching a football game with some nice women I'd enjoy meeting. I know I disobeyed my feelings by turning her down and telling her I wasn't good company right now. I didn't offer a dramatic narration of Lee's destroying some of my possessions and stealing my cat. Instead, I gave her a neatly packaged "No thanks," wrapped in a hope that I could call her soon. I did have the presence of mind to mention I'd misplaced her home and cell numbers, and I asked if she'd give them to me once again. This time I was clever enough to program them into my cell.

The truth was, I wanted to see Avery but I needed more time. I didn't need time to get over ending my relationship with Lee. It was clear we'd been ending it since the first day we met. I was forty-five years old, adequately educated, and respected in my little world. But I'd been lost for the past few years and I needed time to find myself. I had to hope I didn't need more time than Avery Sloan would be willing to grant me.

By now, I've had a chance to think clearly about Lee and all of the chaos wrapped around her. Clive and Corey both told me they believe Lee is beyond mean and angry; that she's dancing dangerously close to the edge of mental illness. During a long phone call followed by an even longer lunch together, my buddy, Julie, said the same thing. She told me she's been afraid for my safety for a while now. Silently fearful, I've agreed with all three of them.

I used to avoid thinking Lee tempted madness, the same way I avoided thinking about cancer. Any fool knows cancer can stake a claim on your soul and body, simply because it can. You can't abdicate your genetics and you can't escape the toxins in the environment. The disease is all around, snapping at everyone's heels. But using your time to think about it is painful and far from life-affirming. So you go through your days ignoring the specter of the plague, negating its very existence.

That's what I used to do whenever I felt myself questioning Lee's mental health. Would a sane person threaten to burn down the house? Would a totally healthy person have insisted that I exile myself from all of my friends? What kind of mind led her to trash my dearest possessions and then kidnap my pet? And what was wrong with me, that I wasn't pounding the pavement looking for Randi? To admit I'd been willing to share my life with Lee was painful, damning. Making that confession wounded my sense of self.

I've had enough hours to reconcile losing all the things Lee destroyed and interred in that box on the living room floor. They were just idle possessions. I gave up the notion of restoring my charm bracelet and my grand-dad's pocket watch. Instead, I bought a small round box made of woven sweetgrass. I put what was left of those two memory pieces inside of it and placed it on my night table where I can see it every morning when I first wake up and every night when I turn out the light and go to sleep.

All I really wanted was to have my cat back. Clive advised me to file a missing pet report with the police and let them know this might be a case of malicious mistreatment of an animal. I'd do that in a heartbeat if I weren't so ashamed of having given Lee tacit permission to mistreat me maliciously for the past four years. Instead of going the police route, I've left messages on Lee's cell phone and I've sent her emails. She's responded with phone messages of her own, some screamed, others chanted seductively, all taunting me about Randi's whereabouts.

For three weeks I've come home at night and called for my cat before remembering Randi was not here. It took one whole week before I was willing to pick up her food and water bowls, and clean and put them away in the cabinet above the damaged counter top. Even with Randi's things out of sight, I've dreamed about my cat and thought she must still be alive and still be with Lee, wherever that might be.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

EVERY SPLIT HER attention between her telephone call and Pat Hawthorn, who waited patiently by the office door. Avery watched as her secretary examined the pieces of art hanging behind her desk. Despite the importance of her phone call, Avery noticed the strained expression on Pat's face. It was clear the secretary's mission was urgent.

Avery hung up the phone and shot Pat a look of surprised frustration. "That was the heating contractor. When he arrived at the house about an hour ago he saw someone had broken the living room window and sprayed graffiti on the dumpsters."

"What did the graffiti say?"

"Are you ready for this?" Avery sighed. "One of the containers said 'Fuck group homes.' And the other one said, 'No ex-cons in Mt. Airy.'"

"Oh boy. I thought all those meetings you had with the neighborhood civic group would have prevented something like this from happening."

"That's what I thought, too. Guess I was wrong."

"Maybe it's kids. You know how they like to write their profanity laced messages everywhere."

"I don't think so, Pat. This is an adult who's not happy about our presence in the neighborhood."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have to call the window person and get that repaired. Frankly, I'm not sure what I should do about the graffiti. For sure I'll call Margaret. We might need to touch base with the Mt. Airy Neighborhood Association to make sure they're still on our side."

"Why don't I phone Whittingham Builders? They might be able to suggest someone who could put a piece of plywood in the window, instead of replacing the glass right away."

"That's a great idea, Pat. Thanks. I'll phone Margaret."

"Uh, before you do that, I have a message for you and I'm afraid it's not good news."

Pat glanced quickly at the large painted portrait of a young woman holding a baby, standing in front of a gray and black striped structure. "It's Nia Quarles, Avery. While you were on the phone, we got a call about her."

Avery stood still. She knew Pat was not an alarmist and something terribly wrong must have happened to the Baker Center's young client. "What is it, Pat?"

"A decision came down yesterday in Family Court. Nia's parents were given full custody of her baby because Nia had violated parole twice. Somehow Nia got a gun. She shot herself in the head early this morning."

"Is she dead?" Avery felt like the time had stopped.

"No. She survived. She's in the emergency room at Hahnemann."

Avery barely heard Pat's last syllable. She picked up her bag and grabbed her coat, throwing it around her shoulders as she stiff-armed the door to her office building. Walking against the traffic, Avery spotted a taxi. Not waiting for the cab driver to maneuver his vehicle to the curb, Avery wove her way through a lane of cars until she reached it. She glared at the driver and commanded, "Hahnemann Hospital--emergency entrance."

Those four words were all it took to get the cabby going. Avery watched him grab the steering wheel and begin a soliloquy of, "Come on, move it! Let's go lard ass!"

Moments later, the cab driver delivered Avery to the frightening maze of the Center City hospital's emergency department. She stood near the entrance, floundering momentarily in the ocean of white, green and blue clothed men and women, multi-toned chimes, electronic sounding voices paging one doctor after another, and sobbing children. The kaleidoscope slowed down long enough for her to focus on a sign that read "Information." Avery made her way to the desk underneath the sign.

"Where can I find a patient named Nia Quarles?"

The hospital employee, a young man with weary, experienced eyes, barely looked at Avery. "Are you a relative?"

"No. She's a client of mine." Avery fumbled for her ID card.

The man gave it a cursory glance, then pointed to his right. "Go down there, past the elevators and turn left. The first door on the right is the waiting room. You can sit in there with the family until the doctor comes in."

"Thank you." Avery pocketed her identification card and followed the directions that she'd been given.

The black and white placard with the words, "Trauma/OR Waiting Room", jutting out from the wall above a doorway, caused Avery's mouth to go dry with fear. She entered the large plasticchair-filled space. People were huddled together, in groups of threes, fours and fives, all sharing their communal anxiety. An older woman, dressed in jeans and a torn navy blue hoodie, balanced a crying child in one arm and an open bag of potato chips in the other. The wall-mounted television blared nonsensical noise, doing its best to drown out the child's sobs and the family groups'ebb and flow of prayers and protest.

Avery felt the same riptide of confusion she'd experienced the first second she'd stepped inside the hospital. Unsure of where she should sit, she let some undefinable force pull her toward a section of vacant chairs, away from the TV's noise and on the other side of the room from a quiet, dignified looking middle-aged African-American couple. The neatly dressed man and woman nodded at her as Avery took her seat.

A doctor walked in, paused near the doorway, and checked the information he held in his right hand before he gazed around the room.

"Marín? Anyone here for Angel Marín?"

A teenager jumped to her feet. "Yeah! We're here for Angel!"

The doctor sauntered over to his patient's support group. Ignoring anything remotely connected to a patient's right to privacy, the surgeon loudly related every detail of the procedure he'd just completed. Pronouncing himself and the surgery a success, he took a step backward and nodded at the whoops, hollers and high-fives filling the waiting room.

Avery smiled faintly, recognizing the joy that Angel Marín's friends and family were feeling. Then she stole a look at the couple seated across from her. She could see their concern for their loved one superseded any relief they might have shared with the other group. The only change in their grimly quiet demeanor occurred when the man patted the woman's hand as she sighed deeply.

"Avery?" A familiar voice ended Avery's speculation about the couple waiting for their news.

"Loretta. Hello. I got a message about Nia."

"I'm glad you're here, Avery." Loretta gestured to the couple on the other side of the room. "Have you met Mr. and Mrs. Quarles, Nia's parents?"

Avery's gaze followed Loretta's hand. The older couple acknowledged Avery once again, and the man stood up and crossed the divide separating them. Avery arose also.

"Mr. Quarles? I'm Avery Sloan. I work at the Josephine Baker Rainbow Center, and Nia is one of my clients. I'm so sorry to be meeting you under these circumstances."

"Yes, Ms. Sloan. I'm sorry too." He turned slightly. "That's my wife, Nia's mother."

"Hello, Mrs. Quarles."

The older woman smiled wanly.

"They have her in surgery, you know." Mr. Quarles checked the clock that was above the waiting room's doorway. "She's been in there now for three and a half hours. You'd think that a doctor or a nurse or someone would come out and tell us something, wouldn't you?"

"I guess we just have to have faith they're doing the best they can do, Mr. Quarles."

Avery listened to the tone of Loretta's voice. It wasn't that she sounded insincere when she responded to Nia's father. It was more like she was trying to convince herself that no news meant good news, and the absence of anything negative meant surely something positive was being done to save the young parolee's life.

"Yes, yes. You're right, Ms. Jones."

"Nia is lucky. She's always had good skillful people in her life." Mr. Quarles gazed sadly at Avery before walking slowly back across the room and sitting down next to his wife.

Loretta took Avery's arm. "Do you want to get a cup of coffee? There's a cafeteria nearby."

"No, not really. I think I'd rather stay here. The surgery has to end sometime."

Loretta agreed. "Right."

The two women sat down.

"How was your Christmas, Avery?"

"What? Oh, okay, I guess." Avery couldn't keep herself from watching the Quarles'. Nia's parents had become more animated with Loretta's arrival in the waiting area. Mr. Quarles competed with Loretta's small talk, forging eye contact with Avery.

"I told my wife what I said to you two ladies about Nia's always having good people in her life." He smiled at Avery and Loretta. "You two are examples of that."

"Thanks Mr. Quarles." Loretta's tone traveled from perfunctory to almost sarcastic.

"That's all right, Ms. Jones. I know you did your best to try to keep her on the straight and narrow. But she screwed up, didn't she?"

"She was trying, Mr. Quarles. That's the important thing. There are a lot of traps out there just waiting to snare someone in Nia's circumstances." Loretta said.

"Well, she didn't try hard enough." Mrs. Quarles' anxiety about her daughter wore a cloak of bitterness. "You all gave her the tools she needed to succeed. But did she pick them up and use them? No."

Avery couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Nia wanted the best for herself and for her child. You must know that."

"Well, my dear. If she'd wanted the best for herself and for her child, why did she have to turn into a lesbian?" Mrs. Quarles aimed her question at both Avery and Loretta.

Avery froze. The venom with which Nia's mother spit out those words was absolutely toxic. How could she hold onto this poison, knowing that yesterday's court ruling, an action which they had precipitated, had been the impetus for Nia's suicide attempt?

"Oh, this is bullshit." Loretta stood and walked toward the door. "I'll be in the cafeteria for a while."

The Quarles stared at Avery. They dared her to defend their daughter.



"I can't let you believe that Nia turned into a lesbian. That's pure ignorance." Avery spoke quietly but forcefully.

"Then how would you phrase it, Ms. Sloan?" Mr. Quarles sat back in his chair.

"Nia loves women. It's as simple as that. It's as natural as the color of her eyes." Avery paused for a second. "She loves her baby, also. And quite obviously, having her child taken away from her was more than she could stand."

"You talk like you're an expert, Ms. Sloan. Are you one of them also?" Nia's father challenged Avery.

Avery didn't have a chance to respond. She was aware of two pairs of green cotton covered legs standing near her.

"Quarles family?"

Nia's parents stood up quickly from their seats.

"Yes, doctor. We're Nia's family."

"We're sorry, but your daughter has expired." The doctor reported his patient's death dispassionately, as if he were reading the use-by date on a food jar.

Mrs. Quarles began moaning before the physician could say another word.

"Oh, no. God. Oh no. Nia, why did you do this?" Mrs. Quarles clung to her silent husband as the second pair of green clad legs approached the older couple.

"We did everything we could to save her. But the damage from the bullet was too extensive."

Mr. Quarles remained motionless. After a few seconds, he acknowledged the surgeon's explanation. "We understand, doctor. Thank you."

"Mr. and Mrs. Quarles, I--" Avery took a step toward the mourning parents.

"Doctor." The father's monotone voice interrupted Avery. "We want to see our daughter."

The first physician nodded and gestured toward the doorway. "Of course. Why don't you both come with me?"

Again, Avery tried to approach Nia's parents. "I am so very sorry. Please, if I can do anything for--"

"The only thing you can do for us is leave us alone, Ms. Sloan! Do you hear me? Leave us alone!"

Nia's father's angry snarl was a magnet, attracting the attention of every other person in the waiting room. Avery felt a hot flush race across her cheeks. She watched the two older people walk past her. Mr. Quarles cupped his wife's elbow and guided her through the room's doorway. Once under the florescent glare of the hallway's lights, Mrs. Quarles suddenly stopped and turned back, facing Avery.

"I wish to God Nia never got involved with your Rainbow Center, or whatever-the-hell it's called. You and that damn parole officer were the ones who convinced her that being a lesbian was okay. Well it wasn't, Ms. Sloan. If our daughter had followed our teachings and the teachings of our church, she'd still be alive. You may as well have put the gun in her hand."

Avery's legs felt weak. Her arms, outstretched in compassion a moment ago, hugged her sides and tried to hold all of her anguish and shock inside.

"Mr. and Mrs. Quarles?" One of the surgeons, clearly uncomfortable with all the emotional pain spilling onto the hospital floor, cleared his throat and took charge. "If you're ready to see your daughter now..."

"Yes we are." Mr. Quarles took one final look at Avery. He nodded in her direction, and then tugged on his wife's sleeve. "Come on, Mary. Let's go."

Avery waited until she saw the parental cortege turn the corner at the end of the short corridor. She reached for her coat, thrown hurriedly on top of one of the plastic chairs. Staring straight ahead, she left the Trauma/OR waiting room and retraced her steps to the hospital's emergency entrance. She was aware of the swirling motions that surrounded her, of the echoing voices of need and physical pain that reverberated through her ears. She remembered Loretta was still in the hospital's cafeteria, and she knew she should probably find her. But at that moment she didn't have the will to see her. She didn't think she could utter the words she needed to speak of Nia's death. Avery wasn't ready to disperse that agony to anyone.

She strode past an available taxi and crossed the street. The frigid January air made no difference to her skin. She needed to walk the cold mile that stretched between Hahnemann Hospital and her office. She needed the time and that distance to think about Nia Quarles and wonder how many more black parents, blindly believing that being gay or lesbian was an evil thing, would willingly sacrifice their sons and daughters instead of holding them close. With each step she took, Avery thought about her own mother, a woman who had pretended to value her, while constantly denying her daughter's personhood. Avery didn't dwell on those memories. She couldn't afford to spend her sorrow on herself.

As she walked the last two blocks to her office, a strong southeasterly wind jabbed at Avery's back, nudging her along her path. The pale mid-afternoon sun had all but disappeared behind a solid gray curtain. Never varying her pace, Avery was aware that she smelled rain in the air. She knew she would welcome the wet weather as it rushed up the East Coast to meet her. The storm would arrive tonight, or perhaps the next morning, and she looked forward to being covered by its cloak of dampness.

Pat turned away from her computer screen when she saw Avery come through the door. "Avery. We called the hospital a few minutes ago, and they told us Nia didn't make it."

Avery nodded solemnly. "Yeah. They tried to save her, but they couldn't."

"It's so tragic. Now her baby girl doesn't have a mother." Pat wrung her hands.

"Worse than that, some judge has decided the baby belongs to a set of hateful grandparents." The memory of Mrs. Quarles's stinging words picked at Avery, leaving her reeling under the weight of the accusation.

"Do you know them? Nia's parents I mean." Pat stood up and walked closer to her boss. She touched Avery's arm. "Oh Avery. You were there when they found out she died, weren't you?"

"Yes. And it was beyond sad."

"Oh my. It must have been awful for you."

"Not as awful as it must have been for Nia these last few months." Avery's voice was a blend of sadness and anger.

"Well, yes. That's probably true."

Avery shook off her coat and tossed it on the clothes tree. Trying to lighten the mood, she asked her usual question. "Was the President impeached while I was out?"

Pat smiled indulgently at her boss. "You have a bunch of phone messages to look after. They're on your desk."

"Thanks, Pat."

Eager to immerse herself in her work, Avery shuffled through the message slips stacked on her desk. There were two calls from Loretta Jones, one that came in before Nia died, and one afterward. Margaret Zelinskie had returned her call, no doubt to address the problem of the vandalism and the anti-group home graffiti that had greeted the heating contractor that morning.

Avery dealt with the other slips, sorting them in their order of importance. The slip that made it to the top was the one bearing the Whittingham Builders' General Manager's name and phone number. Surely other messages were more important for the good of the Josephine Baker Rainbow Center. But none was more urgent for Avery. She needed the comfort Sasha could offer her. Slowly, deliberately she touched the telephone buttons that would connect her to Sasha's voice.

"Whittingham Builders. Sasha Lewis speaking. How may I help you?"

"Sasha?"

"Avery?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, how are you?"

"Okay." Avery sighed. "I got a message that you had phoned."

"Yeah, I did. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Not really."

"You sound upset. What's wrong?"

Tears began to slide down Avery's face. "Oh, it's been a bad day. We lost a client."

"I'm sorry, Avery. What can I do?"

Avery wiped her tears away and, for a moment, covered her mouth with her hand.

"Avery?" Sasha's voice dropped to a whisper. "Hey. How can I help you?"

"Could we meet somewhere for a drink? Not now, if you're busy. But maybe later on?"

"Sure. I could come into town if you'd like."

"No, don't do that. Do you live anywhere near Chestnut Hill?"

"I'm right down the road."

"Good. How about Martina's-On-the-Hill at seven?"

"I'll be there."

"Thanks. We'll talk more then."

One by one, Avery talked her way through the remainder of her phone messages, including the ones left by Loretta Jones. She was annoyed with Avery. She didn't understand why Avery had failed to look for her in the hospital's cafeteria, and Avery didn't have the energy to explain. Loretta was openly angry with Nia's intolerant parents, with Nia's solution to her problems, and with herself for not being able to prevent the young mother's suicide.

At five-fifteen Avery left her office and joined hundreds of other commuters, their heads bowed slightly in deference to the biting wind. The mid-afternoon dampness had thickened to a palpable early evening moisture that made the streets shiny and slick. Avery figured the rain she had smelled earlier would not delay its arrival until the next day. A few degrees colder and the rain

would come down as ice or thick flakes of snow. She recited her own secret incantation against the freezing precipitation. It had to hold off for a few hours longer so that she and Sasha could each drive over the cobblestone streets to reach Martina's. Avery knew with a diamond-tipped certainty that she wanted to see Sasha tonight. She needed to see Sasha tonight.

## Chapter Thirty

FEELING PROUD OF herself, Lee Simpson listened to her voice mail and jotted some notes. In less than a month she'd planned and successfully executed five social events and had been hired to plan six other ones. Lee had been able to handle all those activities and move to an upscale condominium in Center City Philadelphia. The fact that she didn't have to pay rent for the condo was a bonus. The apartment's owner was indebted to Lee for keeping silent about their affair, and didn't mind paying the monthly bill and the condo fees for the next two years.

The only expenses for which Lee was responsible were her credit card bills, her car and renter's insurance, her entertainment costs, her liquor tabs at a couple of the clubs in town, and of course gasoline and food. This last bill had been moderately high at first, because Lee enjoyed shopping in the trendy food boutiques instead of the supermarkets, and because she had to pick up the expensive prescription cat food that Sasha had always purchased for Randi. Within the past two to three weeks, however, she'd found it easier to stick to her budget because she'd stopped buying the higher priced pet food and treats for the cat. In fact, she'd stopped buying cat food altogether. This was a new dimension of Lee's cruelty because she knew Randi had an aversion to most human foods. She couldn't keep the smallest morsel in her system and it didn't take long for malnutrition to lay waste to the defenseless cat.

Late on this Friday afternoon, after Lee retrieved all of her phone messages, she put Randi's emaciated lifeless body in an empty vodka box she'd picked up from the liquor store for just that purpose. She sealed the box and hoisted it into the shopping cart that some lazy tenant had left in her building's mail room. Lee, along with Randi's casket, rode the elevator from the fifteenth floor down to the lower level parking garage. Standing behind the cart, she pushed it toward her car. Then, just as she had done the day she wrecked havoc in her former home, Lee shut Randi inside the car's trunk and drove away from her parking space.

She took the long route to her old address, playing her favorite CD of the moment and accompanying the male singer, blasting the lyrics as loudly as she could. She talked to the low hanging slate-colored clouds, daring them to empty themselves.

When she reached the familiar driveway, she accelerated, wrenching the steering wheel and threatening to loosen pieces of macadam that bordered the parking area. A second later she

flattened her foot on the brake pedal, forcing the car to shudder to a stop. She hooked two fingers of her left hand around the trunk release lever.

Lee swung her legs away from the driver's seat and jetted from the front of the car to the back. She pushed the trunk's lid up. The force of the vehicle's abrupt braking in the driveway had boomeranged the box containing Randi. It shot forward, slammed the trunk's front wall, rebounded, and collided with the rear quarter panel. A gash running the entire width of the cat's cardboard coffin exposed the box's contents.

"Shit, Randi!" Lee lifted the split box from the car. "Well, at least you don't weigh anything."

The event planner carried the box a few yards, laying it down in front of the garage door. She took out a marker from her jacket's pocket and, voiding the liquor's logo and brand name, printed a message on the top of the cardboard container. Pleased with her authorship, Lee stood and read her inscription aloud.

"To Sasha, A belated Christmas present, and a wish for a Happy New Year!"

She mumbled under her breath. "You'll think twice before you throw another woman out of your house, won't you, babe?"

She got back into her car and let it drift quietly out of the driveway. It was getting dark and raw, but the predicted rain hadn't begun falling yet. Lee decided to take a roundabout course back to the city. She navigated over twisting roads and past hairpin turns. Less than a half hour away from her starting point was the Jackman house. As she approached their wide driveway, Lee slowed her car. Despite the increasing twilight, no lights were on in the structure.

"Must be away somewhere," she muttered.

Lee drove past her lover's home and then turned into an adjoining property's entrance. She reversed gears and backed out onto the street. Driving slowly once again, she neared Angela and Richard Jackman's residence.

"It's for damn sure they haven't moved to the new house yet. Whittingham's not finished with it and he won't be for quite some time."

Lee pushed down hard on her gas pedal and impatiently thumped the audio system's volume button. With the driver's side window wide open, she screamed the lyrics of her second favorite song of the week.

## Chapter Thirty-One

"SASHA ARE YOU checking out for the weekend already, love?"

I knew what that meant. Clive counted on getting another hour or so of work out of me.

"Yes, Clive." I glanced at my watch. "It is five-thirty, you know. Some people punch the clock at five, especially on a Friday."

"Yes. Right." Clive rubbed his chin. "On balance, we've had a good week, haven't we? The cancellations are beginning to slow down, and the November sales numbers in this region are better than we expected. Good news."

"Great news, Clive." I started back-peddling out of the reception area of our office.

"Got anything brewing for the weekend?"

My thoughts flew to Avery and our plan to meet each other for drinks two hours from now. Even though I remembered how sad she sounded when we spoke, the very notion of spending some time with her drove me to a smile.

"Yeah. Actually I do have something brewing, to use your word. That's why I'm so out of here."

"Well, in that case, get going before the weather worsens." Clive gave me his most endearing younger but wiser brother grin.

I looked over my shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of the outdoors. "What do you mean, worsens?"

"We're in for a bit of sleet and snow. It's already started falling in the city."

"Oh crap!" I didn't enjoy driving on ice. But if I had to tap dance the length of the frozen Mississippi River, I would do it to have one drink with Avery Sloan tonight at Martina's-On-the-Hill. Sleet and snow would not deter me.

"Enjoy your weekend then. And mind the icy roads, Sasha."

It would have been easier for me to drive directly into Chestnut Hill, but I hadn't come to work today expecting to spend part of the evening with Avery. So I wanted to go home to change into an outfit that would be more flattering than the lackluster slacks and shirt I had on. This was the second time in as many months that I'd needed to make a pit stop before seeing Avery. Maybe I ought to save some time and bring a change of clothes to the office.

I was a mile away from my house when I heard the first ping of sleet hit my windshield and ricochet into the darkness. I grimaced, realizing that I'd have to speed through my wardrobe change in order to be back on the road before the surface got too slick. The trip to the northwest part of the city was bound to be sluggish, and the route crammed by commuters eager to get home, but shell-shocked by the late season's icy precipitation. Barring any accidents along the way, I'd be able to arrive at Martina's on time. And even if I were late, I knew Avery would understand.

I guessed her ride wouldn't be so bad, even in the bad weather. The day I met her at the Mt. Airy house, she said she lived close by. And Martina's was on the Chestnut Hill-Mt. Airy border, probably just a short hop away from her house.

The first thing I noticed when I pulled into my driveway a little while later was the way the tiny white icy pellets bounced off the blacktop and got caught in the reflection of my headlights. The second thing that riveted my attention was a small box blocking my entry to the garage. Small sleet pebbles caromed off the top of it. Between my car's lights and the one mounted in the garage door opener, I could see the box clearly. I applied my parking brake and shifted the car into neutral.

Damn it. Why didn't the UPS driver leave the package under cover, by the front door?

I got out of the car and squinted the sleet away from my eyes. As I got closer to the box, I could see some sort of writing on it, but I couldn't decipher the words until I was almost standing on top of it.

I don't know if it was the wind whispering in my ear, or the memory of Randi's semi-silent meow. I do know that as I scanned Lee's handwriting, I was certain the flimsy brown box with the gash running from left to right held my cat's still body. I knew that as surely as I'd ever known anything. I bent down and picked up the parcel, carrying it into the garage and gently laying it down on the wooden potting bench. The flimsy seal needed little encouragement from my thumbnail before it gave way. One at a time, I bent back the weather-weakened flaps. There was Randi, half the size she was the last time I saw her. I picked her little body up and held her close to my chest.

"Oh Randi. You didn't deserve this."

For a second, I thought I could feel Randi purring. But the vibration turned out to be my sobs, coming in quick shallow spasms as I cradled my cat's head under my chin. My tears slowed after a while, and I began to grapple with the mystery of what to do next. I spotted an old towel on the shelf underneath the bench. I spread it out, laid Randi on top of it and carefully folded the excess material over her. I turned around to search for a sturdy container, and was blinded by my car's headlights. I needed to turn the engine off and close the garage door.

The seventy-five watts of light beaming down from the door opener revealed a small plastic storage bin propped up against the back wall of the garage. I relieved it of its car wash paraphernalia and brought it over to Randi, wrapped in her shroud of a towel. My once plump



silky-furred cat, now reduced to the size of a sickly kitten, fit perfectly inside the plastic box. Two of my tears dropped onto the towel that covered her and two more coursed their way onto the top of the box.

I fished in my coat pocket until I found my house keys. Using one hand to unlock the door between the garage and the backyard, and the other to drag a nearby shovel, I made my way to the base of the tallest tree on my property. I left the shovel there before returning to the garage to get Randi and turning on the floodlight that spread an angle of brightness over the backyard.

The sleet was falling furiously, leaving a stiff undercoating on the grass, and the lawn crunched rebelliously under each of my footsteps. Miraculously, the ground didn't fight the small bites from the shovel as I poured my sadness into the chore of digging a hole. I got down on my knees and pulled the plastic coffin close enough to the edge so I could lower it gradually into the depression. Then I stood up and in silence, covered the hollow with shovelfuls of earth.

I walked back toward the garage, looking up into the floodlight's glare. Had I done the right thing? Should I have taken Randi's body to the vet's office and asked that she be cremated? Should I have phoned Clive and tearfully asked for his help?

The cardboard box that had held Randi's body was still in the garage, waiting for me. I strode over to it and kicked it as hard as I could. I sent it clear across the garage floor, ripped apart into useless panels of corrugated paper.

"You stupid-ass, fucking ugly...!"

I was out of control, convinced the screaming voice wasn't mine. The foot launching the box belonged to someone else. The pieces of cardboard scattered across the floor bore Lee's portrait. What more could she do to me?

Out of breath and burning with rage, I went from the cold garage into the dark kitchen. Before I could turn on the light, I saw the pulsing red beam on the answering machine. I started to ignore it because I was convinced the tape held a string of hate-filled words spat out by my ex-lover. But the anger within me was spoiling for a fight with her. So I pushed the "play" button.

"Hi, Sasha, this is Avery. Look, the weather is pretty bad, and I know how it gets in this part of the city. If you don't want to venture out to Martina's tonight, I'll understand. Give me a call to let me know what you're going to do. Thanks."

Instinctively I checked the clock. Six forty-five. I'd never make it to Martina's on time, not with the roads getting slicker by the minute. And not with my vision compromised by sadness and swollen eyelids. My spirit was so heavy. How could I possibly lift Avery's? It felt like a century had passed since I spoke with her this afternoon.

I unclipped my cell phone from my waistband and dialed her number.

"Avery?"

"Sasha, are you somewhere safe?"

I looked at the gouges on the kitchen counter and thought about the mound of freshly dug soil under the large maple tree in my backyard. I didn't feel safe at all.

"I'm at home."

"Good. You're not out driving on the icy roads." Avery sounded relieved.

"I can be if you don't mind my being a little late."

There was long pause before Avery responded. "Sasha, it's too risky. I don't want you to have an accident."

"But I want to see you, Avery." I made no attempt to hide the serious tone in my voice.

"I want to see you too, Sasha. It's just that--"

"I need to see you, Avery." When I spoke her name I thought I heard her breathe deeply, almost moaning.

"Is anything wrong, bab--uh , Sasha? Are you all right?"

I whispered into the phone. "I'll be okay as soon as I can see you."

"You're making it hard for me to convince you that you shouldn't be out driving in this weather tonight." Avery sounded like she was trying to convince herself that we shouldn't see each other.

"I'm leaving in five minutes. Give me an hour to deal with the slow traffic. If I'm not at Martina's by then--"

"Sasha, why don't you come to my house instead of Martina's? It's a little closer and it'll be easier for you to park."

"Okay. Where do you live?"

"Two blocks west of Germantown Avenue. My address is 221 Willow Road."

"I know where that is."

"Drive carefully, okay?"

"Okay. Can I bring anything with me? A bottle of wine?"

"Just bring yourself, Sasha."

"Okay. Look for me within the hour."

With each step I took toward my bedroom, I felt the cold patches of wet fabric hitting against my knees, reminding me I had just buried my cat under a coat of sleet. The moisture from the grass had penetrated clear through the soles of my soaked shoes and dampened my socks, so I kicked them off and traded them in for new pairs of each. I went into the bathroom where I splashed some warm water over my face, but I didn't rinse away the hurt of losing Randi nor the anger that simmered just below my surface. I snatched a pair of black cords and a warm fleece top from their hangers, put them on quickly and headed back downstairs. If I left the house in the next five minutes, I'd be able to get to Avery's in the time frame I'd promised.

The laundry room closet held my serious winter weather jackets. I raided it, gathering the newer of two parkas. Chanting a silent "rest peacefully, Randi," I walked out of the garage and confronted my car.

"Damn! Look at this!"

A thick coat of ice covered every inch of it, challenging me to scrape off enough to be able to see what was in front of me and what lay behind. That turned out to be the easiest part of my ride into Chestnut Hill. I slipped the car's engine into the lowest gear and crawled the entire route. I ignored red lights if I didn't see any headlights coming toward me from the left or the right. If I did see another car, I began stopping a hundred yards short of the intersection. The closer I got to Avery's neighborhood, the less sleet I had to deal with. The ice had already changed to snow. Fortunately, I could coax the car's tires into gripping a snow covered road more easily than a street enrobed in ice.

By the time I turned onto Willow Road, I'd been holding the steering wheel so tightly that my fingers felt permanently fused to it. The snow was falling in thick dense splotches that dared the windshield wipers to keep the view unobstructed. I spotted a vacant parking space in the block that I figured was Avery's, and I gingerly persuaded my SUV to fit.

Most of the single and semi-detached houses on that block had their outside lights on illuminating their address, so I had no trouble finding the one that belonged to Avery. As I neared her steps, her front door opened and I looked up to see her standing there, smiling and shaking her head at me.

"Hey! Want to go out for a drive?" I winked and grinned wanly at the jeans and sweater clad woman.

"No. I do not." She welcomed me. "Do you want to come in?"

I climbed the four steps to her home's threshold. "Oh well, as long as I'm here, but just for a little while. Then I have to be going."

"Just for a little while?" Avery winked back at me and reached out for my arm, pulling me into her foyer. "I don't believe you, woman. You actually drove in all of this bad weather?"

I wanted to step closer to Avery, throw my arms around her and say that I needed her so badly I would have driven through hell to get here, but I didn't know how she might react to that kind of intensity.

"Driving was the best way to get here, and if it were Monday morning instead of Friday night, I'd have to drive up and down the hills of Conshohocken to go to work. I'd much rather drive here to see you."

"I feel honored, Sasha."

Avery invited me to take off my jacket. As I tugged at the sleeves, I lowered my head. Avery removed the fleece hat that I was wearing. Mindful that my skull cap of short curly hair had probably conformed to the shape of my hat, I raked my fingers through it, trying to make it look neat. Avery watched me, her eyes sparkling with amusement. She lifted both of her arms toward my head and she began to brush over the top of my hair with her fingers.

"You look fine, Sasha Lewis, just fine."

Her physical closeness made me want to make love with her right there, in the middle of her foyer. I wanted to hear her say my name and look me in the eyes as I loved her into coming for the very first time. I wanted to tell her about Randi, and how my soul was shattered into little pieces. Instead, I settled for gazing at her and mumbling, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Avery took a step back. Nervously, we both looked down at my shoes. This was the second wet pair that I'd worn in the last few hours. I immediately noticed the maple flooring in the foyer and living room.

"Is it okay for me to take these things off? I don't want to mess up this nice wood."

"You can do whatever makes you feel comfortable."

I swallowed hard and figured that I'd better stop taking everything that Avery said so literally. She watched as I bent down to untie my shoes and step out of them. Standing upright, with only my thick socks covering my feet, I was exactly the same height as my hostess. We glanced at each other, measuring our equality.

"You're not as tall as I thought you were." Avery cocked her head, pleased with her discovery.

"And you're not as tall as you were on the plane." I challenged her assessment of my height and teased her about her stature.

"Well, that's because you were sitting down at the time."

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah, and stupidly sleeping during the whole damn flight."

"Do you think I should have awakened you?" Avery lifted her right eyebrow. For a second I could tell she thought waking me up had been her responsibility.

"No. I'm just sorry I missed the opportunity to meet you then, that's all." And if I didn't take a chance and kiss Avery soon, I'd be missing another opportunity.

"Why don't we go into the living room?"

Avery gestured toward the cozy, softly lit area to the left of the foyer. The room was modestly furnished with a sofa, a large square coffee table, two club chairs, end tables and a wall of bookcases. I sat down at one end of the comfortable tweed sofa and she remained standing. "Can I pour you a glass of wine?"

"How about a small one?" I didn't like to drink much on an empty stomach.

Avery must have read my mind. "How about some crackers with cheese and fruit?"

"That would be great." I held my hands out in front of me and feigned trembling. "What a drive."

Avery shot me an over the shoulder look of reproach as she retreated to her kitchen. "I warned you it was bad out there, and you didn't have to risk life and limb to come over here."

"Yes I did." I called after her, watching the way her denim covered hips moved in sync with her confident attitude. I repeated my answer, whispering it for my ears only. "Yes I did."

Avery returned a few moments later, carrying a tray with two glasses of red wine and a small platter of cheeses, apple and pear sections and wheat crackers. She put the tray down on the coffee table, and handed me one of the glasses. Picking up the second one, she sat down on the sofa and tilted her glass in my direction.

"Here's to your bravery and my gratitude for that bravery."

Our glasses touched, clinking gently.

"Avery, before I forget to tell you, your friend, Karyn, interviewed very well, and the sales division wanted to hire her immediately."

"Do I hear a 'but' on the way?"

Once again, Avery guessed my script. "Unfortunately, yes. She's used to selling Center City real estate with Center City commissions, and we couldn't offer her the base salary that she wanted. We really regret not signing her on."

"I'm sorry, also." Avery frowned. "She might have enjoyed working for Whittingham. The hours would have been more predictable, right?"

"In general, but she'd still have to work her butt off."

A slow smile returned to my hostess' face. She looked directly into my eyes.

"Sasha, why did you risk life and limb to come here?"

"It was the only way I'd get to see you tonight, and that was important to me."

Avery put down her wine. "Why was it so important to you?"

Should I tell her that I'd lost Randi, and the drive here was even more difficult because I cried a couple of times and I could hardly see the friggin' road through my tears? Or all I could think about was holding her and her holding me?

"I knew you'd had a bad day. You told me you lost one of your clients."

Avery lowered her gaze. "Yeah. We did. A young girl, Nia Quarles."

"What happened to her?"

Avery looked like she was literally biting her tongue. "She committed suicide. She shot herself."

"I'm so sorry, Avery." I reached for her hand.

"I'm sorry, too."

"Had she been involved with your agency for a long time?" Maybe I could listen well enough to take away some of Avery's pain.

"No. But I sort of took a personal interest in her. She was gay and her parents gave her a hard time about her sexuality."

"Dammit. When is that going to stop?"

"Apparently, not in our lifetimes." Avery paused, trying to decide whether she should continue her news or change the subject.

"The hardest part of today was hearing her parents blame me and her parole officer for her death."

I frowned and looked up at her sad expression. "You've got to be kidding."

"I wish I were, but they were serious. They really believed that because we supported Nia, we caused her suicide."

Avery had a look of desperation on her face. I wanted to soften her grief and reassure her she had been a life raft for her client, not a life taker.

"You don't believe that, do you? You have to know you gave that girl comfort when her parents weren't in her corner."

Avery narrowed her eyes. "I hope so, Sasha. Otherwise--"

"There is no otherwise. You were there for her. I know you were."

Her slight smile made its appearance. "How could you know that about me? We don't really know each other that well."

"That's another reason I'm here. I want to know you very well."

I sat closer to Avery and leaned in to kiss her soft welcoming mouth. Our kiss began gently as if we were both asking each other for permission to make the sensual contact. Once it was granted, we were both persistent, enjoying the release that my lips upon hers delivered. Avery tasted like allspice mixed with the sweetest, most seductive perfume I'd ever known.

I held her in my arms and she held me right back. Our lips parted, assured they were comfortable kissing each other, but not completely satisfied. We found each other's tongues and took turns probing, tasting and touching. Avery caressed my face and my arms encircled her waist, pulling her even closer to me as she continued to explore my mouth.

"Avery?" I began leaving a trail of kisses from her lips to her chin and then lower.

"Yes, Sasha." Avery tilted her head back, exposing more of her lovely caramel hued throat.

"You started to call me 'baby' when we spoke on the phone a couple of hours ago, didn't you?" And just as I had done when I heard her utter the first syllable of the sexy euphemism for my name, I felt the force of her voice reverberate inside my vagina, making me moist with my need for her.

Avery stared into my eyes. "It almost slipped out. I've called you that in my mind so many times since I met you." She paused, waiting for me to interrupt her, but my mouth remained silent. My eyes however, called her all sorts of lovely names.

"I want you, Sasha. Probably since that morning when we flew back from Portland and I watched you sleeping in the seat next to me."

A shy smile tugged at my lips. "I want you too. Probably ever since I tried to follow you off that airplane. You left so quickly, I couldn't catch up with you. But I held onto your card, so at least I knew your name and where you worked."

"Were you planning to do anything with that information?"

"This." I kissed Avery's mouth once again, and I sent my hands on an exploratory voyage underneath her loose fitting sweater. With no bra to stop them, my hands caressed Avery's small warm breasts. The second that my thumbs coursed over her nipples, she closed her eyes and shuddered. I continued making sweet discoveries, letting my hands lead me under the waistband of Avery's panties. I pulled her closer, palming the smooth contours of her hips and running the edge of my fingertips along the fine line that separated her left hip from her right one.

"Sasha?"

"Yes, baby?" I interrupted her with another deep soul kiss.

She rested her arms on my shoulders and looked at me through desire clouded eyes. "Come upstairs with me?"

"Try keeping me away."

Avery responded with a kiss and took my hand. She turned toward the staircase. As we climbed the steps, I marveled at her beauty and I knew there would be more than simply sex waiting for us upstairs. There would be a kind of tenderness in our love making that I hadn't known for a long time. There would be a kind of caring I'd always missed in my life.

When we arrived at the top of the stairs Avery turned to face me. "I've thought about your being here so many times, Sasha."

"If I'd known that, I would have been here sooner."

Once again Avery took my hand and kissed my palm. We walked next to each other, pausing at the entrance to the largest of the second floor rooms. I was eager to see Avery in an intimate place, so I followed her into the bedroom and watched as she turned on the small Tiffany lamp atop the dresser. Its light showered the large room with a subdued glow. From that moment on I was unaware of anything else that was in that bedroom. All I saw was Avery, facing me. I held her hand up to my lips and took my turn kissing her palm.

"I'm so glad to be here. Thank you."

"You're completely welcome." Avery glowed. She rested her fingertips on the side of my face, and I covered them with my hand, before turning my head slightly so I could kiss her fingers.

I let her break away long enough to walk over to her bookcase and turn on a CD player. With "Am I Dreaming?" playing in the background, Avery invited me to dance with her. I made a shelter with my arms, and folded them around her, fitting our bodies together. Softly, she sang the song's lyrics in my ear and I felt my legs weaken. She was the center of my world at that moment, and I wanted her so very much. The risks of the perilous drive over the icy streets, the agony of Randi's loss, and Lee's cruelty all melted away the second Avery's thighs began moving against mine.



With my hands pressing the small of her back, I willed Avery's body to be as close to mine as possible. My hands and fingers remembered her breasts. Now my eyes and tongue needed to know them, also. I lifted her sweater up and over her head, and I all I could do was smile at what I saw. Avery's round orbs held dark brown nipples that were erect, waiting for my mouth to surround, lick, and savor them.

I almost lost my mind when I heard her moan and felt her thigh grinding between my legs. But I didn't want to succumb to her body's movements and the involuntary murmurs coming from her throat. Not yet. There was much more pleasure I wanted to give. I must have whispered how good she felt because she slowed her dance and started tugging on the closure of my slacks.

"Hey." I could barely talk. My passion-thickened speech came out in low, barely audible whispers. "What are you doing, girl?"

Avery answered my question with one of her own. "What are you doing, Sasha?"

"I'm making you feel good, baby."

"Yes you are. And I'm getting impatient to make you feel just as good as I do."

"Oh damn, Avery. I can barely stand up."

I've heard that love making starts in your head. That night it started in my ear. Every word that Avery spoke made me more and more wet. I wasted no time getting out of my clothes and helping her shed the rest of hers. I ripped open my pants and stepped out of them. I unfastened Avery's jeans and pulled them down, all the while outlining the profile of her thighs and legs with the flat of my hands.

We managed to dance our way close to the bed and remove my shirt and bra at the same time. Avery peeled back the covers and then turned to face me.

"I want to make love with you all night, and I want tonight to last a long time."

I closed my eyes involuntarily to let a spasm of desire pass through me. Then I cupped her chin and told her to please sit on the bed. She complied. I knelt on the floor, in front of her, and let my fingers knead her thighs gently. She must have known what I wanted to do, because she ran her hands through my hair, bent forward to kiss the top of my head and then spread her legs apart, allowing me to kiss the soft inner surface of each one.

Avery leaned back, letting her elbows assume most of her weight. I kissed, licked and nibbled my way to her honeyed center, slowing down long enough to inhale her essence. Just as I arrived at her portal, she moaned deeply. Encouraged by the sounds of her pleasure, my tongue sought its goal. Massaging each side of her jewel, I felt it grow and pulse. I took all of the treasure in my mouth and sucked gently, then more insistently.

Avery gave in to her good feelings. She began moving in time with my mouth's rhythm. And she added her lyrics, calling out my name. "Sasha, oh Sasha!"

Inflamed by her voice I wanted to yell, "Baby, don't stop." Instead, I entered her with two of my fingers. I traveled in and out of her sweet opening with all of the passion that I could summon.

Avery sat up straighter and held onto the base of my neck, keeping my head and my mouth where they were, at the core of her world. I wanted to see what passion looked like, so gradually I replaced my mouth with my thumb and I gazed at her beautiful face.

"Baby, do you feel good?" I punctuated my question with the steady in and out of my fingers.

"Oh yes, Sasha."

"Do you feel loved?" I wrapped my free arm around her hips.

"Yes, baby. I'm so close to coming."

"Can you hold on for a little while longer?"

"I don't know. You feel so good."

I slowed our movements. "Hold on so we can come together, okay?"

Avery opened her eyes and smiled at me through her sensuous haze. "I can try, but you're making it hard, baby."

Gradually I pulled my fingers from her and guided her legs up from the floor to the bed. She reached out for me and I climbed onto the bed with her. With both of us turned slightly to the opposite side, we scissored our legs and fit as closely as we could.

I shall always remember that first electric second when my pearl, wet and hard with wanting Avery, touched hers. With no guidepost, just sheer instinct, we moved against each other. "If Only You Knew" streamed out of the CD player and Avery and I screamed each others' names into the night. I bit the inside of my lip trying to keep from coming too soon, but I couldn't stop the pleasure from building. Avery felt so damn good pushing against me. Her deep-throated voice echoed in my brain. Her spicy fragrance filled my nostrils and smelled so good. I needed her body and her loving so much. That first time we nearly climaxed together, but I couldn't stop myself and I came a moment before she did.

We held each other and talked for a while, until Avery started kissing my mouth again and I got all caught up in her sexy voice saying what she wanted us to do to each other. Before we knew it, I was tangling my fingers in her hair and nibbling her shoulders. She was exploring my lower lips and running her fingers along the sides of my clit. All of this made our first orgasms foreplay for the more intense second ones. We fell asleep bundled together under the blanket of our

afterglow. When we awakened hours later, we looked over at each other, smiled sleepy grins, and made love again.

Some time late the next morning, after a non-stop conversation over a huge breakfast, we went outside and shoveled the snow from the sidewalk in front of Avery's house. It only took a New York minute for me to be cajoled into spending the rest of the day and that night with her. It took me most of Sunday before I could tell her about Randi. A day and a half spent with this woman and I was willing to share some of my hurt with her.

I felt safe crying in front of her, as if my tears were little diamonds she had mined, cut, and polished.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

CLIVE SHOT UP in his bed like a bullet. He reached to the night table and grabbed his BlackBerry before it could ring a third time. Not wanting to awaken Eddie, Clive got up and managed to be out of the bedroom in three quick strides.

His phone conversation was over within seconds, and he returned to his bedroom spitting profanities.

"What's the matter, babe?" Eddie had turned on the light. Shielding his eyes from the brightness with one hand and propping himself up with the other elbow, he was completely awake and alert.

"I'm sorry I woke you up." Clive was less than his verbally affectionate self.

"Don't worry about it. What's going on?"

"That was Rob Morton of Morton and Sons. He's my relay buddy for strike information. It appears the electricians are walking off their jobs at midnight. They failed to reach an agreement with the idiotic contractors who are using non-union guys on their projects." Clive sat on the edge of their bed, dragging his hand over his rough unshaven cheeks.

"You expected this, right? That's what you said a couple of weeks ago."

"Yes, I expected it. But I hoped a labor action would have been avoided." Clive talked to himself, thinking aloud. "They're going to shut down every building project in the tri-state area...just as we're recovering from our slowdown. Bollocks!"

Eddie reached over the expanse of the king-sized bed and rubbed his partner's back. "Do you think the strike will be a long one, babe?"

"What? Uh, no." After a few seconds passed, he rethought his answer. "I don't really know actually. There will be so much pressure on them from the other unions."

"Or pressure on the poor fools who are trying to do business without them."

"Yes. Those idiots are so short sighted, aren't they?" Clive jumped up. "I'm going to throw some clothes on. I'll shower later."

"It's only seven-thirty, you know. And it's Sunday."

Clive walked to the window and pulled back the side of the woven shade. "It's a snowy Sunday at that. Fuck me!"

"Well, finally. You're cussing like the naturalized American you are." Eddie loved to tease Clive about the souvenirs of his British English.

"Yes, well I've listened to you and to Sasha long enough. It's a wonder I can still speak properly."

Eddie grinned. "You got 'crap' from me, bro. Sasha just lets it fly with 'shit' and 'fuck' here and there."

"There's nothing wrong with that as long as she doesn't do it too often in front of our clients."

Clive picked up his BlackBerry once again. "And speaking of Sasha, I've got to phone her after I contact the next person in the relay queue. I'll be in the study, Eddie."

"I might as well get up, too. How about some coffee?"

"Thanks, love. I'd welcome a cup."

Moments later, armed with a mug brimming with hot coffee, Eddie found Clive sitting at his desk, surrounded by spreadsheets, and tapping his forehead with the end of a pen.

"What stream of curse words did Sasha yell when you told her the news?"

Clive gazed up at Eddie. "Not a single one. She wasn't at home."

"Did you try her cell phone?"

"Yes, and apparently it's turned off." Clive took a sip of his beverage. "I hope she's all right."

"Relax, Clive. She probably got lucky last night." Eddie grinned.

"Do you think so?" Clive cocked his head.

"Absolutely. I'll bet she's okay and she'll get to you as soon as she turns her phone on."

"You're probably right." Clive looked down at the papers in front of him. "Well, our contingency plans are here. I just need to get Sasha up to speed."

Eddie peered through the den's window. "It's beautiful out there, man."

"Do you think she's safe?"

"Who? Sasha?"

"Yes."

"If she's found herself a good woman, she's probably safer than she's been in a long time."

Clive nodded. "Right. Anyone is better than Lee Simpson."

"What happened to that girl, anyway? She used to be fun."

"Well she's the exact opposite of fun now. I don't understand how Sasha continued to live with her for as long as she did." Despite his preoccupation with the labor problems, Clive's mind sprinted off in a different direction. He began to think about his close friend and the last few months of her relationship with Lee Simpson.

It was Sasha's private business and Clive knew that. The situation affected his business tangentially, however. He'd become aware of Sasha's increasing inattention to details; little bits and pieces others had to pick up in order to avoid confusion and disorganization in the office.

Clive remembered the faraway look he'd seen in Sasha's eyes several times this past fall. He recalled the auction in Maine and Sasha's missing the call to bid on those materials for the Jackman house. He was aware of his general manager's inability to deal with Richard Jackman's brutish attitude. In the course of handling her job, Sasha had dealt diplomatically with so many difficult customers. Why couldn't she handle Jackman?

Clive turned to Eddie. "Well, Sasha needn't worry about Lee any longer, now that they've separated."

## Chapter Thirty-Three

REMEMBERING WHERE SHE left her cell phone, Avery ran to the kitchen. With each step, she hoped that the voice on the other end of the apparatus would be Sasha's.

"Hello."

"Hey, Avery?"

"Hey. How are the roads?" Avery felt a flood of joy and relief surge through her.

"Not bad. They got better as soon as I left the city limits."

"Yeah, I've heard about the good municipal services out there in the 'burbs." Avery looked out at the snow-covered backyard. "I enjoyed spending the weekend with you, Sasha."

"I had a good time, too." Sasha's voice traveled down to a lower register.

"Yes. That's the impression you gave me." As Avery leaned against the sink she imagined feeling the delicious pressure of Sasha's groin moving against hers. She struggled to repress the sigh that yearned to escape from her throat.

"What are you doing, baby?" Sasha's question caressed Avery's ear.

"Thinking about us."

"Then you're having pleasant thoughts." Sasha grew quiet for a few seconds. "I've only been gone fifteen minutes, and I miss you. I hope it's okay to tell you that."

"Of course it's okay. I miss you too, Sasha."

"Good. I'll call you later."

"Or maybe I'll call you."

"That'll work."

"Will you be all right? Without Randi there?" Avery didn't want this call to end without being certain how Sasha might feel, all alone and with the knowledge her cat was buried only yards from the house.

"I'll be okay. At least now I know where she is." Sasha spoke in measured tones.

"Pick up the phone when you feel sad, okay?"

"Thanks, Avery. I will."

"Bye for now."

"Bye."

Avery had no sooner released her phone when it rang again. Thinking that it must be Sasha calling to say something that she'd forgotten, Avery grinned with anticipation.

"Hey, what did you forget?"

"Not a thing, Avery. It's Pat."

"Oh, Pat. Hi." Avery stood at attention at the sound of her secretary's voice.

"I'm sorry to trouble you at home, Avery."

"It's no trouble. What's going on?"

"Have you collected your messages this weekend?" Pat was obviously agitated.

"No, I've been busy the entire time. Is there an emergency?" Avery went to the table where she kept a pen and paper.

"No, at least I don't think so. But we've received some bizarre messages, all saying the same thing."

Avery squinted. "How many messages were there?"

"Five."

"And what exactly did the person say?"

Pat hesitated, and then sputtered the messages' contents. "Do you have any idea who could have said such things?"

"No, I don't have a clue. When Margaret met with the neighborhood groups, she was assured that everyone was on board."

"Well, it looks like someone's jumped ship now. And in a big way. Should we notify the cops?"

Avery began to pace between the kitchen table and the window. "I'll give Margaret a call and let her make that decision."

"I'm afraid whoever left these messages is going to do something destructive, like break the windows again."

"You're right, Pat. We can barely afford the rehab. Paying to replace mysteriously smashed windows is getting old."

"I know it is, Avery. I didn't want you to end your weekend with more bad news, especially after Nia Quarles' death on Friday. But I thought you should know about this."

"You did the right thing, Pat. Thanks. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay, honey. See you then."

Avery tried to remain calm in the face of this latest bad news. The phone call from an upset Pat Hawthorn disquieted her. This had been the secretary's weekend to check on any emergency messages, and what she'd heard when she checked late Saturday and again this morning left her shaken. She'd had no recourse but to phone Avery at home.

Avery was stunned when Pat repeated the text of the five identical messages. A woman's voice threatened to burn down the group home and then torch the Baker Center's office. Avery had no clue who could have left such a hateful recording. No one besides Nia Quarles' parents who blamed her acceptance and support of their daughter's sexuality as the cause of their Nia's death. But would they go so far as to threaten her group home project?

Avery tried to shake off her apprehension and dive into a mindless weekend chore. She gathered an armful of freshly cleaned laundry from the dryer and carried it upstairs to her bedroom. Dropping the bundle of clothes and linens on the bed, Avery surveyed the pile, selected a towel, and began folding it. She wanted to tuck her new worry into each piece of clothing, and then put it away in a drawer or a closet.

Nesting in the middle of the laundry pile were a pair of socks and some panties she'd lent Sasha. Avery held the briefs to her nose and willed the fragrance of the laundry softener to be replaced with Sasha's essence. She let the silky fabric transport her back to Sasha's arms. Its very softness pulled her back between Sasha's strong legs. As she gazed at her bed she imagined the two of them entwined around each other. She wanted that sensual vision to look like her future.

Avery blinked repeatedly, rousing herself from her lovely fantasy. She recalled needing to contact Margaret Zelinskie. Surely the chairperson of her agency's Board of Directors would decide to talk to the police about the possibility of more vandalism at the Mt. Airy house. Afterward, she'd phone Sasha to make sure everything was intact when she arrived home.

Avery felt sure she wasn't completely intact. Sasha's presence in her home this weekend, along with their joyful lovemaking had made her come totally undone. She'd never figured she'd be the one to take the advice she'd given her friend, Karyn. But here she was, being honest about her feelings and letting herself act on those feelings.

## Chapter Thirty-Four



"WHAT THE FUCK is this about?" Lee's temper flared with the fury of a blowtorch as she clicked her way out of her email. After ripping the phone from its stand on the computer desk, she punched ten of its buttons.

"Answer the friggin'phone!" Lee paced back and forth between the desk and the small room's doorway.

"Angela, it's Lee! What do you mean sending me that email? The damn event is less than a month away. Why do I have to attend a meeting with your fucking social committee?"

"Hello to you, too." Angela delivered her sarcastic greeting frostily.

Lee's pacing picked up speed. "I said, why am I being summoned to a meeting? I don't have time for that crap."

"It's just a formality, honey. It won't take too much of your time, and you can walk to the office."

"I know where the friggin'law firm is located."

"I figured you did. Listen, I might not be able to make it to the meeting."

"Why the hell not?" Lee stopped and glared at some papers strewn across her desk.

"I don't do icy roads." Angela sounded petulant, almost whining.

"The roads are already cleared. By Wednesday they'll be completely dry."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because I had to make a run to the northwest edge of the city this morning, and if those streets are cleared, then every road is passable." Annoyed with Angela's helplessness, Lee reloaded with more convincing ammunition. "Look Angela, you told me you were in charge of that stupid-ass committee."

"I am in charge." Angela's authoritative voice took over. "But the streets out here are still too slippery. And don't tell me they're on their way to being dry, because I'm looking out of my living room window as we speak."

"Well who told your trying-to-be-white husband to live all the way out there? What are you going to do when you move into your new mansion? That's further out in the sticks than where you are now."

"How do you know where the new house is?" Angela couldn't conceal her surprise.

"Because I know who your builder is, that's how. Remember my ex, Sasha Lewis? She works for Clive Whittingham."

The lawyer's wife spoke slowly. "You never told me that."

"Yeah, I told you a couple of times, but you weren't listening. You were too busy trying to get me to fuck you."

"Really? Like you weren't busy on your own trying to do that very thing?"

Both women stopped speaking. Their silent duel lasted a few seconds before Angela picked up the sword.

"We haven't seen each other for a while. Isn't it about that time?"

"You can forget that. It's not going to happen." Lee pulled the chair from under her desk and sat down. "I told you the first time it wasn't going anywhere. Shit, I even surprised myself by coming back for more."

"And why do you think you did that, Lee?"

"I have no idea." Lee picked up a pen and drew a dark, ink-filled zigzag pattern on a piece of scrap paper.

"My door is still open."

"I don't do house calls anymore."

"That's okay. This time I'll come to you."

"Oh yeah? Your old man found out, didn't he?"

Angela hesitated before choosing her words to answer. "He thinks he has a clue."

"Well, we didn't give him the show Sasha saw when she found out, did we?" Lee paused. "But you know what? I don't give a flying fuck. I'm better off out of that house and out of that relationship."

"Really? So, who's the lucky woman you're seeing now?"

"No one important."

"Good. That means we can still see each other." Angela answered breathily.

"The only place we're going to see each other is at the meeting on Wednesday. And you'd better be there, Angela."

"I told you I don't drive when the roads are slick. And you already know I don't follow orders, Lee. I'll see you when I'm damn good and ready."

"It looks to me like you follow your husband's commands."

Lee slammed the phone onto its base, and flipped open her daily scheduler. She entered a notation for Wednesday. After another moment, she got up and walked into her bedroom. Opening the door to the closet, she stepped into the walk-in space and began taking an inventory of her clothes. She seized a gray suede jacket and its matching pair of slacks, along with a black-and-white striped designer-label shirt. Holding the ensemble in front of her body, and posing in front of the full length mirror attached to the back wall of the closet, Lee passed judgment on her appearance.

This outfit will be good enough for the meeting with the Wives' Social Committee of Stanton, Cawley and Brown, she thought. And it should be sharp enough to get Angela Jackman's attention refocused on me, where it belongs.

Her wardrobe decision made days in advance, Lee donned her ski jacket, picked up her house and car keys and left her condo. She took the elevator down six levels to the garage and approached her car. Chunks of snow, grimy with a mixture of street filth and a chemical melting agent, clung to both the front and rear wheel wells of her vehicle. The sides of the red coupe looked like they were wearing whitish striped decals, a memento from her early morning foray. Stepping a few yards away from the back of the car, Lee scanned its surface, searching for a dent on the bumper. It didn't take long for her to find the offending blemish.

"Shit," she cursed aloud. "It took the paint off and left a crease. I have to get this fixed. Now."

Lee went back upstairs to her flat, rifled through her desk drawer until she located a business card, made a quick phone call, and then returned to her car, and drove away. A scant thirty minutes later, she walked away from an auto body repair shop and hailed a taxi. The repair shop's owner, a friend of one of Lee's acquaintances, had promised her that since this wasn't an insurance job, he'd have her car ready by early Wednesday evening. She questioned neither the cost of the job nor the guy's expertise. She did wonder though, if the newly painted bumper would have enough time to dry by then.

Trusting that the job would be finished as promised, Lee made peace with the arrangement. She wouldn't need to use her car for the next day and a half, and she had enough work to do to keep her busy in her home office.

After reconsidering the hassle of having to attend a meeting at the offices of Stanton, Cawley and Brown, Lee decided she might even enjoy observing the dynamics between the women on the social committee. And if Angela Jackman were at the meeting, watching her operate among her peers certainly promised to be fascinating.

Angela's lame explanation for needing a meeting hadn't fooled Lee for one minute. She knew those blue blood broads didn't want to thank her in advance for her hard work. They wanted to grill her about the plans for February's cocktail party and brunch. They wanted to make sure that every "t" would be crossed and every "i" dotted. If they were going to pay her black butt the fabulous fee she was charging, they were damn well going to make sure she earned it. They would make Angela Jackman toe the line, also. Lee figured the first time chair of the social committee had had the temerity to make one decision too many without consulting the old guard veterans.

Lee sneered, concluding that Wednesday's meeting was all about two black women needing to be accountable to the powers that be. She pictured the committee members' facial expressions if they ever found out the true nature of her "meetings" with their chairperson. Wouldn't that turn their blue blood red?

On Wednesday, twenty minutes early for the meeting, Lee swaggered into the skyscraper where Stanton, Cawley and Brown leased five floors. Signing in at the reception desk, she was directed to take one of the two last elevators located at the end of the bank up to the twentieth floor. Alighting from the lift, Lee faced yet another welcome desk. This one belonged to the law firm. Again, she signed in, but this time an attractive young woman asked her if she wanted to deposit her coat there. Someone would hang it up for her. Then the young woman assured Lee that although the meeting wasn't scheduled to begin for another few minutes, she could proceed down a hallway to the conference room.

Lee thanked the greeter and made a mental note to stop and flirt with her before leaving the office. Armed with her notebook computer, Lee took in the surroundings as she stepped along the lushly carpeted floor.

So this is where Mr. Angela works. She thought about the Jackmans and labored to keep from snickering.

Although she felt the utmost confidence about her appearance, Lee opted to take a detour to the rest room. She pushed open its heavy door and walked in. A long peach and cream veined granite counter offering wash basins accented with very modern mixed metal faucets and imported toiletries lined the left side of the room. Five stalls were on the right. The last stall at the end was equipped with an extra-wide door that screamed "handicap-accessible".

Right away, Lee noticed something different about that stall, something that had nothing to do with its placement nor with the blue and white symbol advertising its special features. When Lee looked at the space underneath the cubicle's door, she saw two pairs of feet. Pausing to listen, she heard the unmistakable sound of two female voices caught in the throes of passionate groping. The smell of sex, a fragrance that Lee knew all too well, filled the air.

Lee stood still. The moaning and panting coming from that wide stall at the end of the room didn't slow down, not for even a second. The women must have been unaware that anyone else was nearby. Their activity was so intense that they hadn't heard her come into the bathroom. Lee

smiled, shook her head and entered the first cubicle. Gently, she pulled the door closed and eased the sliding lock into place, making sure it made no sound.

Damn. This kind of stuff goes on even in a top tier law firm. Well, maybe especially in a top tier law firm.

Lee hated to do it, but after listening to the action for a few moments longer, she knew she had to flush the toilet. The sound of the gushing water brought the thrashing at the other end of the rest room to a halt. Lee heard water running in one of the sinks. She decided to wait a moment, and give one if not both of the women time to compose themselves before she stepped away from her enclosure.

She left the stall and walked briskly to the phalanx of wash bowls. A handsome auburn-haired, pin-striped pants suited woman stood in front of one of the basins. She released three dabs of liquid soap from the dispenser and then scrubbed her hands vigorously under the steady stream of hot water. Lee stole a look at the stranger and was tempted to say to her, "If she felt good to you, you're gonna want to smell her on your hands for the rest of the day."

She chose to remain quietly amused though, preferring to acknowledge the woman's reflection in the mirror with a knowing nod.

The hand washer finished her chore and exited the rest room, leaving Lee behind, curious about the unidentified sex partner, but unwilling to be late for her meeting. She calculated the social committee would be searching for any reason they could find to issue demerits to her, and she wasn't about to give them any justification for finding fault. So she settled for taking one last look under the door of the handicap-accessible stall. She spied a pair of expensive looking beige leather boots standing there. Lee grinned and made a mental note to buy herself a pair of boots exactly like the ones that were waiting for her to leave the rest room. They would have looked terrific with the gray suede pants and jacket that she was wearing today.

Lee stepped out into the hallway and covered the short distance to the conference suite in seconds. She entered the large room and saw immediately that she'd been right to anticipate the need to arrive on time, if not early. The committee members, minus its chairperson, were already there. The four women stared at Lee before one of them walked toward her, her hand outstretched and her face relaxed and smiling.

"Hello. I'm Betsy Scott Price. You must be Lee Simpson."

Lee shook the friendly woman's hand. "Yes, I am. It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, it's wonderful to finally meet you, also." Betsy pointed to a water pitcher that was sitting on the round conference table. "Would you like to have something to drink?"

"No thanks." Lee wanted a Cosmopolitan, not a drink of water. But she knew that cocktails weren't on the menu at this meeting.

Betsy took on the task of introducing her to the others. "Lee, this is Siggy Robertson."

Appearing bored, Siggy acknowledged the introduction with a wave of her cigarette-laden hand.

Betsy continued, dutifully. "And this is Josette Zimmer."

Josette walked from the other side of the mahogany table and shook Lee's hand. "We've heard good things about your work, Ms. Simpson."

"Thanks. I always give it my best effort."

Betsy steered Lee's attention to the oldest woman in the room. "And, this is Helen Cawley."

"Nice to meet you." Lee offered a tight-lipped smile.

Helen paused for a second before responding. She fixed Lee's image in the camera of her small icy blue eyes. "My pleasure, Ms. Simpson."

Lee figured this Helen Cawley babe might talk a good game, but she hadn't known any pleasure for quite some time. Like many sovereign types, she had a stiff regal bearing that telegraphed an absolute absence of humor.

The older woman addressed them all. "Well ladies, shall we be seated and get this meeting started?"

"Isn't there someone missing?" Lee didn't believe they were going to start the meeting without Angela. Had she stubbornly clung to the notion of the roads still being snow covered? Had Angela refused to drive into town? Or had she been relieved of her duties as chairperson and neglected to share that news with Lee?

Betsy supported Lee's question. "Yes. Our chairperson isn't here yet. Can we wait for another few minutes before we begin?"

Lee didn't miss seeing the acid-laced glances Siggy the smoker and Helen the queen exchanged. She checked her watch and then smiled broadly at the committee members. "I certainly have time to wait for her. It's been so--easy working with Ms. Jackman. Such a pleasure."

Josette, Siggy and Betsy deferred to Helen Cawley.

"That's very gracious of you, Ms. Simpson. By all means, we'll give her a little more time. She's usually late, isn't she ladies?" Mrs. Cawley's lips eked out a thin smile.

"Almost always." Siggy inhaled the last syllable along with a lungful of cigarette smoke.

Lee went on the offensive, aiming a question at the last speaker. "Isn't there a no-smoking regulation in effect in all the city buildings?"

Siggy, her eyes glazed by the nicotine film in front of them, didn't miss a beat. She regarded Lee coolly. "Yes, dear. There is." Then she took another drag.

"Maybe Angela is in the wrong conference room." Betsy's tiny voice offered an explanation. She gazed at Lee. "We always meet on the nineteenth floor, but that room was reserved for another meeting. Maybe Angela went down there by mistake."

"That's within the realm of possibility, Betsy." Helen answered. "But how long would she stay there, dear, with the firm's Business Section meeting going on?"

Siggy snorted and then coughed the dry hacking sputter of a lifelong smoker. Josette looked down at her hands planted flatly on the table. Betsy was bereft of an explanation for Angela's absence. Realizing that anything would be better than listening to these women downgrade their chairperson, especially since Lee knew exactly why they were engaging in their bitchiness, she was on the verge of capitulating to Helen's call to start the meeting. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the door opened. Angela burst in, dressed to the nines and carrying a suede covered notebook.

"Hello, everyone. Have you started without me?" Angela smiled and established eye contact with each of the conference room's occupants as she pulled out the chair at the head of the table. Whether by convenience or design, she sat with Lee directly to her right.

Betsy Scott Price jumped to her feet. "Hi, Angela. We were just about to begin."

"Then I'm right on time. Great." Angela turned slightly, so that she could be eye to eye with Lee. "It's good to see you, Lee. Thanks so much for interrupting your workday to attend our meeting." Angela distributed printed material to each of the committee members.

"Lee, these are copies of your contract with us as well as the breakdown of your services. Let's give everyone a few moments to peruse this information, and then if there are any questions, I'm sure that you or I can answer them."

Lee smiled at Angela. She began to see her sometime-lover in a new light. She'd known how clever Angela was, how manipulative.

But this was the first time she'd seen Angela operate in this den of foxes. Grudgingly, she had to admit to herself that she admired Angela's skills. Some of these women had been snobs since birth, unwilling to bow to social change. But not one of them, not even the one with the cold ass stare could ruffle Angela's feathers.

"I don't have any questions, Angela." Betsy Scott Price smiled serenely.

"Nor do I." Josette Zimmer agreed, staring calmly at the two hold-outs.

"I suppose we need live music at both events?" Siggy Robertson asked dryly.

"It's a nice touch, Ms. Robertson. Most events on this scale have musicians." Lee answered just as dryly. Siggy stubbed out her latest smoke and remained stoic.

"Helen?" Angela raised her eyebrows quizzically as she waited for the older woman's response.

"No questions. Just a comment though. Perhaps next year we'll have only one event. We don't need both a cocktail party and a brunch."

"Certainly we can discuss that, Helen." Angela turned back to Lee and favored her with a sincere smile. Surreptitiously she maneuvered her foot until she touched her lover's leg and rubbed her leather clad ankle against it. Lee feigned a cough and looked down.

"Would you like a glass of water, Lee?" Angela was already reaching for the crystal pitcher.

"Thank you." Lee pushed her chair just a bit away from the table. In the time that it takes for a spark to ignite, she caught a glimpse of Angela's legs and feet. She was wearing beige leather boots; the same boots that covered the legs of one of the panting, screaming illicit lovers Lee overheard in the restroom.

Lee closed her laptop computer and stood.

"Don't get up. I can get the water for you." Angela made the offer softly, solicitously.

"No thanks, Angela. I can do this myself." Lee picked up the full pitcher, and held it waist high. She towered over Angela, upending the vessel and pouring every bit of the water onto Angela while avoiding splashing droplets on her own outfit. She placed the pitcher squarely on the table, and then picked up her computer.

Lee shot Angela a withering look and spoke down at her. "You stupid bitch. We could have had something, but you can't keep your legs closed, can you?"

With a chorus of, "Oh my God!" "My goodness" and "What the hell is going on?" echoing in her wake, Lee Simpson marched out of the conference room. She went directly to the reception desk, asked for her coat, and marched to the elevator.

The office building's revolving door spit Lee out onto the street. She yelled for the first taxicab that crossed her line of vision. After a short ride, she threw the fare at the driver and climbed out of the vehicle. As if possessed, she sped into the auto body repair shop and verbally accosted the owner.

"You said my car would be ready today."

"I said by early this evening, Ms. Simpson." The proprietor hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "My man is putting the finish coat on now. It has to have time to dry."



Lee wasn't listening to him. She was too busy signing a check and ripping it from her checkbook. "Here. Take it. Where are my keys?"

The repair shop owner looked nonplused. He searched the keys hanging from hooks on two sheets pegboard. Apparently he didn't search quickly enough for Lee.

"That set right there!" She snatched her keychain from the man's hands.

"I'm writing on your receipt that we're not guaranteeing the paint job. It's still wet and it's too cold outside for it to dry properly."

Lee advanced toward her car without taking the yellow sheet of paper from the repairman. "You can take your receipt and shove it up your ass."

"Oh, that's nice. Real nice. You're quite the lady." He shook his head.

As the city streets swarmed with lunch timers, Lee tore into her condo building's underground parking area. Before she pulled into her assigned space, she stopped in front of her storage locker. She unbolted the door and went in only to return a second later carrying a red and gold can which she scraped along the edge of the newly painted section of the bumper before placing the metal container in the car's trunk.

By her calculation, she had a five hour wait until it would be dark and she could perform her last chore of the day.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

IT'S MUCH TOO soon for me to be thinking about Avery as more than someone I'm seeing. But I have been seeing a whole lot of her and enjoying every minute of it. Being with her is easy, even when we've both had a difficult day. We balance each other. When I've had a tough time at work, she soothes me. When she's been particularly challenged by all of the stresses that bump against her, I'm able to listen and bring her peace. I've noticed the way we thank each other for the most ordinary things, like cooking a meal, or hanging a painting on a wall, or simply handing the phone to each other when it rings.

I like everything about Avery Sloan. My liking goes deeper than her looks, though God knows she is fine. It goes deeper than my constant desire for her, though God knows my mind is always wrapped around her smooth hot body. My liking goes to the heart of her. To her deepest part that accepts my imperfections and my faults. So, while it's too soon for me to be thinking serious thoughts about Avery, I can't help but hope that she's more than someone I'm seeing.

I felt the delicious reality of having Avery in my life as early as that first weekend we spent together. That Sunday, as I drove away from her snow covered street, my soul lingered in her presence, eager to continue unfinished conversations and discoveries. My fingers remembered how they'd felt entwined in Avery's hair. Did that space between her collarbone and the swell of her breasts really taste like ginger, or had that been my tongue's imagination? Did I continue to be uncontrollably wet just thinking about her mouth, or was being in that state a cruel perimenopausal symptom? Although I was temporarily distracted by two phone messages from a highly agitated Clive, all I really wanted to do that day was collect my mail, compress my usual weekend chores into a scant three hours and drive right back to Avery's home.

As it turned out, I didn't return to her that Sunday. When I stood at the kitchen window trying to gauge the depth of the snowfall, I found myself staring at my backyard. I remembered what I'd been doing in that yard two days earlier, and I gave in to my grief about Randi. I knew she was gone and in a better place, but I couldn't stop imagining how she must have cried for her food; how she must have whimpered until feebleness stole her voice. Now it was my turn to cry about my unfed needs. The shittier parts of my recent existence crept over me like the nightfall, and I realized I wouldn't be good company for anyone, not even Avery.

Lee Simpson still had the power to hurt me, to make tears fall from my eyes. When would she show up at my door, and what would she want? I supposed I'd be watching over my shoulder for her anger for some time to come. I'd cringe every time I had to listen to a recorded message on my answering machine, for fear I'd hear her volcanic voice damning me to pain. As farfetched an idea as it was, when Avery told me her secretary had reported receiving obscene phone messages at the Baker Center, I wondered if Lee were responsible for them. She knew Whittingham Builders was involved in the rehab project. But as quickly as that thought entered my mind, I dismissed it. By now Lee surely had other things to do with her ire.

Mercifully, the electricians'walkout lasted only three days. On Monday and Tuesday morning I ventured out with Clive to each of his projects. We carried a trunkful of donuts to accompany the coffee and tea vendor's service that my boss ordered for the picketing laborers. I had to hand it to Clive. He'd thought of everything. The absence of animosity between him and his workers was a thing of beauty. Most of the crews began working again midday on Wednesday, as soon as they got word the contractors who had hired non-union help had agreed to continue their projects with organized laborers.

At five p.m. Wednesday a huge cheer went up at the offices of Whittingham Builders. Everyone was relieved and happy. The strike was history and we could get back to our daily routine.

At eight p.m. Wednesday night, just three hours after our staff's mini-celebration, a despondent Clive phoned me with bone-chilling news. The Jackman house, only six weeks from completion, had burned to the ground. Someone torched it. Not a malcontent. Not a striker dissatisfied with the terms of the labor settlement. The fire had been started by an arsonist who'd left behind an empty gasoline can scarred by a dent on one side. The Fire Department's investigators were certain they'd be able to lift fingerprints from the can of accelerant.

I did what I had to do to help Clive prepare for Richard Jackman's verbal and legal onslaught. Certifying the safety records of the building materials used so far and checking on all the subcontractors' liability paperwork kept me pretty busy. I even volunteered to go with Clive when he met with Jackman. This was a self-serving offer, I'll admit. I even considered blowing the whistle on his wife's affair with Lee because I wanted to see the expression on the lawyer's face when he realized both of his houses had burned, so to speak.

Clive was grateful for my support, but he declined my help with Jackman. He saw I was inundated with the emergency research tasks added to my everyday work.

"Not to worry, love. We're fully insured against this kind of thing. And you're much too busy." Then, as if he had seen clear through to my mind and read the motivation planted there, he added one more detail about the Jackman's.

"I suspect that dealing with him will be more complicated than ever, as I heard he's begun divorce proceedings against his wife." Clive shook his head and gazed up at the ceiling. "Negotiating with him under these circumstances is going to be enormously difficult indeed."

He was right about all of it. Soothing Jackman was going to be impossible, and I was drowning in all of the extra work. But I wasn't too busy to wonder if Lee knew anything about the fire that destroyed her lover's new house. She used to talk about setting houses afire far too frequently for me to forget about it. I was sure Clive remembered also. If not, I'd remind him. And I'd help him recall the color of Lee's car; albeit not a freshly painted one.

Lately and with good reason, I'd been looking everywhere for the signs of Lee's destruction. I'd listen for her footsteps, even in my sleep. And I stood sentry duty twenty-four seven, guarding against her intrusion into my life with Avery.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

CLIVE, FULL OF more energy and enthusiasm than he'd had for weeks, bounded into my office. Always pleasant and polite, he was practically bursting out of his skin this morning. He propelled a swivel chair from the worktable over to my desk, spun it around one full revolution, and then planted himself in it, facing me.

"Good morning, Sasha."

"Good morning." I looked at him, skepticism painted all over my face. "Too much caffeine?"

"Only the standard amount." He continued to grin at me.

"What's up?"

"The veritable jig, Sasha Lewis."

"Are you gonna keep me hanging in mid-air, or what?"

Clive leaned back in the chair and used his thumb and index finger to groom both sides of his mustache.

"No indeed. Hang no longer, love."

"Well...?"

"Well, I ran into two friends of mine, Marie St. John and Ameerah Kirkpatrick."

Avery and I had gone out to dinner with these women a week ago, so I knew where Clive was headed.

"And?"

"And you've been seeing our Ms. Sloan, haven't you?"

I threw my head back and laughed. "Do you always get this excited when you find out who your employees are dating?"

"Not at all. My life is fuller than that." Clive sat forward, resting his arm on the edge of my desk. He looked me dead in the eyes. "But you're a special employee who's had an especially difficult time in the romance department. And the moment I met Avery, I knew she could be someone special in your life."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess you think you're pretty slick, huh?"

"Not slick, just basically a romantic sort of chap." Was it my imagination, or was Clive snickering at me?

"Well, that makes life pleasant for Eddie, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed." My boss continued to stare at me. "So when were you going to tell me about this?"

I hadn't shared much of anything about my personal life with Clive for a couple of months. In fact, I hadn't told anyone how important Avery had become to me, because I still needed to protect the two of us from Lee.

"You know what, Clive? You almost nailed it. Avery isn't a special person in my life. She's *the* special person."

"I knew it. Well done, Sasha." Satisfaction spread over Clive's face.

I shook my head and chuckled. I loved Clive's expressions, but he'd just made my relationship with Avery sound like a school project I'd been working on, or an order for a filet mignon. At times like this, I enjoyed jolting him a little bit.

"Clive, you can't imagine how well we are doing it." I closed my eyes and held my hands up, as if I were sculpting a curvy sensuous woman. "Oh man, when Avery and I--"

My boss narrowed his eyes. "Right. That's something I'd rather not imagine."

"Good. Now can we stop chit-chatting about my love life and can I get back to work?" I snapped out of my feigned reverie.

For one second, Clive glared at me indignantly. The next second we both started laughing.

I began to stand up so I could show Clive the chart I'd affixed to the white board on the other side of my office. "Seriously, I wanted you to look at the job flow-chart for the Jackman rebuild."

Clive raised both hands, cautioning me to sit back down. "It's all moot, Sasha. We got a call this morning from Jackman's attorney. They're rejecting our offer to reconstruct, and they're asking for a full refund."

I knew how I felt about this news, but I didn't know about Clive. I'd heard him say many times that he hated to leave any project unfinished, no matter its size or complexity. I sat down and kept quiet, giving him a chance to say more.

Clive looked down. "So sorry that you wasted valuable time putting the chart together." Then he inhaled deeply. Exhaling, he grinned. "Thank God we've seen the last of that sodding fool!"

Clive reached over my desk and gave me a high-five. I clapped his palm and then grasped his hand, turning our little celebratory ritual into a handshake. Clive immediately placed his other hand over mine, enveloping it warmly.

"Sasha, I don't often say this to you, but I think it. I am so grateful for your friendship and for all the things that you do to help me run this company. I worried about you tremendously the entire time you were trying to extricate yourself from Lee. And I've felt so guilty knowing I was the person who introduced her to you."

"Thanks for that, Clive. But remember, Lee introduced herself, and back then I was as interested in knowing her as she was in getting to know me."

"I hope that things go well for you and Avery. I'm happy for the two of you." Clive let me reclaim my hand. "Now, back to business. The second good thing that's happened this morning,

aside from Mr. Jackass's pull out, is that we had a favorable response from Whitpain Township. Their zoning board has approved our plans for the Winding Glen subdivision."

"That's very good news."

"Yes. So I need to meet with some of those folks this afternoon, and that means that I need you to make an appearance for me at a two o'clock meeting."

I quickly glanced at my schedule. "No problem. Where do I have to appear?"

"The Mt. Airy rehab project. Avery and I were planning to inspect the two new bathrooms, check the HVAC system, and check on the progress of the kitchen. Do you mind handling that?" Clive winked at me.

"I don't mind at all."

"Excellent." Clive meandered to the doorway. I could tell there was something else he wanted to say to me. "Uh, one more thing for now, Sasha."

"What's that?"

"The city police called me late yesterday afternoon. They have a vague description of a car that's been spotted parked in the group home's driveway from time to time."

"Could it belong to one of the contractors?"

"Apparently not. An elderly woman who lives across the street reported the car's been there three different times, always at night after the workers have left. The last time she saw it was a few days after the January snowstorm. She said the driver got stuck on the ice and then, when he accelerated, he collided with the dumpster that's closest to the street."

Maybe it was the way that Clive was telling me the story that made my jaw tighten. "Did the police say what kind of car it was?"

"No. They weren't that forthcoming. I think their priority was to assure me that they're still working on the case." Clive plunged himself deep in thought. He rubbed his chin, deliberating about how much he should tell me.

"I have a feeling they've shared much more with the Baker Center people, because they own the property. Maybe your Avery can fill in the missing pieces."

I nodded. "I'll be able to ask her about it this afternoon, thanks to your meeting in Whitpain."

"Right. Let me know what she says, will you?"

"Sure."

Clive was mute, but his eyes spoke a book's worth of pages. He turned slowly and left my office.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

I TUCKED MY laptop into its padded case and eased my arms into my jacket. Everything in my end of the office had been pretty much under control during the morning hours, but the afternoon brought a series of problems I needed to solve. Consequently, I was running late for my appointment in Mt. Airy.

"I'll be back here well before five, Nona."

Our secretary didn't even look up at me as I trotted by her desk. "I don't think so, Sasha. Have you looked outside in the past two hours?"

"What?" I put the brakes on and stared through the reception area's window. "Oh, crap."

"My sentiments exactly. Winter took a long time getting here, but now that it's arrived, it's here in a big way."

"Well I guess I'd better revise my plans." I shook my head. "First I'll be at the Mt. Airy project. Then, I'll be at home, if I can get there."

Who was I kidding? I'd be at home, all right, but not at my home.

"Be careful, Sasha." Nona's good wishes followed me out the door.

"Call me on my cell if you need anything."

I started my car, letting it heat up while I cleared the snow from the windows. The light gray sky, bursting with frigid white flakes, promised many hours of precipitation. I mumbled under my breath.

"This is that serious snow; those dry powdery flakes that cover the road before you know it. Well, at least I'll be getting out of hilly Conshohocken before it gets too deep."

Driving away from the parking lot, I probed under my jacket, feeling the way to my cell phone. I unclipped it from my belt, and pushed a newly familiar pattern of buttons.

"Hey, Avery."

"Sasha, hi honey. How are you?"

God, I loved to hear her voice. "I'm okay. Where are you?"

"I'm at the group home."

"Good. You're not out driving in all of this snow." I pictured Avery safe and sheltered in the large old house.

"No. In fact, I'm up on the third floor checking out the new bathroom." I could hear the sound of water running.

"What do you think of it?"

"Oh, Sasha. It's beautiful. I might have to hire some of your people to do work in my house."

"That can be arranged." Trying to keep my windshield cleared of snow, I increased the speed of the wipers. They had to compete with the increasing wind. "Hey, Avery, did you hear anything on the news about this storm?"

"Yeah, they've been talking about it for the last two days."

"I must have missed that." I held the phone closer to my ear. "Between my job and the way you've been keeping me busy, woman..."

"Hey, if you're complaining, I can occupy less of your time, you know." Avery had this sexy way of teasing me.

"Believe me I'm not complaining, baby." I shook off the unhappy vision of spending my days and nights without her. "So how long have you been at the group home?"

"About thirty minutes. I have a meeting with your boss."

"I know. I'm afraid you have to meet with me though, instead of with Clive. He had to rush off to another appointment."

"Oh, is that how it goes? Mr. Whittingham assumes he can cancel our meeting? Am I not an important client?" Avery continued her flirty teasing tones.

I grinned at no one but the snowflakes crash landing on my car. "Of course you're important. That's why I'm sliding and skidding all over the road to get to you."

"Don't do that. Where are you right now?"

"I'm on Ridge, but I'm headed over to Germantown Pike. I have to get away from these fools who keep fish-tailing and almost crashing into me."



"Do you think you should stop talking to me and keep both hands on your steering wheel?" I heard Avery substitute her playfulness with serious concern.

"That's probably a good idea, baby." I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. At the speed I was driving, I was going to be late.

"It's really cold in this house, Sasha."

"Well, you could turn the heat up. We have to test the system anyway. Or, you could wait for me to get there. I bet I can warm you up." It was my turn to tease Avery with an invitation to intimacy.

"Oh, I'm sure you could. But remember, you're Clive Whittingham this afternoon, and we need to take care of business

before either of us warms the other one up. Okay?"

"Sure, I can remember that, one hundred percent business."

"All right. Drive carefully, honey."

"Uh-huh. See you soon."

Driving on the single-lane road wasn't too perilous as long as the traffic lights were green, and I hobbled along at twenty-five miles per hour. The moment either of those two conditions changed, it became dicey. It's strange how you never notice how steep certain sections of a road are, until you're having difficulty controlling your car's speed or trajectory. I prayed to the four-wheel drive goddess and recited the anti-lock brakes mantra about twenty times between the top of Chestnut Hill and the outer edge of Mt. Airy.

The narrow thoroughfare where the group home is located was even tighter than usual, congested with cars parked on both sides of the strip. Nevertheless, that street was a welcome sight. I wouldn't have to grit my teeth much longer as I picked my way to my destination. Almost a full block away from the house, I saw the distinctive shape of the dumpsters that stood on the property. Two brown behemoths thrust their metal silhouettes against the background of the falling snow.

I spotted Avery's car parked in the driveway, facing the rear yard. The porch, with its gently-pitched, snow-whitened roof, was an inviting shelter. It suggested Norman Rockwell's Americana, a painting from the last century. All that porch needed was a woolen-capped little boy leaning on a sled and inviting a puppy to take a ride with him.

As I nudged the turn signal, preparing to point my car into the driveway, I gasped. A red Infiniti was parked at the curb, blocking my entry to the property. I knew full well that several thousand red Infinitis had been manufactured in 2007. But I knew without a doubt this one belonged to Lee.

I slowed my car and steered it toward the curb, stopping nose to nose with the Japanese import that used to share space in my garage. In a fever to find Avery, I left my computer and handbag in the front seat. I damn near left my mind there, also. My pulse speeding, I jogged across the front yard and leaped up the steps, two at a time.

The porch was partially snow covered and slippery. I skidded past the living room window and noticed a reed-thin beam of light coming from the kitchen area and cutting through the dining room. I grasped the front door knob and found no resistance.

Without thinking, I yelled, "Avery! Baby, where are you?"

"I'm back here--in the kitchen, Sasha."

The only memory I have of passing through the living room was the vague suggestion of smelling something familiar, yet out of place and noticing a few drops of liquid on the floor, marking a path from the living room to the back of the house. One second I was standing in the entrance calling Avery's name, and the next instant found me in the kitchen, toe to toe with Lee. Avery stood to my right, halfway between my former partner and me.

"Baby?" Lee's mouth twisted as she said that word. "You're callin'this woman 'baby'already?"

"You need to leave, Lee. You're trespassing." I ignored Lee's question.

"The hell I am. She told me I could come in."

Avery, seized by confusion, sought to explain Lee's presence in the house. "She told me she worked for Whittingham Builders and she wanted to see how the renovations were going. She said she knew you, Sasha; that you okayed her being here."

"Tell her how we know each other--baby." Lee shifted her stance, just enough to distract me from looking at her and to redirect my eyes to the red and gold metal container she'd put on the counter. Gasoline. That was the odor I'd smelled as I ran past the living room, and that explained the drops of moisture on the floor.

I moved closer, angling my body between Avery's and Lee's.

Avery spoke, her voice just above a whisper. She must have sensed Lee's volatility and knew instinctively that a soft low tone might help contain the impending explosion.

"You're Lee Simpson, aren't you? You and Sasha used to be together."

Lee leaned to her left, trying to look around me and speak directly to Avery. "That's right. Until she threw me out of our house. Isn't that some bullshit?" Quickly, Lee shifted her eyes toward me. "You didn't waste too much time, did you? Or was this going on before I moved out?"

"Please leave, Lee." Aware that she was armed with the intense laser-like stare that always preceded one of her irrational acts, I repeated my request.

"Lee, please leave."

"I don't think so. Not until I'm goddamn ready. And I'm not ready yet."

My mouth went dry. I could hear the sound of my pulse beating. I swear I could feel the blood pumping through my arteries. When I tried to focus on Lee's features, her face receded, as if she were in a tunnel. Or maybe I was the one who'd suddenly been sucked into an abyss.

I felt Avery's hand touch the small of my back. Just a subtle, gentle brush with her fingertips. That's when it all came back into focus. I wasn't lost in a vortex. Lee was. I wasn't the irrational one. It was Lee. I hadn't been repeatedly unfaithful during the past four years. Those behaviors belonged to Lee. I was not the one whose meanness teetered over the edge of mental illness. That described Lee. And at that very moment, when she was trying so hard to intimidate and force me to cower, all I really felt for her was sorrow.

"Why are you here, Lee?"

"Why the hell do you think?" She raised her voice, and I saw the vein in her neck sticking out, distorting the smooth flow in the fabric of her turtleneck shirt.

"I honestly don't know."

"Here's a clue. I'm here to hurt you, both of you and this stupid friggin'group home."

"You've already hurt me. You destroyed my only tangible link to my mother. And you starved Randi to death." I battled to keep my voice from quaking. "What more could you do?"

"For starters, I could damage your latest fuck-buddy here." My former lover reached into her pocket and pulled out a lighter.

"You need to leave us alone, Lee." The calm in my voice surprised me.

"Oh, I'm not leaving anybody alone."

I tried to grope for Avery, and push her away. I said a silent prayer for her to understand what I wanted her to do.

Lee looked past me and leered at Avery. "Not bad. You met her through work, huh? I always suspected you were sleeping with your job contacts."

I recalled the scene between Lee and Angela Jackman that I'd interrupted in my living room

"That's ironic coming from you."

"It is, isn't it?" Lee began to laugh. She was amused by her own treachery.

"Lee?" Avery stepped from behind me. "Sasha's right. You have to leave."

Lee spit out her answer. "You need to step back. You think you're gonna fuck Sasha and then tell me what I have to do? Well think again. If I killed a stupid cat, don't you figure I could hurt you too?"

"This is enough, Lee." I took a chance and turned my back to her, pleading with Avery. "Go outside, get into your car, and drive away."

Avery shook her head. "I'm not leaving you alone with her."

"Please, Avery. Go." I started to push her forcefully.

"Please, Avery. Go." Lee mimicked me and took two steps closer to the gallon container of gasoline.

I tugged at my cell phone, unhooking it from my slacks. Just as I started to push 911, I noticed a bright light streaming through the living room window and staining the walls with its reflection. The front door opened and I felt a gust of cold air rush in, accompanied by two voices, one male and one female.

"Hello? Anyone here?" Heavy footsteps thundered through the same rooms I'd passed through only moments ago.

"Back here," I shouted. No one had to tell me that the boot covered feet coming our way belonged to cops. The female officer carried a flashlight in one hand. She rested her other one atop her service revolver. Her partner walked one step behind her. He had a small piece of paper in one of his hands.

"Is one of you Lee Simpson?"

"I'm Lee Simpson. How can I help you?"

I watched as Lee deftly pocketed her lighter.

The female officer gestured toward the front of the property. "Is that your vehicle parked at the curb?"

I watched Lee measure the situation. She smiled slightly at the officer. "Yes. Is this a snow emergency route or something? Are you officers going to give me a parking ticket?" Lee stood there, with her hands on her hips, smiling one of her insinuating grins. She cocked her head toward the policewoman. "You know, sister, you could give another sister a break on a snowy day."

Neither cop blinked. The female handed her flashlight to her partner. "Lee Simpson, you're under arrest for suspicion of committing acts of vandalism on private property. Put your hands behind your back."

"You're out of your fucking minds if you think you're going to arrest me!" Lee screamed, abandoning her attempts to be provocative with the female cop.

"Oh, we're going to arrest you, all right." The male officer turned Lee around forcibly, while the other cop handcuffed her and proceeded to pat her down. The uniformed woman removed Lee's wallet, her keys, and the cigarette lighter from her pockets.

"That can of gasoline is hers, also." I needed the cops to know that. I might have been making things worse for Lee, but it was my way of liberating myself from her threats.

Without missing a beat, the officer recited Lee her Miranda rights. Her partner wrote my name and Avery's in his notebook and asked to see some proof of our identification. Avery removed her driver's license from her wallet, and I had to go out to my car to get my bag. As I pulled it from the front seat, I noticed an elderly woman standing at the curb on the other side of the street. She was stooped over, wearing a plaid woolen shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

"Y'all okay in there? The cops got everything under control?"

"Yes, Ma'am." I gave her a short-lived wave. "It's cold and windy out here. Are you warm enough without a coat?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be okay now that I know the cops got that woman in the red car." She pointed at Lee's vehicle. "Every time that car showed up, something happened in that house. I got tired of seeing the windows broke. And I think she's the one who wrote those nasty words on the big trash cans."

"Well, if you're right, you won't have to worry about it anymore." I gestured that I had to go back inside the house. "Thank you for your concern, Ma'am."

"Oh, I was more than concerned, honey. I told the cops I'd call them the very next time I saw that car. And I did just that. I'm what you call an activist-neighbor. Always have been." The old woman turned around and walked toward her pathway. The unfurled ends of her shawl blew freely in the wind.

I came back into the kitchen in time to hear the electronic crackle bursting from the cop's shoulder-mounted radio. A disembodied voice barked something about a warrant issued for Lee's arrest in Chester County.

The male officer grinned at his partner. "Bingo. We've got a hot one here."

"You've been real busy, haven't you, sistah?" The cop put on a pair of latex gloves and picked up the metal can. She turned to Avery and me.

"Your friend here is a suspect in an unsolved arson out on the Main Line; she may be the one who incinerated one of those McMansions while it was being built. The perp left smudges of recently applied auto paint on the can of accelerant. And the paint matches a repair job she had done on her car recently."

We listened silently. I wanted to be surprised by the news, but I wasn't.

"Okay, let's go." The male officer led the parade toward the front door while his partner held Lee's elbow and steered her past us. Lee walked defiantly, her posture dead set against any remorse.

"It's not over, Sasha. You don't get to put me out of your house without paying for it."

I watched passively as the cops escorted her away, and I wondered if Lee had any kind of a grip on reality. I wondered also, what Avery must have been thinking.

Realizing it was okay to breathe, I turned toward her and searched her eyes, looking for some reaction. I wanted to assess what this episode had done to us. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. How about you?" Worry lines creased her forehead.

"I'm okay. Just sorry as hell all of this had to happen."

"Do you think she's the one who broke the living room window and defaced the dumpsters?"

"Yes. And she's probably the one who burned down another one of our projects." I wanted to get the worst Lee had done out into the open. If I had any chance of continuing a relationship with Avery, she needed to know all about Lee's destructive potential. "I guess all of this could frighten you away from me."

Avery shook her head slowly. "I'm not afraid to be with you, Sasha." She paused. "Although I have to admit I had no idea you were dealing with so much."

"I didn't want you to know about all the drama. You might not have wanted to go out with me." I touched her cheek with the back of my hand.

Avery exerted a gentle pressure on my hand, holding it to the side of her face. "Hey, I'm willing to do more than go out with you, Sasha Lewis."

I leaned forward and left the shadow of a kiss on her mouth. "Can we do this inspection tomorrow, when our heads are a little more together than they are now?"

"That sounds like a wise idea." Avery glanced out the window at the failing daylight. "The snow is really coming down."

I frowned, seeing how quickly it was accumulating. "Is there any chance I can camp at your house tonight?"

"There's a very good chance. I wouldn't want you to drive all the way back to the suburbs in this mess."

The two of us made our way to the front door. When we opened it, we were greeted by the sight of a tow truck bearing the insignia of the Philadelphia Police Department. The rig, attached to the back of the red sedan, pulled away from the curb, hauling the evidence of Lee's guilt behind it.

Avery rubbed my arm and then clasped my hand in hers. "That part is all over, Sasha. You and I are going to be all right."

We stood watching the tow truck's tail lights grow dim as it made its way along the whitened street. I turned to Avery. "Meet you at your house in two minutes?"

She brushed a snowflake from the tip of my nose. "Make it five, speedy. You want to follow me, or should I follow you?"

"Follow me, baby."

And she did, cautiously, perfectly. She stayed close to me, turning when I turned, slowing when I slowed, going faster when I accelerated. When we rode down her street, I drove past the first empty parking space I saw, leaving it for her. I continued to the end of her block before turning around. Slowing to a crawl, I finally saw a vacant space, and filled it.

I gathered my handbag and computer case and stepped out of my car. Avery was nowhere to be seen. How she had gotten to her house and gone inside in such a short amount of time amazed me. Why she had done so without waiting for me was a puzzle. I made my way to her front steps, carefully avoiding what looked more like ice than snow.

The onion glass entry lights on each side of Avery's door were lit, drawing me to the house. I looked up, blinking away the snowflakes, and I saw her there, smiling and holding out her hand to me.

"What took you so long?" Avery taunted me.

"I stopped to chat with your neighbors." I knew she could take as well as she gave.

"Which one? The good looking woman up the street?"

I entered the foyer and put down both of my bags. "You're the only good looking woman on this entire block."

"And you're just saying that because you want a hot meal and a place to sleep." Avery placed her hands on either side of my face. Her lips melted onto mine.

I nuzzled her throat. "I want more than that, Avery Sloan."

"I know, baby. So do I." Avery pushed my jacket off my shoulders and hung it in the coat closet. She grasped my hand, pulling me up the stairs.

When we reached the second floor, she turned to her right and led me to the guest bedroom's closed door. "I want you to see something."

As Avery opened the door and quickly shut it again behind us, I caught a glimpse of a tortie-colored mass of fur darting across the floor. The soft little brown and black form stopped in front of the closet. It looked up at me, its amber eyes huge with surprise. I looked down at the kitten, and then at Avery.

My lover held my hand in hers. "She's not supposed to be a replacement for Randi. You might not be ready for that. And if you want, she can live here with me."

"Avery, I..."

She placed her finger on my lips, silencing me. "I wanted a way to remind you it's okay to trust what's gentle and soft once again."

"I can't believe you've done this for me." I pulled Avery close to me, breathing in her spicy fragrance.

"I want to do so much more, Sasha."

"Thank you, baby." My voice began to tremble as I released Avery and got down on my knees. I tapped the carpeted floor, hoping to persuade the kitten to approach me. She drew close and sniffed my hand. "I know what I'm going to call her."

"What's that?"

"Cricket."

Avery got down on her knees and gazed at me. Her voice, filled with the tones of an indulgent lover, lingered through her two-syllable response. "Oo-kay." She let another second lapse before continuing. "Why are you calling her Cricket, honey?"

"Because crickets represent the arrival of good fortune."

Her curiosity sated, the kitten went in search of Avery's outstretched fingers. She petted the little mound of fur and then turned to face me. "You are definitely my good fortune, Sasha."

"And you are mine, Avery."



## About the Author

A native of Philadelphia, Renée is a former foreign language teacher who plans to return to the classroom only once in a while between the covers of her novels. After having had three short stories published (Sister Vision Press, Toronto, Canada and "Labyrinth" Newspaper, Philadelphia), this author stretched her writing efforts and penned the novel, "Leave of Absence" (Borders Personal Publishing, 2005). With that book tucked under her arm, she attended the 2006 GCLS Convention where she met quite a few dynamic writers, editors, and publishers and was encouraged to submit her second manuscript to a publisher. "Breaking Jaie" (Regal Crest Enterprises) is the result of that encouragement. Renée is dedicated to the belief and practice of creating racially diverse characters. She knows that there is a readership of underrepresented lesbians who are hungry to see themselves reflected on the pages of well written lesbian fiction.

Renée invites you to visit her website, [www.RenéeBess.com](http://www.RenéeBess.com).

## Other Books by S. Renée Bess

### *Breaking Jaie*

Jaie Baxter, an African-American Ph.D candidate at Philadelphia's Allerton University, is determined to win a prestigious writing grant. In order to win the Adamson Grant, Jaie initially plans to take advantage of one of the competition's judges, Jennifer Renfrew, who is also a University official. Jennifer has spent the past ten years alone following the murder of her lover, Patricia Adamson, in whose honor the grant is named. Jennifer is at first susceptible to Jaie's flirtation, but is later vengeful when she discovers the real reason for Jaie's sudden romantic interest in her. A lunch with an old cop friend reveals that Jaie may very well have ties to Adamson's death.

Jaie is confronted with painful memories as she prepares an autobiographical essay for the grant application. She recalls the emotional trauma of her older brother's death, the murder of a police detective, her dismissal from her "dream" high school, and her victimization at the hands of hateful homophobic students. She remembers her constant struggles with her mother's alcohol-fueled jealousies and physical abuse she had to endure. This wake-up call causes her to look at her life in new ways.

But Jaie is not the only student applying for the grant. Terez Overton, a wealthy Boston woman, is Jaie's chief competitor. Jaie is drawn to the New Englander immediately but is also unnerved by her. She has no clue that Terez is trying to decide whether she wants to accept an opportunity to write an investigative article about an unsolved murder. Writing that article could put her budding relationship with Jaie in jeopardy.

And just when the angst of old memories and the uncertainty of her future with Terez are complicating Jaie's life, her manipulative ex, Seneca Wilson, returns to Philadelphia to reclaim Jaie using emotional blackmail. Seneca's actions serve to wound and break Jaie in many ways. Will Seneca drive the final wedge between Jaie and Terez? Who will win the Adamson grant? And what did Jaie have to do with the death of Patricia Adamson?

## *The Butterfly Moments*

After a twenty-plus year career as a Parole Officer in Philadelphia, Alana Blue is more than ready to leave her job and move on to more rewarding work. Jaded and burned out, Alana is given the difficult assignment of supervising Rafe Ortiz, a renegade Probation and Parole Officer who arrives in Alana's office by way of a disciplinary transfer and with a reputation for accumulating meaningless sexual conquests.

Alana's life is more complicated by the frequent conflicts she experiences with her homophobic daughter, Nikki. Convinced that the transparency of her mother's sexuality doomed her first marriage, Nikki is obsessed with keeping her second union intact, even if it means constantly repudiating Alana. Nikki's husband, Owen Reid, doesn't always agree with his wife's opinions regarding same-gender relationships; nor does he always support their marriage by remaining faithful to Nikki.

As Alana is reaching for an opportunity to pursue a new career, the body of a brutally murdered university student is discovered partially hidden on a property very close to Alana's neighborhood. Detective Johnetta Jones, recently retired from the Philadelphia Police Force, and hired by a suburban law enforcement department, is assigned to the murder case. When the investigation leads her to one of Alana's parolees, Johnetta remembers having interviewed this particular Parole Officer once before. Although her memory of Alana is mostly pleasant, Johnetta remains more emotionally connected to her work than she is to any woman she's ever

met. Vaguely discontent, she is reluctant to forge a romantic connection with anyone...until her path intersects with Alana's once again. Their renewed contact suggests the possibility of love and the end of loneliness for both women. As Johnetta and her work partner, Detective Harold Smythe, get close to solving the university student's murder, Johnetta realizes arresting their suspect will imperil her tenuous relationship with Alana.

Alana becomes caught in the war between her impulsive attraction to Rafe Ortiz's flirtatious pursuit and her realization that her feelings for Johnetta Jones are growing deeper with each passing day. Will everything in Alana's world disintegrate when lies are revealed, true identities are exposed, and the murderer is unmasked?

Other Regal Crest Books You Might Enjoy

## *A Question of Integrity*

by Megan Magill

Jess Maddocks is a talented business trouble-shooter who has worked hard to win the respect of her colleagues. When her boss assigns her a special case, Jess relishes the opportunity to prove her worth, unaware that her strict professional boundaries would this time fail her.

Rosalind Brannigan captivates people as easily as others smile. Described as charisma personified, she knows the value of her ability and is ruthless in utilising it to her own advantage. Confident in her mastery of the game, Rosalind assumes the rules will never change.

When Jess' assignment brings these two women together, it sparks an unexpected chain of events that proves life changing to both of them. They are forced to deal with mutual attraction and suspicion whilst an increasingly malignant shadow looms over them. As events unfold they must look to their own integrity as the only guide they have.

This is the first book in the Jess Maddocks series.

## *My Life With Stella Kane*

by Linda Morganstein

In 1948, Nina Weiss, a snobby college girl from Scarsdale, goes to Hollywood to work at her uncle's movie studio. She's assigned to help publicize a young actress named Stella Kane. Nina is immediately thrown into the maelstrom of the declining studio system and repressive fifties Hollywood. Adding to her difficulties is her growing attraction to Stella. When a gay actor at the studio is threatened by tabloid exposure, Nina invents a romance between Stella and the actor. The trio become hopelessly entangled when the invented romance succeeds beyond anyone's dreams. This is the "behind-the-scenes" story of the trio's compromises and secrets that still has relevance for today.

**VISIT US ONLINE AT**

[www.regalcrest.biz](http://www.regalcrest.biz)

**At the Regal Crest Website You'll Find**

- The latest news about forthcoming titles and new releases
- Our complete backlist of romance, mystery, thriller and adventure titles
- Information about your favorite authors
- Current bestsellers
- Media tearsheets to print and take with you when you shop

Regal Crest titles are available directly from Bella Distribution and Ingram.