

Coming Home
AN LA LOVERS BOOK



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CHAPTER ONE

Blaise

“CAKE! I NEED cake!” Blaise’s usually sweet, New Zealand accent was stressed even to her own ears as she breezed into her best friend Ellie’s diner kitchen. “And tea!”

Ellie’s eyes glanced up from frosting the red velvet cake she had just grabbed from the refrigerator, then up at the clock.

“It’s barely eight o’clock, Blaise. Are you here with your date?”

Blaise snorted a very unladylike word before answering. “No, he is definitely not here with me. Are you going to give me cake or do I have to stick my face in that one?” she asked, gesturing to her favorite dessert ever sitting in front of Ellie.

“You will do no such thing! There’s some red velvet left over there. Grab it yourself since you seem to think you can just waltz back here anytime you want,” Ellie teased.

Blaise just grinned, knowing full well Ellie didn’t mind her being back here. They had been best friends since they met at University. Fourteen years later, they were closer than ever. Even after Blaise’s stupid decision to return home for a while four years ago. Ellie had even made Blaise her teenage daughter, Jessie’s, Godmother.

She eyed the last bit of red velvet that sat under the glass cake dome. *How many calories if I just finish this sucker off?* she wondered idly before lifting the

dome and bringing the stand with her, along with a fork.

“You are *not* going to eat the rest of that, are you?” Ellie asked incredulously.

Blaise blinked at her, then stuffed a big forkful of moist, delicious red velvet with cream cheese frosting into her mouth. “Mmm,” she purred.

Ellie just shook her head, going to the cabinet above the refrigerator. She grabbed a bottle of Sullivan’s Cove whiskey. “Do you want the tea with this, or would you just like it straight up?”

Blaise wrinkled her nose. “Tea, please.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Ellie placed a teacup in front of Blaise and filled it with jasmine tea.

Blaise sighed dramatically. “I’m just sick of arrogant arseholes. These damn books come out about alpha males and men think that’s what every woman wants. Problem is, they only get the arrogant part down, not the sweet part.” Blaise poured a generous spattering of whiskey into her tea.

Ellie had resumed frosting her cake, but paused when she saw the amount of the alcohol Blaise poured. “That bad?”

“He basically told me that the date was just a prelude to bonk me. And that was not even ten minutes into the damn thing.”

Ellie snickered at Blaise’s Kiwi word for sex. After more than a decade of listening to Blaise, she was a pro at understanding the odd words and phrases.

“I take it you weren’t feeling it?”

“Um, no,” Blaise responded around a mouth full of cake. “He *thought* he was awesome and God’s gift to women. You know I don’t go for that shit.”

Ellie made a face. “So, back to the drawing board?”

Blaise sighed. “I think I’m going to take a break from dating. I have struck out the past... well, *every* time.”

“That’s not true. What about the one guy. Chad? Brad?”

“Tad. Or, Thaddeus. Ugh. He was okay, just too pretentious for me.”

Ellie chuckled. “You know you find something wrong with everyone you go out with.”

“At least I go out,” Blaise mumbled grumpily.

“Blaise.”

“It’s true, El. You’re a beautiful woman, and yet you hide here in your diner, baking all the time.”

“So? Where is it written that a woman has to date to be happy? Besides, I have Jessie.”

“Having a kid doesn’t mean you have to deny yourself, Ellie.” Blaise knew she was treading on thin ice with her friend. This was always a sore subject between the two of them, but she could never figure out why.

“Blaise, please?”

“Fine. I just hope that one day you’ll tell me,” Blaise said softly.

“Tell you what?” Ellie asked warily.

“Whatever it is that you’re keeping from me. You know you can tell me anything, right? I know there’s a real reason you don’t go out with anyone, and no, I don’t count Frank,” she added, bringing up Ellie’s ‘friend’ that moved in with her recently. Blaise knew *nothing* was going on between them. He just wasn’t Ellie’s type. Not that she knew what that type was, Ellie was too closed-lipped about it. But, boring Frank? No way. “I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

“Hey. First of all, Frank is just a friend who needed a place to stay for a little while. Stop hating on him,” Ellie laughed, but Blaise could hear the strain. “Second, keep it up and see if you get any more free cake.”

“I’m sorry!” Blaise held up her hands in mock surrender, deciding it was time to lighten the mood again. “I meant nothing by that. Don’t take my cake!” she smirked, then stuffed her face with another big bite.

“Well, look on the bright side,” Ellie began. “If you stop dating, you can just eat all the cake you want. You won’t have to worry about calories.”

“Thanks. That helps a lot.” Blaise looked at the huge piece of cake that she was halfway through. Shrugging, she took another bite. *Suppose I’ll just double up on yoga and running.*

“Six a.m.”

Blaise glanced up bemused. “What?”

“You’re going to meet me at six tomorrow morning.”

“For what?” Blaise almost shrieked. “I said I was sorry about bringing up the whole dating thing!”

Ellie chuckled much to Blaise’s dismay. “I know. I’m not doing it to torture you. We’re going to go running.”

“Oh, and that’s not torture?” Blaise mumbled, taking yet another bite. Hell, if she had to endure running with Ellie, she sure as hell was going to finish off this damn cake.

“No. Torture would be making you do an hour of yoga after our five miles.”

Blaise poured another shot of whiskey, downing it without diluting it with tea this time. “I don’t know why you hate me,” she muttered as Ellie laughed heartily.



BLAISE’S BAD NIGHT ran over into the next morning, and she was in a terrible mood. First, she awoke with a raging headache. *Serves me right for drinking more of that whiskey than usual.* Of course, with this pounding in her head, she was not happy about having to wake up before anyone should be *allowed* to wake up. Mind you, waking up at the butt-crack of dawn to run with Miss I-Could-Run-A-Marathon-Every-Weekend, was *not* Blaise’s idea of fun when she wasn’t hung over. It was pure hell when she was.

Then her delivery boy, Jason, called in sick. *Again.* That makes the fourth time in the past two weeks. So, for the fourth time in two weeks, Blaise has to make the deliveries herself. As the owner of *Knight in Bloom*, she was used to having to compensate for her employees. But enough was enough. It was time for her to find a new delivery boy.

And now, here she is, driving the damned delivery van instead of her bitchin’ Camaro. A very bad calypso band was pounding in her head, and there was a damned car parked in her designated spot in front of her shop.

“Son of a *bitch!*”

It didn’t matter to Blaise that the offending car was an exquisitely sexy Aston Martin. It was in *her* spot, and now she either had to search for another spot and risk being late with her deliveries. Or, double park and put whatever ticket she may get on the jerk’s windshield. She smirked at that thought. *Decision made,* she thought as she pulled up beside the sleek car. Blaise flipped on her hazard lights, and hopped out of the van. She was tempted to run her fingers along the smooth exterior of the panty-dropper of a car. Black on black, red accents. *Damn,* Blaise thought with longing. Cars just happened to be her weak spot. There was no backseat to speak of, but Blaise was sure she could figure out a way to have sex in the front. While the

car was purring, of course.

She chuckled at herself, welcoming the lightening of her mood, even if it was for a moment. What made it even better was the fact that, whoever was driving this sex machine was now blocked in until she was ready to go.

Blaise finally tore herself away from the car, and pushed her way through the front door of her pride and joy. *Knight in Bloom* was her baby. For as long as she could remember, Blaise Knight had a love of botany and floriculture. She had been born, it seemed, with a green thumb. There wasn't a plant or flower she couldn't make flourish. People from all over the world came to Blaise for weddings, funerals, Valentine's, and even "I'm sorry, forgive me" bouquets. If it could be grown, bloomed or even created, Blaise could do it.

"Good morning, Ms. Knight!"

Blaise eyed Meredith Finch, who had worked for Blaise for a little more than a year now. The young blonde was enthusiastic, eager, cheerful, and—if Blaise was completely honest—just a tad flighty. Perhaps she was just naturally effervescent, but there were times when Blaise *had* to believe it was an act. At least she hoped so. It was that customary cheerfulness that almost made Blaise groan this morning. She was *not* in the mood to be all happy-go-lucky.

"Morning, Mer." Blaise forced her tone to be light. It's not her employee's fault that she was in a bad mood. "Would you get all of the order sheets ready for me? I need to start loading the van for deliveries."

"Jason called in again?"

Mer's tone was sympathetic, making Blaise's sarcastic retort die on her tongue. "Mhmm. I'll be in the back. Just put the orders on the table over there." Blaise absently gestured to her crafting table where she created her 'masterpieces'.

"You know, I could make the deliveries if you want," Mer offered hesitantly.

Blaise stopped and glanced over her shoulder. "Did you get your driver's license back?" she asked with a smirk. Mer was a great employee, but driving was *not* her strong suit. Multiple parking tickets and moving violations caused the young college student to have her driver's license revoked.

Mer grinned sheepishly. "No. But if you need help..."

"Mer, I appreciate the offer, but I really don't need my insurance rate to go up. Nor do I want to have to bail you out of jail," Blaise teased with a smile,

then continued to the back.

She tossed her bag onto her extremely messy desk with a sigh. Usually a very clean individual—almost to obsession—Blaise couldn't figure out why her desk in the shop was the one exception. She tried keeping it clean, of course. But she was always driven to distraction by customers, orders or just wanting to play around with certain ideas she had for arrangements.

“Ms. Knight?”

Blaise looked up to see Mer poke her head around the door frame. She shook her head, wondering if her young employee would ever start calling her Blaise. This ‘Ms.’ business made Blaise feel old, which at thirty-two, she certainly wasn't.

“Yes?” She decided she'd wait until she was in a better mood before having *that* talk again.

“The orders are ready for you.”

“Fine, I'll be right there.” First things first, Blaise thought grumpily, and turned to her much adored Keurig coffee brewer. She spun the coffee pod carousel, randomly choosing a flavor. It was her morning routine when she got in. Nothing was done until she had her cup of coffee. Today's flavor? She plucked the pod out of its spot and held it up. **Jamaica Me Crazy**. Blaise laughed dryly. How appropriate.

The sound of the bell above the door barely registered with Blaise as she started the process of making her perfect cup of coffee.

“Ms. Knight?”

The cup stopped halfway to her lips as Blaise heard Mer call back to her. So close, she thought. Sighing, she took the sip anyway. A little too quickly for her esophagus's own good. Fantastic. Perhaps scalding her esophagus would take her mind off her headache.

“Yes?” she called back, coughing lightly.

“There's a man here saying you're blocking in his car.”

“Too bad, buddy,” Blaise muttered. “Shouldn't have parked in my spot.”

“Ms. Knight?” Mer leaned on the door jam, fanning herself with an order sheet.

Blaise took in the slightly flushed blonde, and raised a bemused eyebrow.

“He's going to have to wait until I load the van.”

“He says he's in a hurry.”

“Yeah? Me, too.”

“Maybe you should come out here and talk to him?” Mer asked, sounding almost desperate. Was he that much of an asshole, Blaise wondered. With that sensual automobile he drives, she wouldn’t doubt it.

Blaise sighed heavily. “Fine. Can I have one more sip of my coffee, please?”

Mer nodded enthusiastically, then curiously took a deep breath before returning to the front of the store. Her employee’s odd behavior made Blaise’s annoyance surface. She wouldn’t tolerate anyone being unpleasant to her people, and if that was the case, she was more than willing to tell this man how she feels.

Setting her coffee down with a distinct thud, straightened her shoulders and went to greet the man who stole her parking spot.



FUCK ME. THAT was the first surprising thought that entered Blaise’s mind. What bothered her most was the fact that she didn’t know if she meant it literally. *Of course this is the man that drives that sex machine.* He was dripping with sex appeal, himself. Good God, the man was hot. She took in the brown hair, stylishly cut in what Blaise thought of as ‘businessman chic’. She imagined running her fingers through that hair while staring into the smoldering gray eyes. Smoldering gray eyes? What the hell was she thinking? Of course, her eyes decided to take a journey further down, skimming over full lips... then taking another cursory glance at those lips. *Hmm, move on, Blaise.* On down to the body. Sure. That was perfectly safe, she mused, mentally chastising herself, yet continuing her perusal. The journey took a while since the man was *extremely* tall. Especially considering Blaise was only five foot five.

Mr. Businessman was built! Have mercy! Feeling a bit flush herself, Blaise was beginning to wish she had Mer’s makeshift fan. The suit jacket covered him, but she could still make out the bulge of biceps. That made Blaise think of another bulge, and she abruptly brought her eyes back up, meeting his amused—and, something else—expression.

“Can I help you?” Grateful that her voice was steady, and strong, Blaise

leaned confidently on the counter. She crossed her arms in front of her. It may be a defensive gesture, but in this case, Blaise was defending against her hardening nipples. Damned traitor of a body.

“I have no doubt you can,” he answered with a sexy smile.

His voice was a deep, velvety baritone that had Blaise’s stomach clenching. She said nothing, raising a questioning eyebrow, and waited.

He chuckled softly before continuing. “You’re blocking my car.”

“Hmm. You’re parked in my spot. The one with the sign that *clearly* says ‘Parking for Knight of Bloom van ONLY.’”

“I was in a hurry.”

“So am I,” Blaise answered. “I have deliveries to get out, and you being there throws my schedule off.”

“Well, if you could just back the van up a bit, I can get out of your way.” His arrogant tone started to grate on Blaise’s nerves. After her date last night, the *last* thing she wanted to deal with was another ego.

“And, if you hadn’t parked in a designated spot in the first place, you wouldn’t be in this predicament,” she shot back.

“Look,” he scrubbed his hands—very large and strong hands—over his face. His arrogant façade faded a bit, and Blaise got a glimpse of weariness that pulled at her heartstrings. “Can you just move the van so I can get out? I have a meeting to get to.”

And, just like that, her heartstrings were snipped in two. She glared at him. “And, like I said before, I have deliveries to get out. Let me load up my van, and I’ll be ‘out of your way.’” The last words were dripping with sarcasm as Blaise turned on her heel and walked away.

“Can’t your girl here move the van if you’re too busy?” The infuriating man flicked his hand indifferently towards Mer.

“No.” Blaise began gathering arrangements she had finished yesterday from the refrigerated walk-in. She was glad that she had made the decision to get the orders ready before leaving for her crap date last night. It made things easier for her today, which apparently was a good thing since Mr. Aston Martin followed her.

“You’re being impossible.”

That rich, velvety voice was starting to sound a bit irritated, Blaise thought gleefully. *Good. That will teach you to park in my spot.*

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” she said without one ounce of remorse.

“Ms. Knight, is it?”

Blaise glanced at him, her arms laden with arrangements. “You obviously heard Mer call me that.” She pushed past him, heading towards the front door.

“Mer could you come and open the van for me?”

“I can do that,” Mr. Velvet said.

“That’s okay. Mer?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Blaise rolled her eyes. If it wasn’t ‘Ms.’ it was ‘ma’am’. Way to make me feel older, kid. Mer jogged out to the van, propping the backdoors open, and pulling the step stool out for Blaise. “Thanks.”

“So, when you get these loaded, you can move, right?”

“When I have everything loaded, I will move.”

“Are you always this difficult?” he growled.

Oh, Lord. Blaise felt that growl in her core. She couldn’t help but wonder if he did that while having sex.

“Not always,” she said easily, mentally patting herself on the back for not giving away how much this man affected her.

“So, it’s just for me?”

Her eyes cut to him, then to his car as she hopped out of the van. “Yep.”

“Ms. Knight,” he began, following her inside once again. “What can I do to expedite this situation?”

“You could have *not* parked there,” Blaise replied sarcastically.

“Well, obviously I did, so what is the solution?”

Throughout the entire conversation, Blaise noted that not once did he apologize. Maybe, just maybe, she would have acted a little nicer had he at least had the decency to be contrite. “Mer?” she called out, ignoring the man’s question. “Could you load the rest of these while I finish this arrangement, please?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Blaise watched as Mer’s eyes drifted over the beautiful man. She felt a touch of jealousy, which completely baffled her. Yes, the man was gorgeous, but he was exasperating. Blaise was *not* interested. *Liar*, she immediately thought to herself. She separated herself from the exasperating man by standing behind her crafting table, a bunch of roses and baby’s breath littered

the table top in front of her. She mentally thanked Mer for getting everything set up.

“You’re serious? You’re going to do this now?”

Blaise ignored him once again, taking her pruners in hand. She picked up a perfect red rose, absently bringing it to her nose and breathing deeply before trimming the stem diagonally. Finally, she glanced up, noting the slight flare of his nostrils, and darkening of his eyes. *I guess he’s pissed*, she thought briefly finding the sight extremely seductive. “I have a job to do, Mr.?”

“Steele. Greyson Steele. And, so do I, Ms. Knight. You’re keeping me from it.”

The bell above the door sounded, cutting off Blaise’s retort.

“Blaise?”

Smiling immediately at the familiar voice, Blaise called Jessie over. “Hey! Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“On my way. Mom wanted me to stop by and remind... oh, sorry!” Jessie’s eyes widened a bit at the sight of Greyson Steele. Not that Blaise blamed her at all, of course. He was quite impressive.

“No problem. Your mom wanted you to remind me of?”

“Huh? Oh! Right. The, um, centerpieces you promised her,” Jessie answered, her eyes still on the tall man.

Blaise chuckled. “I’ll have them ready. I just have to make these deliveries first.”

“Jason didn’t show up again?” Jessie asked, finally bringing her attention to Blaise.

“Nope.” She found it amusing that Mr. Steele stood there watching the exchange as though he were watching a ping pong match. Blaise put the final touches on the arrangement of red, peach and white roses she was working on. With sprigs of baby’s breath and maidenhair ferns complimenting the full blooms of the roses, she was happy with the finished product. She wanted to bury her face in the fragrant flowers, but didn’t think that would go over very well with her guests. So she delicately sniffed the bouquet, inadvertently letting out a small moan at the scent.

CHAPTER TWO

Greyson

FUCK ME. THE jolt that Greyson felt in his dick when he first saw the owner of the flower shop, just intensified ten-fold. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen—not to mention the most infuriating—just moaned. The softest, sweetest sound he had ever had the pleasure of hearing had his already twitching cock growing harder. She was being distracted by the young girl that came in asking something about centerpieces, so Greyson took the opportunity to do an even more thorough examination of the brunette.

Blaise, he thought with interest. The name suits her well. Her hair fell in long, soft waves cascading down her back. It was so shiny, looked so soft. Greyson couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like fisted in his hand as he thrust himself deep inside her. *Shit, she is fucking beautiful.* Her full, pink lips called to him like a siren. Greyson wasn't sure if he wanted to kiss them until they bruised, or watch his cock slip between them. Either one would do just fine, though watching her suck him off while she looked up at him with those eyes the color of fine, aged whiskey was quickly taking the lead. Damn. He had to rip his eyes away from those lips before he embarrassed himself. Unfortunately for him, his eyes landed on the firm, full breasts. The petite woman, almost a foot shorter than his six four frame, was dressed in a baby blue button up blouse, the top buttons undone enough to give him a glimpse of silky cleavage. *Don't look there, idiot!* He realized then that there was nowhere

he could safely look at her. Any further down, and he would have to deal with seeing that perfect ass in jeans that looked as though they were made specifically for her.

“Mr. Steele?” Damn, that soft voice, and intriguing accent, made his cock jump again. He could imagine her calling his name out as he made her come. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to hear her say his name now.

“Greyson,” he muttered gruffly, more turned-on than annoyed at this point.

“Sorry?”

“Call me Greyson.”

She regarded him for a moment, and he found himself wondering what she was thinking. He was normally very good at reading people, but this woman was excellent at shielding her emotions.

“Mr. Steele,” she repeated with conviction. Damn it. He *really* needed to hear her say his name. “I’ll be out of your way in about ten minutes. There’s really no reason for you to stand there.”

“Where else am I going to go?” Greyson countered, suddenly not giving a damn about his meeting. Sure, his father is going to be pissed at him for being late, but one look at the beauty before him, and thoughts of his father’s ire disappeared completely.

“There’s a diner a couple of doors down. Why don’t you grab yourself a cup of coffee?”

Damn. Was she trying to get rid of him? He supposed he hadn’t made much of a great first impression. Not good, since Greyson had decided to ask her out. The young girl had left, and the employee is busy. This is his opportunity.

“How about I bring you back a cup? A sort of peace offering?” he asked hopefully.

“No. Thank you.”

“Blaise?” He tested the name on his tongue, and decided it felt good. “Your name suits you.”

She stopped what she was doing and placed her hands on her hips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Greyson lifted his hands in defense. “Nothing bad. It’s just a beautiful and unique name.”

She frowned, giving him a skeptical look. “If you keep distracting me, Mr. Steele, you’re going to be even later than you already are.”

“Please, call me Greyson.” He managed not to sound as desperate as he felt. The need to hear that sweet, accented voice speaking his name was growing intense. His heart began to beat a little faster as she held his gaze. She opened her mouth to speak...

“Ms. Knight?”

Greyson barely contained an irritated growl at their interruption. So fucking close, he grouched internally.

“Yes?”

“Everything is loaded. I also made sure the addresses were input into the GPS for you.”

“Thanks, Mer.” She gave her employee a genuine smile. It made Greyson wish she would smile at him like that.

Fuck. It’s been a while since he’s felt this intrigued by a woman. If ever. Curious that it takes a woman who riles him. Or perhaps that’s exactly why he’s interested. She didn’t just fall at his feet, begging for attention. Why should she, he thought. She’s beautiful. Could have any man she wants. Sure, he’s never had problems getting women. In fact, usually all it took was a drink and a compliment. But somehow Greyson didn’t think that would work with this spirited woman.

“Mr. Steele?”

Her angelic voice cut through his reverie, and he focused his attention back on her.

“Sorry?”

“I said, you’re in luck. I’m leaving now.”

Shit! Think, Greyson!

“Oh. Right. Look, about that coffee. Perhaps you could join me for a cup when we both have some time?”

“You’re asking me out?” she asked, her perfectly arched eyebrows shooting to her hairline.

Greyson shrugged, not accustomed to feeling self-conscious. “Sure. Why not?”

“I’m flattered, but I have to decline. I’m sorry.”

He watched, stunned with the rejection, as Blaise rushed around the table

with flowers in hand. She called for the keys, and the young blonde that worked for her tossed them in her direction. Greyson was still frozen with confusion as Blaise slipped out the door. The bell broke the spell he was under, and he ran after her.

“Why?” he called out as she closed the back doors of the van.

“Excuse me?”

“Why won’t you go out with me? It’s just coffee.” Greyson mentally chastised himself for running after her. He doesn’t run after women if they’re not interested. Of course, once they know who he is and how much money he has, they’re *always* interested, he thought bitterly. He hoped Blaise would be different. “Blaise, we got off on the wrong foot, I admit that. Let me make it up to you. Coffee. That’s all I’m asking.” Greyson leaned against his car, crossing his arms and his ankles.

He knew she found him attractive. Greyson could see it in her eyes when she looked at him. If he could just get her to sit down with him, he could show her he’s not always the prick he’s sure she thinks he is.

“I really have to go, Mr. Steele.” He saw her hesitate for a moment, and he felt hopeful that she’d give in. “I hope you don’t get into too much trouble for being late to your meeting. Have a nice day.” The beautiful woman gave him a fleeting smile, and then she was gone, leaving him baffled. *Have a nice day? That’s it?*

“Shit.” Greyson glanced at his watch, grimacing at the time. After one last look at the shop, vowing to come back and wear the sexy owner down, he slipped into his car and drove off.



“GOOD MORNING, MR. Steele.” The voluptuous redhead behind the receptionist desk at Steele Industries greeted him with a sultry smile. She was his father’s acquisition, as were the rest of the women filling roles of assistants or secretaries. It’s not the way Greyson would run the company, but since he hasn’t ‘earned that right’, yet, he had to put up with it. The attention, however, became tiresome.

The whole damned company became tiresome, he thought miserably. His

father's 'vision' of taking companies, forcibly if necessary, and tearing them apart for scraps, wasn't Greyson's idea of good business. It was lucrative if done right, but unimaginative. Boring as hell, he brooded.

"Good morning," he said briskly, with barely a glance. Walking directly to the conference room, he strode in confidently, not about to allow his father to intimidate him.

"Greyson. Nice of you to join us today." Preston Steele gave his son a hard, disapproving look.

"Sorry, couldn't be helped," Greyson answered without a flinch. "Please, continue." He knew Preston would be pissed with his blasé attitude, but Greyson just didn't care. His relationship with his father had always been strained, no need to change that now. Hell, for as long as he could remember, Preston would push his son hard, telling him it was necessary in order to make him a man. It was complete bullshit. Greyson knew that his father was just a selfish prick who didn't give a damn about anything except his money and status. As Greyson grew older, the treatment got worse. Preston didn't want to hand over the business to his son. This would suit Greyson just fine since he didn't *want* the damn business. He'd had other aspirations. But his mother would hear nothing of it. The business stays in the family, and Greyson will take over the reins when the time is right. He would also marry the girl they picked out for him. He almost snarled aloud as he thought of Pricilla. Rich bitch without a hint of a personality. His mother said she had 'good genes' and they would make beautiful babies. Fuck of it is, she was terrible in bed, and there was nothing else about her that kept him interested. He'd be damned if he'd be chained to someone like Pricilla for the rest of his life.

Blaise Knight entered his mind, unbidden. He wondered if she would be as intense in bed as she was with him earlier. Where Pricilla was cold, he just knew Blaise could heat him up like no other. He *had* to get to know the firecracker of a woman better.

"Greyson? Do you have anything to add?" Preston asked snidely.

"Nope. I think you've covered everything, Preston." Greyson hadn't been paying attention, but he knew his father was thorough if nothing else.

"Very well. Meeting is adjourned," Preston announced, dismissing everyone with a cold flick of the wrist. "Greyson, a word."

Fuck. "Of course." He patiently remained in his seat as the others filed out,

then turned bored eyes to his father.

“It doesn’t exhibit good rapport with our employees if you cannot bother to come in on time.” Preston steepled his fingers in front of his face, tapping them monotonously. It was a habit that got on Greyson’s nerves.

“I told you, it couldn’t be helped.”

“I have a life outside of this office, Greyson. But I still manage to get here on time. Whatever ‘extracurricular’ activity you indulge in while you’re not here or with your fiancée, should not keep you from your duties.”

Duties, Greyson thought with disgust. “My duties have never suffered here. And, Pricilla is *not* my fiancée,” he spat.

“It’s just a matter of time.” Preston’s flippant remark only pissed Greyson off more.

“It will *never* happen. Now are you finished here, or would you like to reprimand me some more? I have work to do.”

“I need you out in the field.”

Greyson barely managed to not roll his eyes at Preston. ‘Out in the field’ meant Greyson had to vet a business his father was interested in. He hated it. He had to go in a floundering business, demand to look at the books with empty assurances that his bigger company may be able to help, only to rip the carpet out from under them. In some instances, the owners had built the business up from the ground and just hit hard times. Instead of helping them get back on their feet, for a percentage of the profits, of course, Steele Industries tore them apart. Without an ounce of compassion.

“I have other things to do today, Preston. Find someone else.”

“*You* are my employee, Greyson. You *will* do as I ask.”

“No. I won’t. I’m busy today. If you don’t like it, fire me,” Greyson dared, knowing Preston would never do that. His wife’s money is what kept Steele Industries afloat when Preston practically ran it into the ground. Nora Steele was now on the board of directors, much to Preston’s dismay. In the eyes of the employees, Preston Steele was the boss. In reality, Greyson knew it was Nora.

“Your mother will hear about this. I do not appreciate your attitude, and blatant disrespect for me and this company. *This* should your priority, not whatever tart you have on the side.”

Greyson’s nostrils flared in rage. He couldn’t deny that he’d had his share

of ‘sexcapades’, but having his philandering father call him out, angered him. “There is no ‘tart’, Preston. At least not for me. Get Ethan to run your errands for you,” he retorted, bringing up his father’s apprentice. Ethan was a little too eager to be a part of the Steele family, and unabashedly catered to Preston’s every whim. He’s also ‘courting’ Greyson’s sister. Greyson almost snorted with displeasure. Ethan probably didn’t even like Courtney as a person, just her last name. “I’m sure he’d be more than happy to.” With that shot, Greyson made his exit.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Steele?” The redhead got to her feet and walked around the desk. “You look stressed. I know a good relaxation technique...”

“Show it to Preston. I’m sure he’d enjoy it more,” he rebuked, wondering if he should feel guilty for getting pleasure watching her shrink back from his scowl. *Fuck this place.* Not even nine a.m. and already he needed a drink.



“HEY, MAN.” CADE clapped Greyson on the shoulder before slipping into the booth in front of him.

Greyson and Cade Drake had been best friends since their days in t-ball. They were inseparable then, and that followed them into high school, college and even the military. It was there the two men went their separate ways with Cade leaving college early and ultimately becoming a Colonel in the 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion. Greyson joined the military a couple years later, ending his armed forces career as a Lieutenant Colonel the US Army Delta Force.

“Hey, thanks for meeting me.”

“No problem. You decide you had enough of Preston and are ready to come work with me?” Cade smirked.

For the umpteenth time, Greyson wondered what the hell was wrong with him. He was ex-Army Special Forces, and somehow, at age thirty-nine, Greyson was stuck under his parents’ thumb fulfilling ‘family obligations’ instead of doing what he really wanted to be doing. Cade owned a lucrative security firm here in town, and was constantly trying to recruit Greyson. What

the hell was keeping him from just saying yes? The money? The false sense of belonging with his family? The fucking Steele name?

“Close, man. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.” Greyson took a sip of his coffee, surprised by how good it was. He’d never been in this little diner before, but since Blaise had suggested it—not to mention it was close to the flower shop—Greyson had decided to give it a try.

“Grey, you’re a grown man. Stop letting them control you, brother.” Cade signaled for the waitress, pointing at Greyson’s coffee. Within a couple of minutes, an extremely attractive woman set a cup in front of him, filling it with a smile. “Thanks, darlin’.”

“Sure thing, sugar,” she drawled back with a soft chuckle.

Greyson watched in amusement as his friend watched her ass—a mighty fine ass, he admitted—as she walked away. “Get a good look?”

“Shit, man. Did you see the ass on her?” Cade whistled low. “That’s an ass you could get used to seeing...”

“All right, all right. I get it,” Greyson laughed.

“How’d you find this place, anyway? I’m kind of pissed I didn’t know about it before. Especially with someone like her working here.” He leaned out of the booth, trying to get a look at their waitress again.

“When’s the last time you got laid?” Greyson teased, knowing full well Cade had no problems in that area.

“Fuck you, brother,” he grunted with a smile. “Seriously, what’s up? Not that I mind, but what are we doing here?”

“I met a woman this morning.”

“Yeah? And, you want me to run a background check on her or something?”

It wasn’t unheard of for Greyson to have potential lovers checked out by Cade. He’d avoided many bad situations like that, but that’s not what he wanted with Blaise.

“No, nothing like that. She recommended this place, so I thought I’d check it out. I asked you here because... fuck, I don’t know, man. This woman, she’s sticking with me. In my head.” Greyson shook his head in disbelief. Never before had he been affected this way, especially after just spending mere minutes with a woman.

“Are you shitting me? You dragged me down here to talk about your

feelings?” Cade laughed enthusiastically.

“Come on, man!” Greyson whispered harshly. “Don’t bust my balls.”

“Sorry, brother, sorry.” Cade wiped tears of laughter from his eyes, trying to calm down by taking a drink of coffee. “Tell me about this woman that’s got you all tied up in knots.”

“She’s fucking gorgeous, Cade. Makes Pricilla look like one of the ugly step-sisters.”

“Ouch!”

“Yeah, I know, I’m an ass. But Pricilla’s a bitch, man, you know that.”

“That I do, brother.”

“Anyway, Blaise...”

“Blaise?”

“That’s her name. Blaise Knight.” The name rolled off Greyson’s tongue almost reverently.

“Unique,” Cade remarked, giving his friend an odd look. Greyson had never acted like this before. This woman must be something else.

“Just like her. I asked her out,” Greyson said at length.

“Good for you, man.”

“Not really, she turned me down.”

“No shit?” Cade laughed again. It was an unusual occurrence for Greyson to be turned down by a woman. He’d have to mark this date down. Now he was even more intrigued by this Blaise Knight.

“No shit. Told me to ‘have a nice day’.” This time Greyson laughed along with his friend at the absurdity of it all. “Man, she’s... *here*,” he finished in a whisper as the woman commanding his thoughts stepped into the diner.

Cade turned his head to get a glimpse of Greyson’s mystery woman. “Wow. Can’t blame ya for being a bit obsessive, brother.”

CHAPTER THREE

Blaise

BLAISE FELT HIS eyes on her before she saw him. *Oh God. What is he doing here?* Blaise avoided eye contact, determined to make it safely to Ellie's kitchen without confrontation. As soon as the swinging door closed behind her, she propped herself against the wall, letting out the breath she had been holding.

"Blaise?"

She started at Ellie's voice right beside her, bringing her hand to her rapidly beating heart. "You scared me."

Ellie frowned at her friend's behavior, looking around and noting they were being watched by her kitchen staff. "Come on. Let's go into the office."

Blaise followed wordlessly, embarrassed by her reaction to the hot, yet totally infuriating, man.

"Sit," Ellie ordered. "And, tell me what's going on with you."

"Nothing." Of course Blaise's answer sounded like the lie it was, and she winced at the scowl Ellie gave her. "Fine. There's a guy out there." She jerked her thumb in the general direction of the eating area.

"There are a few guys out there, Blaise. Mind being a little more specific?"

Blaise blew a frustrated breath out, fluffing the piece of hair that had fallen over her eye. "He's sitting near the door, on the left. Where are you going!?" Blaise cried when Ellie got up.

“Calm down, I’m just going to take a peek.”

“Ellie,” Blaise whined.

“Blaise.” Ellie chuckled as she whined back. “Just cool your jets, I’ll be right back.”

Blaise nervously bounced her leg, gnawing on her thumbnail as she waited.

“Black hair or brown?” Ellie asked as she popped back into the office, startling Blaise once again.

“Brown,” she sighed.

“So? What’s the deal with him? Have a bad date? Ooo, did you have sex with him and then didn’t call?”

Blaise narrowed her eyes at Ellie, noting her friend’s eyes were twinkling with mirth.

“No and no. We met this morning. Kinda.”

“Kinda? How do you ‘kinda’ meet someone? And, why are you hiding from him?”

Blaise flopped her arms on Ellie’s desk, and began to lightly bang her head on the hard surface with a groan. After a few taps, she decided it wasn’t worth regaining the headache she had *just* gotten over, and sat back. “His name is Greyson Steele. We ‘kinda’ met at my shop this morning. He parked in my van’s spot.” Her mouth twitched into an *almost* smile when she heard Ellie’s teasing ‘oh no he didn’t’. “Then, he had the nerve to practically demand I move my van.”

“Wait. Move your van?”

“I double parked, blocking him in,” Blaise explained. “Yadda, yadda, blah, blah...”

“Translation: he said move, you said when you’re good and ready?” Ellie guessed.

“You know me so well. This is why you’re my best friend.” They laughed together before Blaise continued. “Anyway, after the whole debacle, he asked me out.”

“Shut up.”

“Truth. He asked me for coffee, actually. I had told him to come down here and get a cup of coffee while he waited. He offered to bring me a cup, as a truce, I suppose. Then, as I was leaving, he asked me out.”

“And, you said?” Ellie leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk.

With her chin in her palms, she looked at Blaise intently.

“I declined.”

“You declined,” Ellie parroted. “That man out there, with looks to kill asked you out and you declined?” She didn’t believe it. Blaise was a serial dater. She rarely declined an invitation to dinner, much less coffee. There was no ‘looking for the one’, Blaise didn’t believe in that. But most of the time she still enjoyed being ‘wooded’. Other times... well, other times ended up like last night’s date.

“I told you last night, I’m taking a break from dating.” Blaise glowered at her friend, knowing exactly what she was thinking. Okay, so she went out on a few dates. So what? That didn’t mean she didn’t know how to say no. Blaise said no *many* times, to *many* things. “Besides, he’s arrogant.” Her indignation filled the atmosphere, and she glared again when Ellie’s mouth twitched. “Don’t you *dare* laugh!”

Ellie covered her mouth with her hand, and cleared her throat. “Not laughing,” she mumbled into her palm before removing it from her face. “But I do have a question.”

Blaise sighed. “Which is?”

“Were you being difficult because you had a hangover and I made you run five miles this morning?” The corners of Ellie’s mouth curved up, but she managed to keep herself from laughing outright at Blaise, who stuck her tongue out.

“I was not being difficult! And, just for that, I’m rethinking the whole ‘best friend’ thing.”

This time, Ellie snorted. “Yeah, right. You’d miss my red velvet cake!”

“Oh yeah.” Blaise let out a grunt of frustration. “Why oh why does he have to be so damned hot?”

“You like him.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“I most certainly do not! Did you know he didn’t even have the decency to apologize for parking in my spot?”

“No! Of all the pig-brained, arrogant...”

“You’re making fun of me,” Blaise pouted, which pissed her off because she hated pouting.

Ellie laughed softly. “I’m not making fun of *you*, sweetie, just the situation.”

Oh, like that makes all the difference, Blaise judged inwardly.

“And, it does make a difference,” Ellie continued as if reading Blaise’s mind. “I just find it ironic that you decided to take a break from dating just when Mr. McHottie Pants comes into your life, getting you all fired up.”

“Mr. McHottie Pants? Can I tell him you called him that?”

“Does that mean you’re going to talk to him?” Ellie responded with a satisfied smirk.

“Shit.” Blaise dangled her arms over the armrests of the chair, tapping her fingers to some silent beat. “I know Mr. Steele’s kind, Ellie. Hell, I went out with his kind last night. Rich, fancy car, fancy clothes, good looks. And, an ego the size of Texas. I just don’t want to deal with that anymore.”

Ellie rose, and went to her friend’s side, kneeling before her. “Sweetie, you don’t *know* him. Maybe, like you, he just wasn’t at his best this morning. If you’re attracted to him, why not give him a chance?”

Blaise shook her head decisively. “No. I said I was going to take a break from dating, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I need this, Ellie. I’ve been doing this dating thing for a while now, and I’m not happy. Look at you. You don’t date, and you’re just fine. I can do that.”

Ellie smiled sadly. “You shouldn’t be looking at me for inspiration. When you’ve prepared yourself for being alone for the rest of your life, it becomes easier not having a lover.”

“Why do you think you have to be alone, El?”

“Oh, no. We’re talking about you, not me. I was just telling you not to compare your life with mine.” Ellie stood up, and backed away as if she were afraid of the direction the conversation was taking.

Blaise sighed with resignation. One day she would get her friend to open up to her. She wanted to know what had been so horrible in Ellie’s life that she refuses to open herself up to the possibility of love. “Very well. But I’m still not dating him. He’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Ellie questioned, obviously relieved at the change in subject.

“I could lose control with him, El.”

“And, that would be bad?”

“Very.”



BLAISE PEEKED OUT the portal window of the swinging kitchen door. “Shit. He’s still out there,” she muttered grumpily.

“Probably because he’s waiting for you to come back out,” Ellie pointed out, following her from the office. She regarded Blaise for a moment before continuing. “You know, I’ve never known you to be a coward.”

Blaise backed away from the window quickly when she saw Greyson begin to turn around. When she faced Ellie, Blaise saw narrowed hazel eyes. “I’m not a coward.”

“No? You’re hiding in the kitchen of my diner, spying on some guy that you just met this morning.”

“I’m not spying, El!” Blaise scoffed, giving her friend a hard stare. “I’m just seeing if he left.”

“So, you’re just going to stay in here and avoid the situation? What if he shows up at your shop again? Are you going to hide from him then, too?” Ellie stepped closer to her friend. “What is so dangerous about him, sweetie?”

Blaise sighed. “I don’t know, El. I just...”

“Are you afraid you could fall for him?”

Love was *not* something Blaise was looking for. In fact, she avoided it at all costs. Marriage, kids... Blaise shuddered at the thought. But a few moments, even tense moments, with Greyson Steele, and she could see herself breaking a lot of her rules. She was loath to admit that out loud, so she shrugged. “I’m sure he can have his pick of women. I’m not really interested in being another notch on his bedpost.” Blaise knew she was stereotyping a man she didn’t really know, and she felt badly about that.

“Blaise, that’s the second time you’ve jumped to conclusions about the type of man he is,” Ellie said, again seemingly reading Blaise’s mind. “Did you Google him or something and found out he was some kind of playboy?”

“No,” she admitted shamefully. She had wanted to Google Greyson Steele, and that’s exactly why she didn’t. Blaise didn’t *want* the desire to know more about this man. And, if she were honest, she didn’t want to know about other women. Stupid, she thought disgustedly.

“Sweetie, just because you agree to have coffee with him doesn’t mean you have to have sex with him.”

They were distracted by the sound of a pan clattering on the counter. With a glance, the friends saw that their conversation was not as private as they would like it to be. Kitchen staff looked away quickly, making themselves busy—or look busy—when the boss glared back at them.

“Thanks,” Blaise muttered to her smirking friend. “And, do you really think that I could resist having *sex*,” she whispered the word, “with a man who makes my body respond with a simple look?”

Ellie’s eyebrows shot up. “That phenomenon is real?” She peered around Blaise, out the window. “Well, he certainly is hot enough, I suppose.”

“You think?” Blaise shot back with teasing sarcasm, then sobered. “Ellie, I’m not strong enough to deny what my body wants when he’s near.”

Ellie sighed. “Okay. But you can’t keep avoiding him. If you really don’t want to go out with him, then don’t. But being a coward is *not* who you are.” Ellie grabbed a to-go coffee cup from the shelf, filling it with coffee and handing it to Blaise. “Here. Now you have a reason for having been here. For...” she checked her watch, “twenty minutes. By the way, what was today’s flavor,” she asked, knowing of her best friend’s coffee roulette routine in the morning.

Blaise snorted. “Jamaica Me Crazy.”

Ellie barked out a laugh. “Maybe you should take that one out of rotation, sweetie. You’re crazy enough.”

Blaise flipped her friend off with a half-grin. “I don’t know why I put up with your abuse.”

Ellie waved her hands in circles in front of her nose, sniffing the air. “Smell that?”

The scent of mouth-watering pies filled the air, and Blaise couldn’t help inhaling deeply. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you use your brilliance with baking just to control me.”

“Would I do that?” Ellie asked with innocence, and a smirk that was anything but innocent. “Now stop stalling and go.”

“I could just go out the back.”

“You could, but as your best friend, I’m not going to let you. Go. You have work to do, and I still need centerpieces.”

“Such a slave driver,” Blaise muttered as she took a deep breath, and forced herself to walk through the swinging door.

Don't talk to me. Don't talk to me. Don't talk to me.

“Blaise?”

Shit.

Blaise paused at the door and glanced back. “Mr. Steele.”

She could swear she heard him growl, and suppressed a shiver. He looked at her expectantly, and as much as she wanted to just walk away, her good manners compelled her to go to him. *Sure. Keep telling yourself it's your good manners, Blaise.*

“This is Cade Drake,” he rumbled, introducing the incredibly handsome man sitting with him.

Blaise gave him a pleasant smile. “Hello.”

“Ma'am.”

She bit back the sigh, wanting nothing more than to get out of there, and back to her shop where she could lose herself in her work.

“I see you already got your coffee.” She heard Greyson say as he nodded to the forgotten cup in her hand.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps I could interest you in dinner instead?”

His beautiful gray eyes, framed by long, dark lashes, flashed with hope and... desire?

“I'm sorry, Mr. Steele.” Blaise glanced towards the kitchen where she just knew Ellie was watching her. “I have plans. And, I really do need to get going now,” she said hurriedly, backing towards the door. “Have a nice day.”

Greyson

SHIT. AGAIN!

“Damn. Strike two, brother,” Cade laughed.

“Fuck you, man.” Greyson wasn't so arrogant that being rejected embarrassed him. It didn't happen often, but there *may* have been a couple of

instances when he got shot down. He just couldn't think of any right now. Well, except for the two fucking times Blaise Knight knocked him down a peg.

"Hey," Cade held up his hands in surrender, "no hard feelings. I just never thought I'd see the day Greyson Steele was flustered by a woman. An impressively beautiful woman, mind you, but this has got to be some kind of national holiday or something."

"More coffee?" Ellie's arrival to their table just might have been the reason Greyson let Cade live. Or, at the least, didn't give him a fucking black eye.

"I'll take anything you're offering, darlin'." Cade smiled charmingly at the woman. It was the smile that usually 'closed the deal' for the Colonel.

"I'm only offering coffee, sugar." The beautiful hazel eyes twinkled with amusement as the waitress winked at Cade.

When she turned to take her leave, Greyson couldn't stop himself from calling out to her.

"Excuse me."

She stopped, and turned back to him. "Yes?"

"Do you know Blaise Knight? Owner of Knight in Bloom two doors down?" Greyson could hardly believe the words that were tumbling out of his mouth. What the hell had possessed him to ask this complete stranger about a woman who was virtually a stranger to him as well?

"Yes, I do," she answered hesitantly. "She's my best friend."

Now what, genius? You gonna ask her to ask Blaise if she likes you? "Have any advice for me to get her to go out with me? Help me out?" Greyson kicked Cade under the table when he heard the choked laugh. He wanted to be kicking himself, but took perverse pleasure at the pained grunt his friend let out.

"Mr. Steele, as I said, Blaise is my best friend, so if I helped you out, I'd essentially be betraying her, wouldn't I?"

She talked about him! How else would the waitress know his name? Especially saying it *that* way. "I see you know my name. Let me properly introduce myself. I'm Greyson Steele. Oomph!" Greyson glared at his friend, reaching down and rubbing his aching shin. "And, this oaf is Cade Drake."

She laughed softly. The woman really was quite beautiful, but Greyson had one woman on his mind. And apparently he was willing to make a fool out of himself for her.

“Ellie.” She met Greyson’s hand, shaking it firmly.

“Ellie? As in *Ellie’s Diner*?” Cade asked.

“That’s me,” she answered Cade with a smile before turning back to Greyson. “And, I still can’t help you, Mr. Steele.” She hesitated for a moment. “All I can do is try talking to her when she comes in for her usual dinner.”

A wide grin spread across Greyson’s face. “I think you may be seeing a lot of me, Ellie.”

“I should warn you that if you show up tonight after everything that has happened today, it may not be a good thing.”

Greyson nodded thoughtfully. “Got it. I really hope everything else here is as good as your coffee.”

“Everything here is delicious,” Ellie responded proudly.

“I just bet it is,” Cade said, looking Ellie up and down.

To her credit, Ellie didn’t seem too offended, and Greyson mentally gave the woman points for not pouring coffee over his friend’s head. He watched, captivated, as she leaned close to Cade and lowered her voice.

“You’d win that bet,” she said seductively, her voice an octave lower, and sexy as hell. “Zagat rated top five.”

Greyson laughed when she tapped her finger on Cade’s nose before straightening.

“Can I get you anything else?” The mischievous look on Ellie’s face made her look really young, and Greyson found himself having a hard time judging her age.

“Your number,” Cade answered confidently.

“Two coffees at two bucks, plus tax. That’ll be \$5.44. Plus, a generous tip for being so understanding with you,” she smiled again. “Are those enough numbers for you?”

Greyson rumbled with highly amused laughter, slipping a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet. “Keep the change. You earned it putting up with him.”

“Thank you,” Ellie smirked, then glanced at Cade with a wink. “Have a nice day, sugar.”

With that, she walked away and Greyson watched his friend scowl after her.

“Have a nice day? That’s gotta be code for something, brother,” he grumped.

Coming Home

“Code? For what, man? Go fuck yourself?” Greyson lost his amusement, and frowned as he thought about it. Surely not, he thought sourly. *Well, Ms. Blaise, challenge accepted.* Greyson didn’t know why he was willing to work so hard to get this woman’s attention, but he would get it. He would get *her*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blaise

“HONEY, THE CALLA lilies are beautiful.”

“Yes, but roses are traditional. You know Mother loves tradition.”

“But this is *our* wedding, dear. Not your mother’s.”

Blaise glanced back and forth between the couple as they argued. This passive aggressive ‘conversation’, not to mention the groom’s need to please his mother instead of his wife-to-be, made her wonder if they were really meant to be married.

“I understand that, *dear*, but my family *is* paying. We should be more sensitive to their wishes.”

The bride, Stacy, rolled her eyes dramatically. “I told you *my* family would pay. Then we could pick what we wanted.”

Steve, the groom-to-be, snorted rudely with laughter. “If your parents paid, we’d be going to the justice of the peace and you wouldn’t be here looking at wedding bouquets from the best florist in the business.”

Blaise couldn’t bring herself to enjoy the compliment. Sitting here while the two of them bitched at each other back and forth made her uncomfortable. Not to mention it did nothing to help her aversion to love.

“I could create a bouquet that features roses, but also has the beautiful calla lilies as well,” Blaise offered.

Both looked at Blaise in surprise, as though they forgot she was even there.

“That sounds good,” Stacy answered, glancing at her fiancé. “Would that be acceptable to your mother?”

Oh boy. Any more sarcasm dripping off that sentence, and I’d need to get a mop, Blaise mused silently.

“Fine, whatever,” Steve sighed. “Get samples or whatever they do around here. I’ll be waiting up front.”

Blaise raised a surprised eyebrow as Steve shoved out of his seat, and stalked up front. *Good luck, Mer.*

“I’m so sorry,” Stacy apologized, bringing Blaise’s attention back to her.

“It’s fine,” she smiled pleasantly. “I’ve been doing this for a while, so I’ve pretty much seen it all. Planning a wedding is a stressful time.”

“Are you married?”

Blaise let out a sharp laugh, much to both of the women’s surprise. She cleared her throat. “Sorry. Um, no.”

“Good for you.” Stacy peered over her shoulder to see her husband to be blatantly flirting with the *very* uneasy Mer. “Just remember, you marry the man, you marry his family.” She looked back at Blaise and sighed wearily. “Can you give me examples of three different bouquets? All roses, all calla lilies and the mix you mentioned?”

“Of course. I can have something for you in,” Blaise checked her calendar, “two days. Is that good for you?”

“Sounds good. Maybe that’ll give me enough time to find a bakery.”

Oh, Ellie is going to kill me. “I can give you the name of an amazing baker. She owns a diner, not a bakery, but she makes the most incredible pies and cakes...”

“Ellie’s Diner!” Stacy interrupted excitedly. “Her baked goods are to *die* for!” Her excitement quickly faded, and she slumped back into her chair. “I doubt the Monster-in-law will allow me to go with someone who doesn’t own an actual bakery.”

Blaise chuckled wryly, reaching into her bag to grab one of Ellie’s cards. “Well, here’s her card just in case. She’s just as good at cooking as she is baking. That’s why she doesn’t have *just* a bakery.”

After a bit more information, complaining and passive aggressiveness, the young couple finally left.

“Six months,” Mer stated confidently.

Blaise laughed at the prediction. “You really think they’ll make it to the altar? You must be an optimist.”



BLAISE PLOPPED DOWN in her usual booth, directly in front of the counter. “Ugh, I’m so glad today is over.”

“Tough day, Kiwi?”

Blaise smiled at Big Al, a fixture in Ellie’s diner. Every day he came in for breakfast, sitting in the same spot without fail. Every night, he came back for dinner. In the same spot. Ellie and Blaise were always trying to get him to talk about himself. They were curious about the man they knew only as Big Al, but he was as tight-lipped as they came when it was about him. Now, wanting to know everyone else’s business? Big Al was all about that.

“Long,” Blaise answered, which made her feel old. It was barely seven o’clock, and all she wanted to do was go home and take a nice, hot bubble bath.

“Hey, Blaise!”

“Hey, sweets! How was school today?” Blaise smiled at sixteen-year-old Jessie. She was a beauty, just like her mom, with her honey hair and hazel eyes. Her features were so similar to Ellie’s, that it left no doubt they were related. People just assumed they were sisters since Ellie looked too young to have a teen-aged daughter.

“Eh. It was school. Here’s your tea. Mom already put that gross stuff in it.” Jessie leaned closer. “She doesn’t allow me to do it.”

“Good thing! You’d probably forget the tea and have me drunk within minutes,” Blaise teased.

Jessie laughed. “Well, you *are* a funny drunk.”

“And, how would you know that?”

“I *may* have told her a few stories,” Ellie answered, coming up behind Jessie, sliding a plate full of good “home” cooking in front of Blaise.

Blaise feigned indignation. “Some best friend! What happened to what happens in Blaise’s drunken stupors, stays in Blaise’s drunken stupors?”

“You’re thinking of Vegas, sugar. What happens with drunk you is fair game.”

Ellie slung an arm around Jessie’s shoulders, and once again, Blaise was struck by how similar they looked. The most noticeable difference was the color of their eyes. While they both had incredible hazel eyes, Ellie’s held more green, while Jessie’s were more golden. Blaise often wondered if she got that from her father. That was one part of Ellie’s life that was off limits. And, that frustrated the hell out of Blaise, but she always respected Ellie’s privacy.

“Any more visits from Mr. McHottie Pants?”

Blaise groaned as Jessie giggled at Ellie’s question.

“No, thank goodness. I’m too tired to deal with him right now.”

“Wait, who are we... ohhh, you mean that totally hot guy that was in your shop this morning?”

“Excuse me, young lady?” Ellie gave her daughter a mock stern look.

“Oh, come on, mom. He was really...”

“Hot, yes. I heard. And, saw,” Ellie chuckled.

“You saw him? He was here? Man! Why do I miss all the good stuff?”

Blaise laughed at the banter between the two. Seeing them together made her wish... *Wish what, Blaise?* She shook the unwanted thoughts out of her head. “Changing the subject. Don’t kill me, but you might be getting a call soon.”

“I’m reserving my right on the killing until I’ve heard all of the evidence,” Ellie retorted.

“Uh-oh.” Jessie sat in the booth in front of Blaise, propping her head on the palm of her hand, ready for the showdown.

“It’s nothing bad.”

“Nothing bad as in you staining my favorite sweater in college. Or nothing bad as in *what* that stain was?”

“Ellie! Your daughter is here, thank you very much.”

“I know, which is why I’m being discreet. You’re welcome. Now, what did you do?”

“All I did was give your card to someone, geez.” Blaise grouched.

“If this is about a date, Blaise, I swear...”

“It’s not, I promise,” Blaise said hurriedly. “I met with a couple today planning their wedding. She mentioned looking for someone to do their

cake, I recommended you.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not so bad,” Ellie conceded.

“You haven’t met them yet.”



BLAISE SIGHED DEEPLY as she sank into the fragrant bubbles in her oversized bathtub. One of the first things she did when moving into her three-bedroom apartment was do a little remodeling. Turning one room into a virtual greenhouse, and her en suite into a virtual in-home spa resort. Creature comforts, she thought happily as she inhaled the aroma of eucalyptus. It was one thing she absolutely needed in her sanctuary. And, her home *was* her sanctuary. Blaise rarely let anyone in her home, certainly not dates. Ellie and Jessie were her only regular guests. Solitary was important to Blaise, as she was demonstrating with gusto, luxuriating without repentance.

She laid her head back, letting her mind wander. It shouldn’t have surprised her that Greyson Steele crept in when she let her defenses down. Hell, who is she kidding? He was there no matter what she did. His excruciatingly handsome face invaded her calm, inner peace making her body respond instantly. His piercing, smoky gray eyes, that strong, angular jaw shadowed by salt and pepper stubble. The subtle gray in his five o’clock shadow had Blaise wondering how old the sexy business man was, though it only added to his innate masculine sexuality.

Her hand brushed over an erect nipple, making her gasp out loud, as much from the contact as the surprise that she was touching herself like this. Blaise was no stranger to self-gratification, but she had never done this for a man she had just met. But then Greyson wasn’t like any other man she’d ever met. Her hand ventured lower as Blaise fantasized what that six foot four frame looked like under his expensive suit. Hips bucked involuntarily as she slipped a finger inside wetness that had nothing to do with the bath water.

The sound of water gently sloshing, and moans becoming louder, and more frequent, filled the air as Blaise brought herself to orgasm.

“*Greyson,*” she whispered as a long groan spilled from the back of her

throat, and her body convulsed. Blaise's eyes popped open abruptly. "Shit. I'm in trouble."

Greyson

GREYSON WAS READY for a drink. A very stiff, very expensive scotch would do just fine. He was irritable, and *that* was an understatement. His mind was on a certain brunette who, he glanced at his watch, was probably sitting in the diner having dinner. Or perhaps she was home by now, maybe in the shower or getting undressed and ready for bed. Greyson groaned inwardly, his dick twitching at the thought. God, what he wouldn't give to be with her, instead of here at his parents' house enduring an impromptu dinner party with the Chapmans. Fuck his life. He stood at the window looking out into the fading light, conjuring up the face that has been tormenting him since this morning. *Blaise.*

"Darling? Don't be antisocial. Mother and father came here to get to know you better."

"Don't call me that, Pricilla. And, what's the point of getting to know me better?"

Pricilla exhaled sharply. "Why wouldn't they want to know the man I'm going to marry?"

"Not going to happen, Pricilla."

"Of course it will. Your mother, sister and I have already started planning." The smugness in her voice made Greyson want to break the glass in front of him. And, since he would never touch a woman in anger, it would have to be a part of his body going through it.

"I need to get out of here," he grumbled, his lips tight with fury.

"Greyson?" Nora Steele walked in the library where Greyson had been hiding out, looking as impeccable as ever. He couldn't remember ever once seeing her in anything other than designer dresses, slacks or suits. Today was certainly no exception. She insisted the Steele family be presentable at *all* times, including in their own home.

“Yes, mother?”

“You’re being rude. Come out here and join your guests.”

“They’re *your* guests, mother,” he retaliated, noting the repressed anger in his mother’s eyes.

“Greyson, you are thirty-nine years old. It is time for you to stop acting like a child. You have obligations to fulfill for this family. You also need to start giving me grandchildren.”

“Get them from Courtney and Ethan,” Greyson retorted.

“Ethan is not a Steele. Now put your tie back on, and join us. You *will* be cordial to *your* guests.” Nora didn’t wait for a response, turning on her heel and walking out.

Pricilla tossed him a satisfied smile, and followed his mother, leaving him fuming. Again he wondered how his life ended up like this. Even being Delta Force wasn’t as difficult as being Preston and Nora Steele’s only son. Fuck if he would let them dictate his life. He may have to take over the company one day, but Greyson would *never* marry Pricilla Chapman.



“I’M LEAVING.” GREYSON downed the rest of his scotch—thank fuck he raided his father’s stash—and stood. The Chapmans left minutes ago, and he couldn’t wait any longer to get out of there himself.

“Greyson, sit down. We need to discuss something.”

“No, Mother. I’ve endured enough of this shit...”

“Greyson! You will not speak to your mother that way,” Preston chided.

Greyson ignored his father, his eyes fixed on his mother. “As you said before, I’m thirty-nine years old. Yet, you’re treating me like a child. You want me to take over the company to keep it in the family, fine. But I draw the line at marrying someone I don’t even like.”

Nora tsked. “You don’t have to like someone to get married. Think of it as business.”

“Like you and Preston?” Greyson asked snidely.

“We’re talking about merging the Steele and Chapman families together to

strengthen our place in the business world, Greyson.”

“Do you not have enough?” Greyson spread his arms to indicate the enormous house. He caught the look that passed between his parents and he narrowed his eyes. “Is there something you’re not telling me? I swear if this bastard,” he flicked his hand towards Preston, “is bleeding the business dry again, I’m out. He can fix his fuck-ups himself.”

Nora raised her hand to cut Preston’s tirade off. “Greyson, please. The company is not doing as well as it could be...”

“Because Preston has no idea what he’s doing!” Greyson yelled, the stress of his ‘family obligations’ getting the best of him. “You should have figured that out when you had to bail his ass out the first time.”

“You little prick!” Preston stood abruptly, stalking towards his son. Greyson had advantages over Preston in height, strength and youth, so he held no fear. He just stood as well, and waited. “You bitch about this company and your duty to the family, but you have no problems using the money to your advantage, do you!”

“Preston, enough!” Nora’s voice reverberated throughout the massive room. “We have enough to worry about without you losing control because of your bruised ego.”

Preston glared at his wife, but dutifully stopped his advance. Greyson was sure being under Nora’s thumb just *killed* his father, and he struggled to hold in his self-satisfied grin. Sure, he loved the money. But it wasn’t enough. No matter how much money or how many toys he had, there was always something missing. At almost forty years old, he should know by now what that is. And, perhaps he did. The only thing left to do is make it all happen.

“Greyson, you are our son and we need your help.”

Nora *almost* sounded desperate, but Greyson knew better. He knew she could turn on the manipulation when she needed to.

“I’m doing my duty at the company. A company I really want no part of. I draw the line at my freedom. I will *not* marry Pricilla.”

“We need heirs, Greyson.”

“What is this? The royal fucking family? You don’t *need* heirs, you want them. Anyone could take over Steele Industries, and it would still be yours. But if you want grandkids so desperately, Courtney can have them.”

“They will not have the Steele name,” Nora countered angrily.

“I don’t care, mother. I’m not marrying some bitch I can’t stand just because you want grandkids with the Steele name. *If* I ever have kids, it’ll be with someone I want to be with.” Greyson ran a weary hand over his face. “I’m giving you what you want by staying with the company. That’s as far as I go.”

Nora sighed dramatically. “Can you at least take Pricilla to the gala this coming weekend? I’ve already told the Chapmans you two would attend together. Keep up appearances until we can figure something else out, Greyson. Please?”

Shit. He hated that he felt enough guilt to give his mother what she wants. Nora knew nothing but this lifestyle. Greyson didn’t think she’d survive if she lost all of this. If that really was a possibility, he’d do what he could to help her.

“I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can do,” he said, interrupting the protest he knew was on the tip of her tongue. “Goodnight.”



GREYSON PUSHED HIS palms against the tiles of the shower, hanging his head in the warm spray. His thoughts, as per usual today, turned to Blaise Knight. What was it about the petite brunette? Yes, she was beautiful. But he’d seen beautiful women before. Hell, he had *been* with beautiful women. Yet, none of them had made him feel half as unsettled as Blaise did. None of them made his dick hard just thinking about her.

“Fuck.” He fisted his hardened shaft, pumping with vigor as images of Blaise naked, Blaise on her knees, Blaise’s sexy, writhing body beneath him. He grunted as he felt his body respond at the thought of being inside her. Greyson closed his eyes, seeing Blaise’s eyes, that beautiful golden whiskey color, as clear as if she were standing in front of him, and came with a ragged groan.

He slumped against the cool tiles. Greyson had taken Ellie’s warning and stayed away tonight, giving Blaise space. But tomorrow. Oh, tomorrow was going to be different. Blaise would know just how interested he was. And, he *would* hear her say his name.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blaise

BLAISE GAVE THE coffee carousel a spin. “Mmm, French Vanilla,” she murmured, plucking it from its place. She went about the mundane actions of making the perfect cup of coffee, then took a careful drink. “Yummy.”

She knew this would possibly be one of multiple cups since she didn’t sleep well the night before. Plopping down in her chair, she sighed. Greyson Steele would not leave her mind, and it made for unsettling—yet, extremely *hot*—dreams. Blaise wasn’t accustomed to random men practically commandeering her brain, and it was beginning to piss her off. She figured she’d keep telling herself that instead of the truth; that she enjoyed thinking about the man.

“Ms. Knight?”

Blaise chuckled softly. “Yes, Mer?”

“There’s someone here to see you.”

Blaise stood, straightening her t-shirt before pulling her hair back into a loose ponytail. She knew a lot of store owners preferred to look more professional, but she wanted her customers to feel comfortable. She had tried the uptight business suits, went to business casual, and then settled for casual because her clients were more relaxed. More relaxed meant more receptive. More receptive meant Blaise could be as creative as she wanted. Of course, there were always exceptions. The richer they were, the less receptive to her

casual attire. She just didn't care enough to change for them.

Blaise saw the young woman standing in the middle of the shop. She detected a small smile on the raven-haired beauty as she scanned the arrangements Blaise had prominently displayed. She was proud of those specific arrangements, and she hoped the young woman enjoyed them as well.

"Excuse me? I hear you're looking for me?" Blaise asked.

She turned towards Blaise, who was immediately struck by girl's unusual eyes. They were so light; Blaise would almost say white. Could that be possible? There was a bit of color around the irises, but Blaise didn't want to seem too rude by staring so intently. Though, perhaps it would've been fine since the girl was making her own inspection of Blaise. Girl, Blaise thought. She couldn't be more than eighteen, but there was something about her. An old soul. Blaise grinned, allowing the scrutiny.

"You were looking for the owner, correct? My name is Blaise Knight."

The young woman took Blaise's outstretched hand and smiled. Blaise was struck by her unique allure. Working with flowers everyday gave Blaise a deep respect for the beauty in life, and this girl was no exception.

"Ana. I read on your website that you crossbreed?"

Well, she certainly didn't waste time on niceties, Blaise mused. Most teenagers were in a hurry, but this seemed to be a hurry of a different kind. So, Blaise wouldn't delay either.

"I do, yes. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Um..."

Blaise frowned at the perplexed look on Ana's face. It seemed so misplaced for some reason.

"Why don't we go to the back for some privacy?" Blaise suggested, turning abruptly to go back to her office. "You're from England?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been in the States?"

"A while now."

"Not much of a talker are you?" Blaise chuckled lightly. "I've been here for about four years." *Okay, so I fibbed a little. But I'm sure she's not interested in knowing you went to University here before that awful decision to go back to New Zealand for a while.*

"Do you miss New Zealand?"

Blaise stopped abruptly and turned to her customer. She was surprised by

her astuteness, though she felt she shouldn't have been. "Not many people place the accent. They usually confuse me with being an Aussie."

"Perhaps it's because I'm a foreigner myself," Ana suggested with a small shrug.

"Hmm. Please sit." Blaise gestured to the chair in front of her desk, mentally patting herself on the back for having taken the time to clean up a bit. Sitting herself, she leaned back and waited for her potential client to begin. Blaise always waited. She didn't want to influence customers in any way, wanting to hear their authentic first desires.

"What I need may be impossible," she began, her English accent striking Blaise as much more old school than the modern dialect she hears today.

"Nothing is impossible," Blaise smiled, intrigued.

"Even if it's been extinct for a long time?"

Now completely enthralled, Blaise immediately leaned forward. "Well, that may be tough, but not necessarily impossible."

"I'm looking for a flower that was developed in the 1400s."

"Developed? I'm to assume that it wasn't a product of nature?"

"Correct. Medicine men of that time created the flower to assist them medicinally."

Blaise tilted her head, her brows furrowing a bit. "Many flowers, plants and herbs were used medicinally. Which one are you looking for?"

"The Blood Orchlip."

Blaise's heart beat a little faster, and her eyes widen a bit with excitement. *No way*. She couldn't hold back her smile. "I didn't think anyone other than myself knew of that flower."

"You know it?"

Blaise detected the surprise in Ana's expression before popping up from her chair to go to her bookcase. She brushed a finger across the spines of the books, then found the one she wanted. She flipped through the pages as she brought the book back to her desk.

"I have what many say is an unhealthy obsession with the history of plant life. I've read pretty much anything I could get my hands on, going back as far as... well, the era you speak of." She flipped the book around for Ana to see the small article on the Blood Orchlip, and watched her extraordinary eyes light up, making them impossibly lighter.

“Can you recreate them?”

“I don’t see why not. I can at least try. May I ask why you need them?”

And, just like that, it was like shutters came down on those eyes, causing them to darken a bit.

“You know what?” Blaise began, not willing to risk this amazing opportunity because of her nosiness. “It doesn’t matter. It’ll be a challenge for me, and I look forward to it.”

As relief passed over Ana’s face, Mer poked her head in the door. “Ms. Knight? Mr. Steele is here to see you.”

Blaise barely managed to bite back the groan that was a mixture of dread, excitement and pure, unadulterated lust. It was the lust part that made Blaise feel flush. “Ugh. Tell him I’m busy, please, Mer.” She plucked a ‘flower’ from the vase on her desk. Small florist joke, she thought, as the ‘flower’ was really a pen. She caught Ana’s small smirk, and smiled. “Why don’t you write down your information for me, and once I know for sure if I’m able to do this for you, I’ll contact you. Of course, if I’m not able to recreate the Blood Orchlip, I won’t charge you.”

“No, I insist on paying. Please, money isn’t a problem.”

“Look, it’s a thrill for me to even try this, so I refuse to charge you if it doesn’t work. That’s my stipulation.” Blaise smiled so Ana would know she was joking. Well, half-joking at least.

“Very well, I agree. I can’t thank you enough for this. If you can pull this off...”

Ana’s voice trailed off, and Blaise wondered once again why this young woman, yet old soul, needed these particular flowers.

“It’s my pleasure. Believe me. This is exactly the reason I got into all of this. It’s fascinating to me.”

Ana grinned, and Blaise found it to be charming. The girl actually *looked* like a young girl then. She followed Ana out, almost reluctantly since now she had no excuse not to talk to Mr. Steele. She laughed softly as Ana, obviously in a hurry, almost ran into someone coming into the store as she was going out.

“Excuse me. I am sorry.” She heard Ana mutter.

The *someone* made it through the door, and Blaise couldn’t help but stare. The blonde woman was absolutely stunning. And, the man with her? *Holy crap. He’s about as hot as Greyson!* She immediately chastised herself for that thought,

especially since Greyson sidled up next to her. She spared him a glance, before turning her attention back to the couple, and what had to be the cutest little girl ever. The woman looked at Ana curiously, then continued inside the shop.

“Blaise? Could we talk?”

Greyson’s deep voice penetrated Blaise’s thoughts, and she shivered involuntarily. *Fantastic.*

“I wish I had brought my camera.”

The blonde woman’s sensual voice—sensual was the only way Blaise could describe it—brought her attention back to more potential clients.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Steele, I’m busy,” she murmured, and went to greet the newcomers. “It was her eyes, wasn’t it?” Blaise asked the gorgeous woman, and was taken aback when light gray, confident eyes turned towards her. Nerves got the better of her, and she began to babble. “I deal with beauty every day, and I’ve never seen anything like them.” Blaise stopped, and smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop. I’m Blaise Knight. I own this shop,” she explained, holding out her hand in hopes she hadn’t offended anyone. She watched, almost mesmerized, as a perfect eyebrow raised.

“What an interesting name,” the sultry alto voice responded. “Eve Riley. This is my husband Adam, and our daughter Bella.”

The man, Adam, nodded politely at Blaise, but her eyes went directly to the little girl in his arms.

“Oh, she is precious!” Noticing that they were still standing in front of the door, Blaise turned abruptly and motioned for them to follow. “What can I help you with?”

Eve’s eyebrows drew together. “I’m trying to detect your accent. Australian?”

“Kiwi,” Blaise smiled. “I’m from New Zealand.”

“Blaise?”

She almost winced at the sound of Greyson’s voice. She hadn’t meant to be abrupt or rude to him before, but she did have a job to do. Yes, Mer was available, but still. It was her shop. However, Blaise found it rude of him to interrupt her conversation, and unfortunately that brought out her impolite side. Again.

“I’m busy, Mr. Steele. I have customers.”

“Fine. I’ll be back.” Greyson nodded at the couple, and took off.

“Sorry about that.”

“Not a problem,” Eve chuckled. “I’m actually looking into buying the establishment next door, so I thought I’d stop in and get to know the neighbors.”

“Oh? That’s fantastic! Unless you’re planning to open another flower shop,” Blaise joked, secretly hoping that wasn’t the case.

When the couple laughed, Blaise thought how perfect they were together. It was an odd thought to get from only hearing laughter, but it struck true, nonetheless.

“No, though I do deal with beauty, as well. It will be an art gallery.”

“Now that *is* fantastic news. I love art,” Blaise smiled genuinely.

“Your flowers are quite beautiful,” Eve complimented, looking around the colorful, fragrant shop. “I would love for you to do the arrangements when we open.”

“Really? I would be honored! Let me get some information from you, and give you my card. We’ll get everything set for when you need us.” She led Eve to the counter where she could get a piece of paper, and a card. Blaise heard a small giggle, and glanced up to see the tall, beautiful man pointing flowers out to his daughter. *How sweet*, she thought wistfully, then shook the thought right out of her head. Poising the pen over the paper, she turned back to Eve. “What will the name of the gallery be?”

“Sumptor Gallery, LA,” Eve answered. Pride clearly evident in her voice.

“Oh my God, you’re Eve Sumptor? I thought you looked vaguely familiar. I’ve been to some of your galleries. They’re absolutely amazing!” And... she was blabbering again. But who cares! Eve Sumptor was in her shop! Blaise had seen some of Eve’s work, as well, and it was nothing short of spectacular.

“Thank you. Perhaps you could attend the opening?”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you.”

“Well, now that I have the flowers covered, I can move on to catering next,” Eve said absently as she wrote down her information for Blaise.

“Oh, I can help you with that, too!”

“You’re a caterer as well?” Eve asked with amused skepticism.

Blaise chuckled lightly. “Oh, no. I can cook, but certainly not well enough to cater for Sumptor Galleries. My friend owns the diner on the other side of your potential gallery...”

“Ellie!” Eve interrupted, startling Blaise.

“Yes. You’ve met?”

“We stopped in the quaint little diner before coming here. The food was delicious. The pie, however, was magnificent.”

“Yes! Though you haven’t lived until you’ve tried Ellie’s red velvet cake.” Blaise’s eyes rolled back in bliss just *thinking* of her favorite cake.

“Sold,” Eve chuckled. “I didn’t realize the diner catered, but Ellie is a doll. And, it certainly sounds better than sitting through tasting after tasting of pretentious ‘froufrou’ food.”

Ellie is either going to kill me, or love me forever. Blaise thought as this was the second potentially *huge* event she had recommended Ellie for. Catering was not something her friend normally did, but Blaise couldn’t help herself. She believed in Ellie’s skills *that* much.

GREYSON

DAMN IT. GREYSON sat in the small park across from Blaise’s shop. He had meant to talk to her. To charm her into having dinner with him. Or at least lunch. *Anything*, he thought grumpily. But she didn’t even give him a chance. In fact, Blaise had given him the cold shoulder. Had his first impression been *that* bad? He ran his hands through his hair, then scrubbed at his stubble that was getting to be a little too long. *Time for a shave.* And, time to get a little creative when it came to Blaise Knight.

Nothing he can do about it now, he thought. It probably wasn’t a good idea on his part to show up at her work. But after his sleepless night, he hadn’t had the patience to wait.

“Stupid,” he muttered. He hadn’t even gone into the office today. Greyson couldn’t find the motivation to deal with Preston today. Especially after Greyson’s conversation with his mother the night before. It was Preston’s fault that Greyson was stuck in the family business he had no interest in. If the damn bastard knew what the hell he was doing, Greyson would have been able to retire from the Army, come back home and work with Cade. And, nobody

would be breathing down his fucking neck to marry some bitch for the sake of the family name.

The signaling of Greyson's phone brought him out of his thoughts. "Yeah?" he barked.

"Bad day, brother?" Cade's deep, amused voice came through.

Greyson thought about not getting anywhere with the striking Blaise again. "Not the greatest. What's up?"

"Have a job this weekend. Could use your help."

Interest piqued, Greyson sat up. "Yeah? What's the job?"

"Just security during some posh shin-dig. A masquerade deal for charity."

"Those things normally need high security?"

"Apparently they're auctioning off some high priced art donated by some prestigious gallery. They want that art secure."

"Yeah, I could... shit. This weekend?"

"Yep. Not a good time for you? Wait! Don't tell me you snagged a date with the hot brunette."

Even though Greyson could hear the teasing in his friend's voice, he was annoyed. Annoyed because it wasn't true, and the truth made him cringe.

"I haven't had a chance to ask, yet," Greyson replied tightly. He decided he would conveniently leave out the part where Blaise wouldn't even take the time to talk to him.

"So, what's the hold up for the weekend?"

"I..." Greyson paused, knowing he was going to get shit for what he was about to say. "Nora asked me to take Pricilla to the gala. I think it's the one you're talking about."

"Bullshit, brother. No way."

"Cade..."

"No, Grey. Why would you be hanging with that... piranha when you have someone like Blaise waiting for you?"

"First of all, Blaise *isn't* waiting for me. She shot me down, remember? Second, I'm not going to be *hanging* with Pricilla. I'm doing it as a favor for my mother." He hated having to explain himself. To *anyone*. But Cade knew how Pricilla was. He knew what Greyson had to endure with that woman constantly hanging on him, calling him, telling everyone they were engaged, or talking about children. Pricilla was definitely the embodiment of a ball and chain.

Smothering. Greyson hated it, and Cade knew that.

“Well, fuck, brother. Blaise isn’t going to wait for your sorry ass if it’s with some other piece. Especially *that* piece.”

“It’s a fucking favor, Cade.” Greyson’s voice was low and dangerous. If he had been talking to anyone else, they would have been intimidated enough to let the subject go. Unfortunately, Cade wasn’t intimidated at all.

“Your mother asks a lot of you, Greyson. You’ve already given up so much for her and that bastard of a father. But Pricilla? Brother, you have *got* to draw the line somewhere.”

“Appearances, Cade,” Greyson said, though it sounded stupid even to him. “I’m just escorting her to the damned party. Nothing more. And, since I’ll already be there, I can help you out as well. It’ll keep me occupied and out of Pricilla’s clutches.”

Cade sighed. “Fine. But I think you now owe me. If you’re using this work as an excuse to stay away from Pricilla, I want a damned beer as payment.”

Greyson laughed. “You got it. Just send me the info I need to know, and we have a deal.”

“Well, damn. I should’ve held out for more. How about you help me out with hot diner chick?”

“It’s no wonder you’re single, man. Hot diner chick has a name. Perhaps you should try using it.”

“When she says yes, I’ll use her name. Hell, I’ll use it all fucking night.”

“You’re a fucking Neanderthal,” Greyson laughed again.

“Works every time, brother.”

“Every time? Seems I recall it not working on *Ellie*.”

“She’ll come around. You’ll see. I’ll email you the shit you need to know. Thanks for the help, brother.”

“Anytime.”

Greyson clicked off the phone, glancing once again at Blaise’s shop. He could risk going back in there, or... Greyson smiled as he came up with his plan. It will definitely be the ‘or’. His phone chirped in his hand. Glancing at it, his mood suddenly went dark. Two people did that for him. Pricilla and Preston. This time, it was Preston demanding to know where Greyson was.

“*Fuck you,*” he muttered, sending one last glance over to Blaise’s shop before leaving.

CHAPTER SIX

Blaise

“I WANT TO be mad at you, but I can’t.”

This was Blaise’s greeting from Ellie as she came into the diner for her nightly dinner/conversation.

“What did I do now?”

“You keep giving my name out for catering!” Ellie laughed. “I am not a caterer, Blaise.”

“Well, you could be. Your food is to die for!”

“Thank you, and that’s why I opened a restaurant. I make them come to me, Blaise, not the other way around.”

Blaise thought about that for a moment before nodding. “Fine. I will try to restrain myself next time. Now, why *can’t* you be mad at me?”

“Because you gave my name to *the* Eve Sumptor! Excuse me, Riley. She invited me to go to the opening of her new gallery!” Ellie did a happy little booty shake, making Blaise laugh.

“Oh! Did she tell you I was doing the floral arrangements for the opening? I’m so excited! And I was invited, too!”

“She mentioned that when she came back to ask me about the food. We *have* to go shopping. What in the hell do you wear to a gallery—no, a Sumptor Gallery opening?”

“Something really, *really* expensive and beautiful?” Blaise offered as Jessie

bustled out of the kitchen with food that smelled divine. “Hey, sweets.”

“Hey, Blaise.”

“Someone’s a sourpuss,” Blaise commented when Jessie set the food in front of her, then left without another word.

“She’s mad at me.” Ellie slid into the other side of the booth. “I won’t let her go on some coed trip.”

“You’re terrible!” Blaise teased.

“She certainly thinks so.” Ellie sighed, leaning her head back. “She thinks it’s absolutely ridiculous that I don’t trust her enough to go. I try to tell her that’s not the reason, but she doesn’t believe me.”

Blaise tried to think what she would do in this situation, but the thoughts bothered her, so she focused back on Ellie. “So, what is the reason?”

“There will be boys there! I don’t know who will be chaperoning, or if anyone really will be chaperoning. She’s not old enough.”

“Honey, she’s sixteen.”

“Exactly! Too young to be sleeping over where boys will be!”

“Do you feel this way because you got pregnant at sixteen?” Blaise asked softly, wincing inwardly when Ellie glared at her.

“Now you sound like her. ‘Just because you were irresponsible and got pregnant at sixteen, it doesn’t mean I’m going to be like you!’.”

Blaise watched as Ellie’s eyes filled with tears. She reached over, placing her hand over her friend’s, squeezing it slightly. “You know she didn’t mean that, El. She was just upset.”

Ellie shrugged, swiping at an errant tear that got past her defenses that Blaise knew were very strong. Her heart broke for Ellie. Jessie was her mother’s life. There was nothing Ellie wouldn’t do for her daughter. Including taking the verbal hits an angry Jessie deals out if it means protecting her from potential heartbreak.

“I need to get you your tea.” Ellie stood abruptly, and was gone before Blaise could say anything else.

She shook her head sadly. This was hurting Ellie more than she would ever show, Blaise knew. Maybe she could talk to Jessie, she thought, then immediately pushed that idea out. It’s not her place. Yes, she was Jessie’s Godmother, but this was something that was between mother and daughter.

“Blaise?”

Blaise had been so lost in her own thoughts, that she hadn't even noticed Greyson walking up to her. *Shit.*

"Mr. Steele." Blaise shoved a forkful of food into her mouth, and began chewing slowly. She was willing to do anything to prevent her from having to talk to the sinfully magnificent man. But to her extreme dismay, Greyson made himself comfortable opposite of her in the booth. She continued to focus on eating, refusing to acknowledge her unwanted visitor.

"You didn't have time to talk to me earlier, and you are constantly turning me down for coffee or lunch," he stated, as if it explained why he would just join Blaise without her asking.

"That should tell you something," she murmured around a full mouth.

"It tells me you're trying to avoid me for some reason. You can't tell me you don't feel something here." Greyson said after a brief silence, and wagged his finger between the two of them.

And, there's the arrogance again, Blaise thought, unamused. "I *feel* like you're interrupting my dinner."

"Then, I'll join you. It'll give us more time to talk. Get to know each other. And, if I'm eating, it won't be awkward." Greyson stood to grab a menu off the counter. "What's good here?" he asked as he sat back down.

"Mr. Steele..."

"Greyson," he corrected immediately.

Blaise blinked at him, but before she could say anything, Ellie appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"Mr. Steele. Blaise didn't mention you were going to be meeting her here."

"Because I didn't know," Blaise answered before Greyson could respond. "He just showed up."

Blaise missed the questioning look Ellie shot towards Greyson. She also missed the returned shrug.

"I see." Ellie smiled sweetly at Greyson. "Well, since you're here, would you like something to eat?"

Blaise scowled at Ellie, not caring whatsoever that Greyson could totally see her.

"Just give me what Blaise is having," Greyson answered with a chuckle, handing Ellie the menu he had plucked from the counter.

"You got it. And, something to drink?"

Greyson eyed Blaise's tea, then nodded towards it. "I'll take one of those."

"But," Ellie began before Blaise interrupted her.

"He wants tea, give him tea, Ellie." Blaise gave Greyson a charming smile, taking a purposeful sip of her tea. From her peripheral vision, she saw Ellie shake her head with a small smile, and walk away. "Do you always invite yourself to dinner with women who turn you down?"

"Women don't usually turn me down."

"Wow. You certainly have a healthy ego." Blaise took another bite. She thought briefly that it may be a little rude to eat before Greyson got his food. But immediately dismissed the thought because it had been rude of him to sit down to dinner with her without being invited.

"Not ego, just truth." He shrugged nonchalantly. "But to answer your question, no. *If* a woman turns me down, I am no longer interested."

Greyson tapped his fingertips on the table in a beat she thought was familiar but couldn't place. And, her traitorous mind began to wander, thinking there's no doubt those strong hands would be able to make her body sing. Blaise groaned inwardly at the images that popped up in her head, and promptly changed her thought process. *Blood Orchlips*, she mused. Blaise began the mental process of breeding that peculiar flower, plotting out every detail in hopes it would calm her rapid pulse. And it worked amazingly. Until she watched him smile kindly at Ellie when she placed a cup of tea in front of him. God, that smile was killer. Perfect white teeth, full lips surrounded by stubble that was thicker now than she remembered. And, boy did she remember. Every detail. Blaise dropped her gaze, afraid that her resolve would crumble if she kept looking at that smile for too long.

"Your food will be right up." Ellie's voice mercifully forced Blaise out of her fantasy world.

"Thank you, Ellie." He saluted Ellie with his cup before bringing it to his lips to take a drink.

Blaise barked out a laugh when Greyson started sputtering and coughing.

"Jesus! What the fuck kind of tea is this?"

"Jasmine." Blaise gave Greyson a look of pure innocence.

"Jasmine and what? Gasoline?"

She clicked her tongue as Ellie laughed heartily. "I'll have you know you

are drinking some of the finest whiskey made,” Blaise told him, completely offended.

“Well, it certainly produces an interesting flavor,” Greyson commented dryly. “Why not just drink it straight?”

“Drink what straight?”

Jessie bustled up to the table next to Ellie, placing Greyson’s food in front of him. She blushed slightly when he grinned at her, making her seem even younger than her sixteen years.

“The whiskey,” he explained.

“Oh, that gross stuff Blaise puts in her tea?”

“It is not gross!” Blaise huffed.

“It is, too,” Ellie put in. “And, until Jessie is of drinking age, it will *always* be gross.”

“Mom!”

Greyson

MOM? GREYSON ALL but forgot about the whiskey debate when the young girl called Ellie mom. He scanned their faces, noticing the similarities. Okay, they looked almost exactly alike, but he would have guessed sisters. Surely Ellie wasn’t old enough to have a daughter that age. He caught Blaise watching him curiously, bringing him back to the ongoing dispute of whether whiskey was gross.

“Scotch is my poison of choice,” he admitted. “And, I’m sure this is a fine whiskey. But pairing it with tea? That’s almost sacrilege isn’t it?”

He received the cutest glare from the gorgeous brunette, and couldn’t help but laugh. She had been doing that a lot since he ambushed her, taking the risk to invite himself to sit down with her. And, Greyson was glad he did since he was starving and the food smelled incredible. He just hoped he’d be able to swallow it after the unexpected burn of whiskey going down his throat.

“You don’t have to drink it,” Blaise responded. “And, you certainly didn’t

have to make yourself comfortable here.” She waved her arm impatiently.

“I would hate to have to eat while uncomfortable.” Greyson took a bite of the most succulent pot roast he had ever tasted. It was so melt-in-your-mouth good, he had to close his eyes and just savor the moment. “I had enough of that in the Army,” he said, completely oblivious to Blaise’s slightly flared nostrils, and flushed cheeks.

“You were in the Army?”

Guiltily, Greyson angled his head towards Ellie. He had forgotten that she was there, and though he liked her well enough, he wanted Blaise to be the one asking more about him. “Yes. Fifteen years.”

“Wow. So were you like in war zones?” Completely enthralled, Jessie nudged over a stunned Blaise and sat down beside her.

“I was, yes.”

“What was it like?”

“Jessie,” Ellie cut in. “War isn’t something people usually want to talk about. Plus, Mr. Steele is trying to eat.”

Jessie shot her mother a glance, then blew out a short breath. “Fine. Maybe you can tell me about it some other time?”

“We’ll see,” Greyson said with a smile. When mother and daughter left, he took another bite, and studied Blaise. Her demeanor revealed nothing, but it was the look in her eyes that caught him. There was a fire there. Whether that fire was for what he knows to be a mutual attraction, or impatience, he didn’t know. But he would find out.

“You can’t still be holding a grudge because I parked in your spot,” he began. “If I recall correctly, I apologized for that.”

Blaise looked up sharply, and laughed mirthlessly. “Are you serious?” She shook her head when he frowned. “The one thing you *didn’t* say was sorry,” she informed him.

Greyson’s eyebrows shot up before he frowned yet again. He had said he was sorry, hadn’t he? Surely he hadn’t been *that* much of a dick to her. “I’m sure I apologized. Even so, holding a grudge because I inadvertently parked in your spot is a little overboard, isn’t it?” It was the wrong thing to say. He knew it was the wrong thing. As soon as the words were out, he wanted to take them back and replace them with the apology he apparently missed giving her before.

“It wasn’t just you parking in my spot, Mr. Steele. It was the arrogance and...”

“I’m sorry,” Greyson interrupted in a quiet voice. “I apologize for parking there, for not apologizing, for anything else I did that made a bad impression on you.”

Blaise’s mouth opened, then closed again. Greyson could only hope that he had surprised her, and impressed her enough to forgive him.

“Why are you doing this?”

Well, that certainly wasn’t the response he was looking for. “What?”

“I’m sure you can have any woman you want. Why would you waste your time with me?”

“Maybe it’s you that I want,” he answered simply. It was an easy answer, because it was true. He wanted her. Blaise Knight was different from any woman he had known before. Women usually acted the way they thought *he* wanted them to act. Laughing at all of his jokes, even if they weren’t funny. Eating tiny salads when he took them to the expensive restaurants he knew they wanted to be seen at. He glanced at the plate in front of Blaise, piled with comfort food, and the large bite she just took from it. *Probably so she wouldn’t have to respond to what I just said*, he thought with an inward chuckle. “Why flowers?” he asked, deciding a change in topic was probably best right now.

Blaise cleared her throat as though the question caught her off guard. She placed a hand in front of her mouth—manners, he thought—before saying, “Excuse me?”

“Why flowers,” he repeated. “What made you interested in owning a flower shop?”

Blaise shrugged. “For as long as I can remember, I’ve had a love of all plant life. It just so happens that I’m really good at making things grow. When I was little, my parents used to take me on little hiking adventures around New Zealand. I’m not sure if they were amused or frustrated most of the time when I would stop to tell them what each plant, flower or tree was.” She chuckled softly, then stopped abruptly, taking a big sip of her tea.

She gave me more than she intended to, he mused. But, of course, Greyson Steele wanted more, and was used to getting what he wanted.

“Are your parents here in the States?”

Blaise glanced up, then focused on her food. “No.” She shoved another bite into her mouth, but that wasn’t going to deter Greyson.

“So, still in New Zealand, then?”

There was a slight hesitation. “Yes.”

“Are you still close, despite the distance?”

He saw something flash in her eyes, but it was gone before he could decipher what it was. Even so, before she could answer, or he could ask anything more, Ellie appeared at their table. Then he saw an unmistakable look of relief and gratitude Blaise shot Ellie.

“How is the food?” Ellie asked Greyson after smiling slightly at Blaise.

“Excellent. I haven’t had a meal like this since, well, I don’t think I’ve ever had a meal like this.”

“Good, I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

He watched curiously as Ellie glanced over at Blaise, then back at him. The almost imperceptive shake of her head spoke volumes to Greyson. Blaise didn’t like speaking about her parents. She either wasn’t close to them, or—fuck. *Fuck!* He thought again. If her parents are no longer alive, he just put his fucking foot in his mouth. Big time. Another great impression, he thought disgustedly.

“Are you ready for dessert?” He heard Ellie ask. When he looked up, he saw a spark in Blaise’s eyes. It was the only thing that betrayed the look of pure boredom and skepticism she wore.

“What’s it going to cost me?” She asked Ellie.

“Depends on the size of the piece you want,” Ellie shot back.

“What if I have just a tiny sliver?”

“Then three miles instead of six.”

Greyson was confused as hell by the banter, but entertained nonetheless. Especially when Blaise groaned in protest.

“Fine. If you’re going to torture me no matter what, I may as well have a big piece.”

Ellie laughed. “Don’t worry, Blaise. I won’t make you run. Besides, we have yoga tomorrow.”

Ah. So, Blaise and Ellie run and work out together. And, now he had images of Blaise in yoga attire. Well, that should be enough to add to his fantasies later on.

“Yippie,” Blaise muttered unenthusiastically, inciting another chuckle from Ellie.

“And you, Mr. Steele?”

“Greyson,” he responded automatically, noting that Blaise had *still* not said his name. “And, I’m not sure if I could eat an entire dessert by myself. Perhaps you could bring two forks with whatever you’re bringing Blaise?”

The look Blaise gave Ellie, then him, coupled with the surprised look Ellie gave him was so comical that he barked out a laugh.

“Blaise does not share her red velvet cake,” Ellie informed him seriously.

Greyson lifted his eyebrow at Blaise in question who said nothing, but the defiance in her eyes told him all he needed to know. “All right. What do you recommend, then?” he asked with a chuckle.

“The red velvet is phenomenal,” Blaise responded almost reverently. “Or, if you’re more of a pie person…” she paused to think for a moment. “Well, all of Ellie’s baked goods are amazing, but I think I’d recommend the apple pie.”

“Fine. I’ll go with the apple pie. You’ll at least let me try your red velvet, right?”

He caught Ellie’s look of amusement and respect. The respect, he mused, was probably for having the balls to ask Blaise to share even a bite of her dessert. He was banking on the fact that Blaise had impeccable manners that wouldn’t allow her to refuse him.

Blaise sighed heavily. “If Mr. Steele is going to insist on eating off my plate, give me an extra—very small—slice.”

Ellie laughed at her. “Fine. Coffee?”

Blaise nodded, but Greyson was wary.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Steele. Coffee is one thing Blaise doesn’t mess with. There won’t be any whiskey.”

“Then, yes. Coffee, please,” he smiled. Greyson waited until Ellie walked away before turning his attention back to Blaise. “Are you really that stingy with your dessert?”

She raised a brow. “Stingy? No. I’m just not fond of sharing. One bite, and you’ll want the whole thing.”

Greyson’s smile turned wicked when he saw the small smile form on Blaise’s lips. She was flirting with him. Finally! “I can get you to give it all to me.”

“That’s a pretty cocky statement, Mr. Steele.”

His lips quirked, and he shrugged. “Confidence is almost required in this world, Ms. Knight.”

“Hmm.” She paused when Jessie walked to the table carrying two plates filled with succulent dessert, followed by Ellie with the coffee.

“Apple pie,” Jessie stated, placing the plate in front of Greyson. “What do I call you?”

“Sorry?”

“What was your rank in the military?” she clarified.

“Oh.” He caught the look of confusion from Ellie. Obviously the young girl had never expressed interest in the military before. Perhaps she has a little crush. The thought amused him. “Lieutenant Colonel. But you can call me Greyson. And, perhaps you could get Blaise to call me that as well.”

He watched as Blaise’s eyes turned from annoyance at his words, to lighting up like a child on Christmas day when Jessie placed the red velvet cake in front of her.

“Thank you, sweets.” She spared Jessie a glance before digging her fork in the moist, cream cheese frosted cake.

Greyson felt his cock twitch as he watched her wrap her lips around the fork, moaning in sweet ecstasy at that first bite. He hardly noticed when Ellie took Jessie by the arm and guided her away. “Are you going to give me a bite of that,” he asked, hoping he had schooled his voice enough that she didn’t know what he was thinking.

“You haven’t even tried your own,” she argued with another mouthful.

“But yours looks,” he lowered his voice, “tasty.” He gave her a satisfied grin when she swallowed hard.

Blaise recovered quickly, though, and gave him a saucy smile as she pushed her plate towards him. “This,” she began, indicating the small ‘extra’ piece, “is all you get. I’m watching you.”

Greyson stopped his fork in mid-air, and gave her a smirk. “I love being watched as I eat.”

He gave her credit for holding his gaze without even a flinch. The only things that gave away what she may be feeling was the slight darkening of her eyes, and flare of her nostrils. But she said nothing. No witty comeback or annoyed retort. She just watched him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blaise

JESUS, I'M IN trouble. Blaise watched him savor the bite of *her* red velvet cake. It didn't matter that it was an extra piece, it was on her plate, and that made it hers. She wondered what it would be like to kiss those full lips. To feel them on her body. To watch as he ate...

"I have to go." Blaise stood abruptly, bumping into Ellie who was making her way to their table with a pot of coffee. The scalding liquid, *thankfully*, forced her mind off Greyson, and on to her burning arm. "Shit!"

"Blaise! I'm so sorry!" Ellie quickly set the pot down, grabbing the towel she had hooked on her apron. "Are you okay? Let me see."

"No, no. It's fine. I'm fine." Blaise waved her away, panicking a little when Greyson rose to join them. "I'm fine," she said again.

"Sweetie, please let me look at it." Ellie took Blaise's arm, attempting to push up the sleeve. Greyson stepped forward, and Blaise stepped back.

"It doesn't even hurt. Ellie, please. I have to go." Blaise hoped her friend could see the pleading in her eyes, at the same time hoping Greyson couldn't.

"Okay. At least put some cold water on that when you get home."

"I will. Give my love to Jessie." She leaned in, hugging Ellie. "*Thank you,*" she whispered before hurrying out, completely ignoring Greyson calling out to her. Once she was safely outside, she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, then winced at the pain she now felt from the hot coffee. "Damn it!"

Blaise knew that staying there trying to regulate her heartbeat wouldn't do her any good since she was sure Greyson wasn't far behind. She started towards her car, groaning slightly when she spied Greyson's car parked in front of hers. "Of course." She silently cursed herself when she couldn't help the tickle of lust that swelled inside her as she thought about Greyson behind the wheel of that car. Or, Greyson grasping her ass as she straddled him, riding him as the car purred beneath them. "Fuck!"

"Are you okay?"

She whirled around, hand on her heart that was beating wildly for a whole new reason now.

"You scared me." She blew out a breath. "Yes."

"You ran out of there pretty fast. If Ellie hadn't explained to me that you don't pay, I would have thought you ran out on the check."

She had nothing to say to that. Yes, she ran out of there fast (without paying because she never pays), but she couldn't very well tell him why. *Lie!* "I just remembered I had things that I need to get done."

"And, yet, you're still out here," he responded with amusement that irked her.

"Yeah, well. I got distracted by your car."

"I see. Would you like a ride?"

"God, yes." She breathed, previous thoughts running through her mind before it finally caught up to here and now. "No! I mean... ugh." Blaise ran a frustrated hand through her hair. "Your car is amazing, and yes, I would love to be able to ride in it. But..."

"But what? I'm sure whatever you need to get done will still be there when we get back."

"I can't go for a drive with you, Mr. Steele."

Again, there was that shiver that ran through her when he growled. What was *that* about?

"Why won't you call me Greyson?"

"What?"

"You insist on calling me Mr. Steele."

"That's your name."

"My name is Greyson." He stepped closer and she held her ground, refusing to let him intimidate her. "Say my name, Blaise," he said, his voice

low and dangerous.

She wondered, briefly, if he could feel the heat coming from her. Could he see her heart beating out of her chest? Could he smell how much she wanted him? Blaise would think about this moment later on when she was alone, and wonder what had come over her. For now, she went with her instincts, running both of her hands over the lapels of his suit jacket. She gripped them, and pulled him even closer. “Take me for a ride... Mr. Steele.”

Oh, the heat in his eyes burned almost as much as the coffee. She was playing with fire, she knew, but she was rapidly beginning not to care. This self-induced end to dating wasn’t written in stone. And, who said they had to date? Sex was good. They didn’t need anything more than sex. The small spark became a white hot flame as he reached around her, his body pressing up against hers as he opened the passenger door for her.

“Get in,” he rumbled close to her ear. She silently congratulated herself for not letting him feel her tremble. Blaise watched his tall, muscular body skirt the front of the car, then sliding in beside her with unexpected grace. “Where to?”

Now that she had had a moment to think, this probably wasn’t such a great idea after all. But she *really* did love the car. “How about around the block?”

“That doesn’t give me much of an opportunity to open her up.”

She heard it. Of course she heard it. The sexual undertones of his statement. Hell, she *felt* it. “Around the block, Mr. Steele. That’s all the time I can give right now.” When he nodded, she knew her message got through to him.

They rode in silence, though Blaise knew they were both keenly aware of each other. She would catch him watching her, or see his hand drift towards her as he rested his elbow on the console. She wanted him to touch her, and at the same time prayed he wouldn’t. Her pulse hummed. She reveled in the feel of the buttery leather of the seats, the heat of the man next to her, the rumble of the powerful car. She found herself disappointed when he pulled up behind her car.

“Where are you parked,” he asked, bringing her back to reality.

She inclined her head towards the sparkling black Camaro. “There.”

His grin gave him a boyish look. “You drive a muscle car?”

She raised a brow. “Is there some law that says a woman can’t drive a muscle car?”

“Not at all.” The look he gave her was a cross between disbelief and admiration. “You intrigue me, Blaise. Have dinner with me.”

She gave him a short laugh. “I thought we just did that.”

“A real date, Blaise. One that I don’t have to insinuate myself into. I want you to say yes.”

“Mr. Steele.” At this point, she was using the name as a defense, and she knew it. It frustrated him, but it kept that wall up—as wobbly as it was now—between them.

“This weekend.”

“I can’t.”

“Blaise.”

“I have plans this weekend, Mr. Steele. That’s not a brush-off, it’s true.”

“Another date?”

She heard the bite in his voice. What right did he have to be jealous? They weren’t dating. He held no claim on her. No one did. Ever.

“That’s really none of your business, is it?”

“I’m making it my business, Blaise. I’m interested in you. In order for me to make it a fair playing field, I need to know what I’m up against.”

She blinked at him incredulously. Sure she’d been with arrogant men before, but Greyson Steele was in a league of his own. Normally that kind of attitude infuriated Blaise. For some strange reason coming from Greyson, she found it to be—oh, God—a turn on. Of course, there’s no reason for Greyson to know that.

“You know, I’m surprised you don’t drive an obnoxiously big SUV.”

Clearly confused by the change of topics, Greyson frowned. “Why would you think I’d drive one of those?”

“Well, there’s more storage room for that over-inflated ego you carry around.”

Greyson leaned towards her, essentially trapping her between a rock—him—and a hard place—the closed door that she seriously thought about opening even if it meant she’d fall out on her ass.

“It’s not ego, Blaise. It’s seeing something that I want and fighting for it. Do you have another date this weekend?”

She thought about saying yes. Just to piss him off. But his proximity, the feel of his warm breath so close to her lips, made her brain practically shut down. And that pissed *her* off.

“I have plans, Mr. Steele.” Blaise congratulated herself for sounding strong, if just a tad bit breathless.

“What plans, Blaise?”

She placed her hands on his chest, and pushed. “Back off. I owe you nothing.” Blaise straightened, opened the door and stepped out. Before walking away, she leaned back down, holding his gaze. “Thank you for the ride. Have a nice night, Mr. Steele.”

Since she knew he was watching her, her stride was full of confidence, and she added an extra bit of sway to her hips.

Greyson

“FUCK.” GREYSON’S EYES were glued to the sexy-as-fuck sway in Blaise’s hips. He knew she was doing it on purpose, and it did exactly what she wanted it to do. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, watching her drive away. Tonight was a moderate success, he mused. He at least put a crack in that wall Blaise had up. All he needed was more time. But if she had a fucking date this weekend, he was going to have to step up his game.

Greyson didn’t like feeling like the underdog. It wasn’t in his nature to just sit back and see what happens. He made things happen. He was the one people turned to in order to get things done. Whatever Blaise’s plans were this weekend, he wasn’t about to let them come between him and his goal. To get to know Blaise at a very intimate level.



GREYSON SLIPPED HIS ringing phone out of his pocket, muttering when he saw the display.

“Mother.”

“Why aren’t you at work, Greyson?”

He stopped mid-stride in the middle of the atrium of Steele Industries. The massive expansion was tastefully decorated, even if a bit too opulent for Greyson’s tastes. White marble floors adorned the space—imported from Italy, of course—with black veins coursing through the tiles. Floor to ceiling windows curved along the stretch of building, and it was the one thing Greyson loved about the space. Despite the lavish appearance, the backdrop of Los Angeles beyond the windows always made him remember why he lived here. “Keeping tabs on me?”

“You know Preston has an important meeting scheduled with the Madison Group. You should be there.”

“Afraid he’ll screw it up? I’m here, mother,” he said before she could respond. “I just walked in. so, you can tell Preston to calm down.”

She clicked her tongue in that superior, annoyed way she has. “I have more important things to discuss with you.”

“Which are?” Greyson continued on to the gleamingly clean elevators, pressing the up button.

“The event this weekend.”

“Mother.”

“Now, Greyson, I wouldn’t ask you if I didn’t think this was important.”

And, there’s the guilt, he thought. Had he always been so easily manipulated by her?

“Cade is working security for the event. He asked for my help.” He stepped into the ornate elevator as soon as the doors slid open.

“Greyson Steele, you are not hired help. Whatever your friend needs, he can find someone else. I need you to be Pricilla’s escort. And, I need you to show the Chapmans that your union is strong.”

“It’s not.”

“Greyson.”

“I will be her escort, Mother,” he interrupted. “And, I will be helping Cade at the same time. But I refuse to pretend we are getting married.”

“I’m asking you to do this for the family, Greyson.”

“You’re asking me for something I cannot give you.”

“Keeping up appearances is not such a hardship given the reward.”

“Appearances? You and Courtney are planning a wedding with Pricilla. Is that ‘keeping up appearances’ as well?”

“You could do worse than Pricilla as a wife, Greyson.”

“This discussion is over. When and *if* I decide to get married, it will be because I love the woman, not because it’ll help your portfolio.” He ended the call, not giving her a chance to rebut. Pricilla was the last person he wanted to be chained to, and certainly the last person he wanted to think about. For now, he would attend this meeting, and hope Preston doesn’t fuck things up.



“THIS EAR PIECE fits snug, brother. It won’t be visible. It’s a little different than what we’re used to in the military.”

Cade tossed the miniscule device to Greyson, and he fit it in his ear. The transmitter was tucked discreetly in his inside breast pocket. He gave Cade a thumbs up when the sound was tested. “Good. Your design?”

“Yeah. We’re developing a whole line of this shit.”

“For private use?”

Cade shrugged. “We’ll see. I could really use your input on this stuff, brother. You’re wasting your talents at SI.”

“Come on, man. You know I’m there if you need me. But I have...”

“A family obligation,” Cade finished for him. “You have an obligation to yourself to be happy, brother.”

Greyson grunted, putting the finishing touches on his bow tie. He hated wearing tuxedos, felt too restricted. But being a Steele meant ‘keeping up appearances’, as Nora reminded him so often. “She has a date, man.”

Cade stopped fiddling with his own tie to give Greyson a questioning look. “Who?”

“Blaise. I asked her out, and she told me she already had plans.”

Cade chuckled, and shook his head. “Well, brother, technically you have a date as well.”

“Pricilla is not a date. She’s...”

“An obligation,” Cade said again. “You want a woman like Blaise, brother, you’re going to have to throw all those damn obligations out the fucking door. She’s certainly not going to put up with you playing ‘escort’ to some stuck-up socialite.”

“You meet her one time and think you know her?” Greyson was irked, but knew Cade was absolutely right.

“Doesn’t take a genius to figure out a strong woman like that isn’t going to dick around, brother.”

“I know. Fuck, I know.” He ran a hand through his hair, effectively disheveling it. “This is it with Pricilla. They’re fucking planning the damn wedding. It’s gone too far.”

“I would ask you why you’re even doing this tonight, but I know the answer. Look, just keep an eye out while you’re there. Think of it as a mission, nothing more.”

“It’s a fucking masquerade party, man.”

Cade chuckled, and tossed Greyson his mask. “All the better, brother. Undercover.”



“THIS IS ONE of the biggest parties of the year, darling. Everyone that’s anyone is going to be there.”

Greyson looked out the window of the limo, seeing Pricilla’s reflection. She was primping for the umpteenth time, even though the make-up artist she hired was ‘the best’. She was going to be hidden behind a mask, anyway, and Greyson didn’t understand why she was making such a fuss. Of course, the mask was obnoxiously ornate with rubies and sapphires. All real, because someone like Pricilla Chapman would not be caught dead in fake baubles. Her gown was more of a spectacle, enticing the observer to focus on breasts that are packed so tightly into the blood red frock, it was a wonder they didn’t spill over. As a man, Greyson thought he would appreciate the view, however he just found it tasteless. At least its length was respectable, unlike the slit that came close to being obscene.

Blaise would never wear something like that, he thought, not surprised that his

mind wandered to the beautiful brunette. She was everything Pricilla was not. Pricilla was tall, blonde and bordering on too thin. Blaise was shorter, with a beautiful mane of brown hair streaked with golden highlights, and a body that was athletic, yet exquisitely feminine with full breasts and a slight flare of her hips. He closed his eyes as he brought that amazing body into his mind. Greyson imagined how soft her skin would be, how wet she would be when he touched her. His body, as always when thinking of Blaise, responded immediately, so he continued let his mind wander.

His imagination was working overtime, and he could practically feel her lips wrapped around his cock...

“Jesus, Pricilla, get the fuck off of me.”

“Come on, darling. I’d say you were enjoying it.” Pricilla’s dull blue eyes glanced down, and she smirked.

Greyson hurriedly tucked himself back into his pants, wondering how the hell she had managed to get as far as she did without him noticing. “It’s fucked up that you would stoop that low as to ambush me like that.”

“Ambush? Please. We haven’t had sex in months, Greyson. That’s *not* going to work when we’re married. I need to get pregnant, and no sex is not going to get that done. Besides, like I said, you enjoyed it.” She ran a blood red fingertip down the front of his shirt, heading for her “prize”.

Greyson grabbed her hand, holding it firmly, almost painfully in his. “I was thinking of someone else,” he growled. “And, we will never be married, you will never be pregnant with my child, and sex between us? *Never* happen again.”

“Who, Greyson?” Pricilla’s face twisted into an angry scowl. “Who is she?”

“It’s of no concern to you, Pricilla. After tonight, we go our separate ways. You can go and find someone who can actually stand to be around you.” He caught her hand easily as she attempted to slap him.

“We’ll just see what your mother has to say about this,” she spat.

“I’m a grown man, Pricilla. No matter what Nora says, I will not be chained to you for the rest of my life.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blaise

BLAISE SMOOTHED HER hands down her dress as she stepped out of the town car. The elegant black chiffon, floor length column gown draped over one shoulder, leaving the other gracefully exposed. A discreet cut-out at her breasts gave just a hint of cleavage, leaving much to the imagination. A jeweled sash adorned the waist, and a conservative slit stopped at mid-thigh, completing a look Blaise knew was classic and dignified. The dress cost her a pretty penny, but paired with her black and white jeweled mask, she couldn't deny she looked damn good. 'Imagine if Greyson could see you now'. Ellie's voice ran through her head, making her pulse jump. She sighed. She had thought about nothing *but* Greyson since their impromptu dinner a few nights ago. Blaise would like just *one* night without the glorious Greyson Steele invading her mind.

The event was for The Gallo Foundation. Armis and Fiona Gallo founded the charity for abused, neglected or abandoned children after adopting their first of five children, who was left in a hospital dumpster. Blaise was fortunate enough to create the flower arrangements for all of the Gallo's events, and has since become friends with the whimsical Fiona. The annual event was always one of her favorites, as well as one of her most lucrative because many of the attendees sought after Blaise to create arrangements for all their occasions.

Blaise put her mask on before walking into the grand ballroom of the Four

Seasons Hotel. There were only a handful of times Blaise allowed herself this kind of outing. Honestly, if it weren't for her friendship with the Gallos, and the good cause, of course, she'd be home right now eating Chinese take-out and watching television. Okay, she'd be eating ice cream from the carton and reading some book filled with great sex scenes.

Right away Blaise spied the flaming red of Fiona's hair. She always found the color to be cliché, but Fiona loved to 'accentuate her heritage' and thought it was the perfect way to do so. And, that's all that mattered. Grabbing a flute of champagne from a passing waiter, Blaise made her way over to her friend.

"Fiona."

The redhead, dressed in a pale pink, scoop neck princess cut dress, turned at the sound of her name. Blaise had to force herself not to wince at the gaudy mask adorned with multi-colored rhinestones and peacock feathers.

"Oh! Blaise! My, don't you look radiant!"

"So do you, as usual." Blaise gave the usual—and always a little pretentious—double cheek kiss. "Good evening, Armis."

"Sweet Blaise." Armis Gallo took both of Blaise's hands in his, giving her a gallant kiss on the knuckles. "The flowers look marvelous. I never have to doubt that."

"I'm so glad you enjoy them."

As it often happened, Armis was whisked away without time to say much else, and she was left with Fiona.

"Have you seen the art we are auctioning tonight?" Fiona gushed. Blaise adored the woman, but small doses of Fiona Gallo were best for their friendship.

"No, I actually just walked in the door, saw you and came right over. I'm planning on making the rounds as soon as I finish this wonderful glass of bubbly."

Fiona laughed, a little too loud and enthusiastically than was warranted. Blaise just smiled, and sipped.

"I just can't believe we were able to obtain paintings from the divine Sumptor Galleries. We even have photography from Eve Sumptor, herself."

Now Blaise was truly excited to see the exhibit. She had seen photos of Eve Sumptor's work, but had yet to see it up close and personal.

"Oh, that's wonderful! Did you hear she's opening a gallery right

next door to my shop?”

“No! I *have* to tell Marie! Do excuse me. Mingle, mingle! There are single men here tonight.”

Blaise laughed politely, but cringed inwardly. Just what she needed. To be set up with one of these yahoos. These were *not* the kind of men she wanted to date. She tipped her glass to Fiona as she traipsed away, and made her way to the exhibit, feeling the excitement build already as the first of the paintings came into view. Picking up a brochure, she skipped over the descriptions of the art, preferring to form her own opinions, and went straight to the artist bios. Who people were interested Blaise, and helped give just a glimpse into why they created or photographed what they did.

The first painting she stopped at was a colorful array of geometric shapes. It certainly wasn't her favorite as she was more into realism, but she could still appreciate the work and imagination that went into it.

“Blaise?”

That voice. She had been dreaming of that voice for a week now. Her eyes closed involuntarily at the low, undeniably sexy timbre. What the hell was Greyson Steele doing here? Slowly she turned to him, thankful that she had a mask that covered most of her face. Hopefully it would hide the affect he had on her as she took in how he looked in his extremely well fitting tuxedo.

“Good evening, Mr. Steele.” Blaise gave herself a mental high five for keeping her voice even.

“You.” He stopped, raked his eyes down her body, then slowly up again. “You look incredible.”

Blaise gave herself another mental high five for the emotion, the *need* she heard in his voice. She had definitely chosen wisely with this dress.

“Thank you.” Blaise let herself take him in once again. “So do you.”

Greyson glanced around them, then brought his eyes back to hers. The intense gray eyes, darkened with desire she knew was there, studied her.

“Where is your date?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your date. You said you had a date this weekend.”

“No. You *assumed* I had a date. I said I had plans.” She smiled sweetly at him despite her irritation. Women were perfectly able to come to functions without having some man escort them.

“Hmm.” He smiled then, a genuine, extremely sexy smile that she felt in the pit of her stomach. “I would never have pictured you at an event like this, though you certainly dress the part.”

Blaise raised an eyebrow, though she wasn’t sure he got the full effect because of the mask. “Too fancy of a party for some lowly flower shop owner?”

Greyson swiped his hand over his stubble, a look of frustration gracing his handsome features. “That’s not what I meant. Not everything I say is meant to turn into an argument, Blaise. I just meant I would think this is too stuffy for someone as interesting as you.”

“Art is interesting,” she countered, then smiled. “I do the arrangements every year for the Gallo Foundation. Plus, I’m friends with Fiona, and *Knight in Bloom* is one of the sponsors for this particular event.”

“This is why I want you to have dinner with me, Blaise.” He stepped closer. “There’s so much I want to know about you.”

“Perhaps you should try a different approach, Mr. Steele.” Blaise stepped closer this time. “Maybe a ‘please have dinner with me’ or ‘I would love to spend time with you’ would work. But you’re always telling me what you *want*.”

“Please have dinner with me, Blaise. I would love to spend more time with you.” He bent his head until their foreheads were almost touching. “I *want* you.”

“Greyson, darling, there you are!”

Blaise’s eyes widened, and Greyson’s closed on a soft swear, as she watched the tall blonde sidle up to Greyson and tuck her left hand around his arm.

“Mother and father are waiting. Oh, darling, it’s time to tell them about our engagement!”

Blaise felt sick to her stomach, but she would certainly never show it. How dare he pursue her when he was engaged!

“Congratulations.” Her eyes bore into Greyson’s, full of fire and anger, before turning to the blonde and smiling.

“Thank you.” The smile she got in return never reached the tall woman’s eyes. In fact, it was almost glacial. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Pricilla Chapman, soon to be Steele, and you are?” She removed her left hand from Greyson, holding it out, tilted enough so that Blaise could plainly see the huge

engagement ring. It, like the woman's mask, was gaudy. And, like the woman's dress, it was made to be flaunted.

"Blaise Knight." And, though it was awkward to shake hands with her left hand, she did it.

"Blaise," Pricilla repeated as though she were tasting something particularly sour. "Odd name."

"Pricilla, that's enough," Greyson growled. They were his first words since she interrupted them, and they were full of venom. Hell, if this was how he treated the woman he was going to marry, Blaise surely dodged a bullet with him.

"Now, darling, I'm sure she hears that all the time. So, how did you two meet?"

"We're not doing this. Go find your parents."

"But, Greyson, darling..."

"Go, Pricilla! I was in the middle of a conversation with Blaise."

"It's fine," Blaise interrupted. "We were done. Please, go," she said, looking directly into Greyson's eyes.

"Blaise."

"Good night, Mr. Steele. Ms. Chapman." Blaise graced them both with an amiable smile—one she wasn't feeling *at all*—and walked away.

Greyson

"GODDAMN IT!" GREYSON turned on Pricilla. "What the fuck was that!"

"Lower your voice, Greyson."

"Fuck that! You just fucked things up for me royally," he growled angrily. "And, how in the hell did you get my mother's ring?"

"She gave it to me, of course. And, honestly, darling, you shouldn't be flirting with other *women* when you're here with your fiancée."

"You are *not* my fucking fiancée!"

Pricilla clicked her tongue, then sipped her champagne with a shit-eating grin that pissed him off even more. "You really do have a temper. Perhaps I

did... oh what was her name again?”

“If I were you, I’d get away from me, Pricilla. Far away.” Although Greyson knew he would *never* hit a woman, he clenched his hands into fists in an attempt to stay in control.

Pricilla had the good grace, or perhaps good sense, to take a step back. The fear in her eyes shamefully satisfied him. “You wouldn’t.”

“Hit you? Of course not. But do you really want to find out what I would do?” He leaned towards her, eyes hard and intimidating. “This whole fucking building will know what a farce this ‘relationship’ is. *Especially* your parents. I don’t know what the fuck *you’re* getting out of this arrangement you have with my mother, but it ends here. Unless you want to make a formal announcement about that, get the fuck away from me.”

He growled again when she began to talk. Then, thankfully, in a huff she turned on her Louboutin heel and sashayed away.

“Fuck, brother. That was harsh.”

Cade’s voice in Greyson’s ear startled him enough to have him cursing—again—out loud.

“She deserved it,” he muttered.

“I was talking about what happened to Blaise. Who looks fucking hot, by the way.”

“Cade.”

Greyson knew Cade well enough to know he would never go after a woman Greyson was interested in. That didn’t mean it didn’t piss him off when Cade made offhand comments. Especially when it came to Blaise.

“No disrespect, brother. Just an observation.”

“Yeah, well, as entertaining as this shit is, I need to find Blaise.”

“Try the bar,” Cade said.

“Try not listening to my fucking conversations,” Greyson shot back.

“Turn off your transmitter, brother.” With that, Cade clicked off.

Greyson jerked his lapel open, taking the small transmitter out and turning it to silent. *Fucking bastard heard everything that was said between Blaise and me*, he thought with a grimace. Fan-fucking-tastic. He’d probably get ribbed for that for weeks. But he didn’t care about that right now. All he cared about was finding Blaise, and explaining things.

Just as Cade said, he found her standing at the bar, smiling a flirty little

smile at the fucking bartender. When he was close enough, he heard the conversation, which infuriated him even more.

“What can I get the beautiful lady?” The young bartender asked. Greyson took in his appearance, and imagined if he weren’t forced to wear a uniform for this function, the dude would probably be in board shorts, an Under Armour shirt, and flip flops. Totally not Blaise’s type. He couldn’t be. Right?

“I have a mask on. How could you possibly know what I look like?” Blaise laughed a laugh that Greyson thought should only be his.

“Believe me, I can tell.” He gave Blaise a charming smile, which Greyson thought fell a little flat. “Open bar. Hit me.”

“Whiskey Sour,” Blaise ordered, tapping her fingers on the bar. Greyson wondered if it was a nervous habit, or some way to keep her hands busy for wanting to strangle someone. Namely him.

“Ouch. Bad date?”

“Are you the proverbial bartender slash psychiatrist?”

Surfer dude laughed, and grabbed a napkin to write on. “Nah. Just trying to get you to tell me if you’re taken. If not, here’s my number.”

“I’m not, but...”

“She is,” Greyson cut in. “Back off.”

The bartender raised his hands in surrender, and went to tend to another customer.

“What the fuck?”

Momentarily taken aback by the swear word coming from Blaise’s beautiful mouth, Greyson’s response was delayed. And the delay gave Blaise another opportunity to walk away again.

“Oh no you don’t.” Greyson caught her arm, tugging her gently to a stop. “You’re not going to walk away until I explain.”

“Take your hand off of me.” Something in the tone of Blaise’s words had Greyson immediately releasing her. “Don’t ever grab me again. Go back to your *fiancée*, Mr. Steele, and stay out of my life.”

“Let me explain, Blaise, please.”

“I don’t need an explanation. And, I certainly don’t want to hear your excuses.”

She looked at him, and a knife twisted in his belly at the look of distaste and hurt. Then she was off, getting away from him as quickly as she

could in her three-inch heels.

“Blaise, please.”

She didn’t slow down. He wanted to reach for her again, but restrained himself. When she pushed through a door, Greyson groaned in absolute frustration, contemplating going in the Ladies Room after her.

Blaise

“*SON OF A BITCH!*” Blaise leaned against the door, her attempt to make sure Greyson didn’t follow her in, and to hold herself up. *Of course!* She thought miserably. Why would this *thing* with Greyson be any different for her? Blaise Knight was notoriously unlucky when it came to dating. And she wasn’t even *dating* the guy! At least she found this out *before* she made an even bigger fool of herself and slept with him.

She untied her mask as she walked to the sink, laying it on the counter with shaking hands. Hearing that woman call Greyson ‘darling’, and seeing the ring, affected Blaise more than she wanted to admit. She thought about that ring for a moment, thinking about how it didn’t look like Greyson’s style. Then, she laughed at herself. *Like you know Greyson*, she chastised herself. *You certainly didn’t know he was fucking engaged!*

“Do you always go after other women’s fiancés?”

Goosebumps formed on Blaise’s bare arms from the sheer iciness in Pricilla’s tone.

She caught Pricilla’s furious stare in the reflection of the mirror. *Well, hell, if her voice could freeze, her eyes could catch you on fire*, Blaise speculated.

“I didn’t go after anyone.”

“I *saw* you! Don’t lie to me, bitch!”

Blaise felt her temper getting perilously close to snapping. She tried to remember that this woman just found out her husband-to-be was just hitting on another woman. Why women blamed each other instead of the roaming bastard, she’d never know.

“I *didn’t* go after anyone,” Blaise repeated. “Talk to your fiancé, not me.”

“You don’t tell me what to do!”

“It was a suggestion,” Blaise told her calmly.

“I suggest you stay out of my business, and out of my fiancé’s life. You have no idea who you’re dealing with. I will make your life miserable.”

Blaise turned and gave her a fiery look. “First, you’re already making it a bit miserable, so good for you. Second, don’t ever threaten me. *You* have no idea who *I* am.”

With that, Blaise plucked up her mask and stormed out, practically running into Greyson.

“Blaise.”

“Don’t. You want to talk to someone, go talk to your fiancée. She’s in there,” Blaise jerked her thumb towards the bathroom door. “She’s perfect for you. You both possess delusions of grandeur when it comes to your importance in my life.”

Blaise never looked back as she walked out of the hotel, stepped into a waiting cab, and gave directions to the one person she knew could help her.



THE RIDE TO the diner did nothing to calm her down. Blaise was angry and embarrassed. Plus, she had spent a fortune on a dress that she didn’t get to fully utilize. Ignoring the appreciative murmurs and whistles, Blaise made her way through the diner and straight through to the kitchen. She didn’t stop when Ellie gave her a questioning look, going straight to the refrigerator to grab the extra red velvet cake she knew Ellie kept there. She turned, hands full, only to have Ellie snatch the cake from her.

“What are you doing?”

“Ellie, I *need* that!”

“You are not going to eat a whole cake, Blaise. Especially in that beautiful dress! Sit down and tell me what’s wrong.”

Blaise didn’t sit, opting to pace instead. Quite a feat in three inch heels that she didn’t wear often. “He’s engaged! And, then she threatened me. How dare she threaten me! I didn’t come on to her damn fiancé! *He* came on to *me!* Ugh! How dare he come on to me when he’s engaged? Then he has the *nerve* to tell

the cute bartender that I was taken! Of all the...”

“Blaise!” Ellie put the cake on the counter, and stood in front of Blaise, placing her hands on Blaise’s shoulders to stop her pacing. “Stop. Take a breath.” Ellie paused and Blaise drew in a deep breath. “Now, what the hell are you talking about? I thought you were at the Gallo’s charity event.”

“I was! Greyson was there.”

Ellie’s eyebrow rose and she nodded slightly as though ‘Greyson was there’ told the whole story. “I see.”

“No. You don’t. He’s *engaged!*”

“Say what now?”

“Exactly! Engaged. Ring—God-awful ring—but a ring, tall, skinny blonde...”

“I take it she’s the one who threatened you?”

“Yes! Can you believe that? Why wasn’t she threatening *him?* I didn’t do anything!”

Ellie guided Blaise to her office. Some things were too private for a kitchen full of staff. She nudged Blaise into the chair, and sat down next to her.

“Now, let’s start from the beginning. You went to the charity event,” Ellie began for Blaise.

“Yes. I got there, spoke briefly to Fiona, and then decided to look at the art that was being auctioned. I’m even more pissed that I didn’t get to finish browsing! I was looking forward to seeing some of Eve’s work.”

“Focus, sweetie.”

“Right.” Blaise sucked in another breath. “Okay, I just started browsing, then *poof*, there’s Greyson. You were right, by the way, he really loved the dress. Anyway, he said all of his arrogant,” Blaise lowered her voice, imitating a Neanderthal, “me man, you date me’ shit. He got so close, I thought he was going to kiss me!”

“Okay,” Ellie said when Blaise stopped talking. “And?”

“And, that’s when *she* walked up all ‘darling, engagement, blah, blah, blah’, thrusting that God-awful ring in my face.”

Ellie’s lips twitched, which made Blaise want to smile. She knew it was the right decision to come here. Though it would be much better if she were stuffing her face with cake.

“And, how did Ms. Blah Blah Blah threaten you?”

“I ran into her in the bathroom. How cliché is that? I was running from Greyson after he ruined my chances with ‘Surfer Boy Bartender’.”

“We’ll come back to ‘Surfer Boy Bartender’. Let’s stick with the threat from tall, skinny and bitchy.”

This time Blaise did laugh. “I really do love you, you know.”

Ellie smiled. “Back at ya, sweetie. Now on with the story. This is the most entertainment I’ve had all night.”

“TS&B was in the bathroom when I went in there to hide. She asked if I always went after other women’s fiancés.”

“Bitch.”

“I know! Ugh. Anyway, I told her she needed to talk to her fiancé. She told me not to tell her what to do.”

“Because we’re in elementary school?”

“Right?! *Then* she told me that I had no idea who I was dealing with, that if I didn’t stay away from her *fiancé*, she would make my life miserable.” Blaise snorted with displeasure. “Please. Like I’m afraid of some self-important socialite.”

“I can’t believe she said that to you. Who does that? Besides people in bad gangster movies.”

“Pricilla Chapman does, apparently.”

Ellie’s eyes widened. “Chapman? As in the Chapmans that own half of LA?”

Blaise shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care.”

“Yes, I can see you’re shaking in your Manolos,” Ellie snickered. “What did you say to her?”

“I told her not to threaten me, that she didn’t know who *she* was dealing with,” Blaise responded with defiance.

“You go girl!” Ellie laughed. “Wow. So, you had an interesting night. I can’t believe Greyson is engaged. He doesn’t seem like the kind of man that cheats.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so either. I guess we were both wrong.” Blaise sat back, slouching slightly which wasn’t the best position to be in considering the way she was dressed.

“Did you see him again?”

“Only in passing as I was leaving.”

“You didn’t give him a chance to explain?”

Blaise stared at Ellie. “Explain what? Why he was coming on to me when he had a fiancée?”

Ellie sighed, and shook her head. “I just don’t understand. Blaise, I am usually a great judge of character. You know that. The way Greyson looked at you, how much he wanted to be with you, I just didn’t see this coming.”

Blaise sighed. “It’s me. No luck with the opposite sex.”

Ellie studied her for a moment, then smiled. “I’m sure it’s not you, or your luck. I really think there’s an explanation.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side,” Blaise muttered.

“I am, sweetie. And I’ve seen how Greyson affects you.” Ellie raised her hands in surrender when Blaise glared at her. “What is this about a Surfer Boy Bartender?” Ellie asked out of pure self-preservation.

“He was the cute bartender that was making me a Whiskey Sour and flirting with me when Greyson came up and shut him down.”

“Wow,” Ellie said once again, furrowing her brows.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“Do you? Tell me, Madame Mind-Reader, what am I thinking?” Ellie smiled.

“You’re thinking again that you couldn’t possibly be so wrong about someone, and there has to be a reasonable explanation,” Blaise responded confidently.

“Well. We should take this on the road! Imagine the money we could make having you read people’s minds.”

Ellie was teasing her, but Blaise knew she was right. And, though she would never admit it out loud, she wished there was a reasonable explanation. Unfortunately, seeing Pricilla and that King Kong sized rock on her finger, Blaise just didn’t believe there was.

“Only if we traveled by RV with a functioning oven. Now feed me cake before I have a complete meltdown.”

CHAPTER NINE

Greyson

“YOU KNOW THIS is illegal, brother.” Cade tapped the keyboard a few more times, then hit Enter.

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” Greyson answered, peering at the screen that began filling with information.

“Just saying, man, you could just wait until the morning...”

“Cade, she ran out of there without giving me a chance to explain. Her shop is closed on Sundays, and I don’t want to wait until Monday to see her. I went to the diner, but Ellie wouldn’t give me her number.”

“Chick code,” Cade grouched.

Greyson spared Cade a glance. “It’s a wonder you’re still single.”

“If you had told me you were going to see Ellie tonight, like a good friend would have, I could be getting me some of that sweet...”

“Don’t finish that sentence, man. For both of our sakes.” Greyson found the information he needed, and jotted it down on a piece of paper he found on Cade’s cluttered desk. “How do you work like this?”

“I’ll have you know that I know where everything is. And, you just used a piece of paper with important info on it.” Cade cleared the screen, and sat back. “What are you going to do when you get there? Beg her?”

“If I have to.” Greyson keyed Blaise’s address and phone number into his phone, handing Cade the piece of paper. He knew what he was doing, getting

Blaise's information illegally, would probably piss her off even more than she already is. But he had to do something.

"Fuck. You're really hung up on this one, aren't ya?" Cade flipped the piece of paper back on to his desk, and scratched his head, giving Greyson a look. "Greyson Steele begging a woman. Never thought I'd see the day."

"You heard what happened, man, but you didn't see the look on Blaise's face. She was hurt. So, yeah, if I have to beg for her to listen to me just to take that pain away, I will."

"All right. Well, good luck, brother. You owe me for this. I'll take payment in the form of a date with Ellie."

"You think she'll listen to me if Blaise doesn't hear me out or forgive me?" Greyson stopped at the door of Cade's office, turning to him. "She has a daughter."

"Blaise?" Cade asked, clearly surprised.

"Ellie." Greyson laughed as Cade's eyes grew wide. "A teenager." With that, Greyson left to hopefully salvage whatever he could with Blaise.



IF GREYSON HAD ever been nervous standing in front of a woman's door before, he didn't remember. But here and now, in front of Blaise's, he could swear his palms were sweaty. *I should have brought flowers*, he thought. Then immediately rejected the idea. Flowers for the flower shop owner. Stupid idea. Besides, he has seen Blaise's talent. Flowers from anywhere else would just be inferior. And, it was probably in bad taste to buy from a competitor. Greyson certainly didn't need more reasons for Blaise to reject him.

Grateful that he had taken the time to change into well-worn jeans and a black t-shirt—may as well be comfortable while begging—he knocked on the door.

The door slid open. "Honey, I told you I was fine and you didn't have to..."

Greyson was struck dumb by the sight before him. Mere hours before, Blaise was the epitome of grace and class. The gown she wore accentuated everything about Blaise that Greyson found sexy. But now. Damn. Her hair

was piled on the top of her head in a messy bun, her face was clean of any cosmetics and she wore a men's white button up shirt and white fluffy socks. Whether she had on anything under that shirt, Greyson didn't know, but he ached to find out. To him, Blaise was sexier right at this moment than he had ever seen her.

"Hi."

"What?" She frowned, and waved a spoon in his direction. He hadn't noticed the carton of ice cream until then. "What are you doing here? How did you know where I live?"

"I'm here because you wouldn't listen to me before. I need to explain."

"You *need* to go home to your fiancée, Mr. Steele."

"Goddamn it, Blaise. She's not my fucking fiancée. *That's* what I'm trying to tell you."

Blaise raised an eyebrow, and Greyson wondered if she was aware of just how beautiful she looked right now.

"The ring and the woman say something different," she shot back. "And, you certainly didn't deny it at that moment. If you *just* broke up with her and came here, that's even lower, Mr. Steele."

Greyson let out a frustrated growl, and scrubbed his hands over his face. "May I come in?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"No."

"Blaise." The tone of his voice was one he used when he wanted to intimidate those around him to do as he demanded. He shouldn't have been surprised when it didn't even faze her.

"Do not 'Blaise' me. And, don't you dare use that tone with me. I am *not* one of your employees, or lackeys or whatever. You have something to say, say it right here." She leaned against the door jamb, crossing her ankles, and waited. Digging the spoon into the carton, Blaise looked up at him. "And, don't think I don't realize you totally skipped over my question of how you found out where I live."

He watched her wrap her lips around the spoon. Just as he had when he sat at dinner with her a few nights ago, he found watching her eat completely erotic. And, as much as her stubbornness irked him, he couldn't help but feel an equal—or more—amount of respect for her.

"Fine," he sighed. If he had to do this out in the hallway, so be it. "I am

not engaged. That’s the most important thing I need you to know.” He held up a hand when she opened her mouth. “If you’re going to make me talk out here, the least you can do is hear me out.”

Her jaw tightened with annoyance, but she nodded before taking another bite of what he could now see was Ben & Jerry’s Coffee, Coffee flavor.

“I’m *not* engaged,” he repeated. “I’ve never been engaged, and I certainly would never even contemplate marrying Pricilla. She surprised the shit out of me with the ring, as well, which is why I didn’t say anything. It’s my mother’s ring, but I didn’t give it to her. Fuck, I wouldn’t give that hideous thing to anyone.” He took a deep breath. “I was there with Pricilla because my mother asked me to escort her. ‘Keeping up appearances’, she calls it. Padding her fucking portfolio by trying to merge the families is what it really is. I’ve already resigned myself to taking over the family business. I refuse to give her this. Tonight was a mistake. I should never have agreed to it.” He braved a step closer to her. “I never wanted to hurt you, or make you think I’m *that* kind of bastard.”

Blaise

SHIT. SHE HAD gone from complete shock—with a touch of embarrassment at her attire—to anger, to resignation, to relief, and now? Now she just felt sad for him.

“What is the family business?”

She could tell she caught him off guard with her question. She caught herself off guard. What she really wanted to know was more about this ‘Pricilla’ person. Or maybe she didn’t.

“What?”

“The family business. You said you have resigned yourself to take over the family business. What is it?”

“Steele Industries.”

Blaise raised her eyebrows. Perhaps she should have figured that out for herself by his last name. But Blaise never put two and two together that

Greyson Steele was of *the* Steeles. “And, that’s not something you want to do?”

“Can we go inside and talk about this?” Greyson asked, running a hand through his hair. It was something Blaise had noticed as impatience and frustration.

“No. I’m sorry, Mr. Steele, I’m not trying to be a bitch. It’s just that I don’t really know you.”

“Do you think I would hurt you?”

“Of course not.” Blaise sighed. “I don’t invite people into my home. It’s my sanctuary.” It was the truth, and she hoped he would see that in her eyes. The only people she allowed in her home were Ellie and Jessie.

“Okay. I will respect that.” Greyson took a few steps back, and slid down the wall opposite of Blaise until he was seated. “Got another spoon?” he asked, nodding to the ice cream.

Blaise chuckled. “Hang on.” She went back inside, grabbed another spoon and a napkin. “Would you like coffee?” she called out.

“Coffee with Coffee, Coffee ice cream? Do you ever sleep?” he called back, making Blaise laugh again.

She grabbed a couple of bottles of water, and went back out into the hallway. It may be a very bad idea, sitting next to Greyson, sharing her favorite ice cream with him. But he came here in an effort to explain things to her. She figured it was only right she talk it out.

“Here.” She handed him a spoon and a bottle when she settled in next to him. “So? Steele Industries. Not something you want to do?”

“No. My father has turned the company into something I don’t want to be a part of.”

“Which is?” Blaise asked around a bite of ice cream. “Sorry. I’ve heard of Steele Industries; I just don’t know what you do there. Exactly.”

“Not many people do these days. It was different when my grandfather was head of the company. We had purpose. We helped companies. Now, we just tear them apart. My father sees it as a more lucrative endeavor.”

“You don’t?”

Blaise watched as Greyson took a bite of ice cream, wrinkling his nose a bit.

“Interesting,” he murmured. “It’s not as lucrative as he wants everyone to believe it is. He’s already bankrupt the company once.”

“So, if you’re in charge, couldn’t you change it?”

“I could.” He twisted the cap off his water bottle, taking a long pull.

“But?” Blaise began for him when he said nothing else.

Greyson wiped his mouth, and glanced at Blaise. “But, I don’t want to. Steele Industries is not what I want to do.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I wasn’t expecting this conversation, Blaise.”

Blaise shrugged. “I wasn’t expecting you to show up at my doorstep either.”

“Touché. Cade, my friend you met at the diner?” When Blaise nodded, he continued. “He owns a security company. Wants me to come in and be a part of it. Doing all kinds of jobs from private jobs like the Gallo’s event, to military assignments. They also develop security equipment.”

“For the military?” Blaise was impressed, and perhaps a little intimidated. He had mentioned he was in the Army, but beyond that, Blaise had no idea what he actually did while enlisted. “Or is that classified?”

Greyson chuckled a low and rumbling sound that made Blaise shiver. Of course, she immediately blamed the ice cream, and her lack of... *oh shit*. She just became hyper aware of what she had on. Or more to the point, what she *didn’t* have on. Yes, she had shorts on, but the length of the shirt made it seem like she didn’t. Blaise wondered what Greyson had thought about her when she opened the door. And, now she was extremely self-aware of how she was sitting.

“I think Cade is discussing it with the military. But at this point, it’s for civilians or other security personnel.”

“And, this is what you want to do?”

“Yeah. When we were still in, we would talk about what would happen after. This was our plan. Cade did it.” He shrugged, but Blaise could tell it bothered him quite a bit.

“Why did you change your mind?”

Their hands bumped when they both went for another bite of ice cream. Then their eyes locked. Blaise could feel the intense heat coming from them. All her imagination, she thought. Until his eyes slid down to take the rest of her in. Her white button up—which she desperately hoped was buttoned enough not to be showing off everything—bare legs, white

fluffy socks. Jesus, could this be any more embarrassing? She cleared her throat, effectively bringing his eyes back to hers, and she lifted a brow in question.

“Right.” He took a swig of water. “I didn’t change my mind. I came home, found that the business was in the red, my mother begging me to step in and be ‘groomed’ to take over, as soon as possible.”

“Couldn’t you have just said no? That you wanted to do something else?”

“It’s not that easy when you come from a family like mine, Blaise. We have an obligation to uphold the Steele name. I’m the eldest son, the *only* son. That obligation falls to me.”

Blaise stared at him for a moment, not understanding why he would put aside his own dreams to do something he hated. Of course, she had no family to speak of, so she supposed that was one reason she couldn’t fathom this obligation Greyson felt.

“And, this ‘obligation’ is why you agreed to escort that woman?” Blaise knew that she sounded like a jealous girlfriend, but that *woman* had bombarded her in the bathroom. She didn’t deserve Blaise’s respect.

“Yeah.” He took the almost empty ice cream carton from her, throwing both of their napkins in it and setting it to the side. “I met Pricilla at one of the many family functions my mother has. Nora, my mother, set us up.”

“So you’ve dated?”

“I wouldn’t call it dating.”

Well. That was something Blaise certainly didn’t want to know about. “I see.”

“That’s not how I meant that,” Greyson said, bending his knee and turning his body towards her. “We went out a few times, but she’s just... not my type.”

“Tall, skinny, blonde and beautiful is not your type?”

“You can always find a beautiful shell, Blaise. But what is it worth if there’s nothing inside?”

Gorgeous and profound, Blaise thought. Crap.

“Some people don’t care about what’s on the inside,” she countered.

“I’m not some people. Look, I’m not going to lie and say that it didn’t get physical with her. But even that was...”

“Not your type?” Blaise offered acerbically.

He laughed. “I suppose you could say that.” Then he paused, becoming

serious again. “Why don’t you invite anyone in, Blaise?”

Blaise got up abruptly, discreetly smoothing down her shirt to make sure everything was still covered. “Have you said everything you came here to say, Mr. Steele?”

“Damn it, Blaise.” Greyson rose as well. “Stop running away from me.”

“How did you... Cade. Cade looked up my address for you didn’t he?” She raised her hands, not giving him a chance to answer. “Did you have him do a complete background check on me?” God, she hoped he didn’t. Blaise’s privacy meant everything to her. Thinking someone could find things out about her without her permission scared her.

“Of course not. I just needed to explain this to you. I needed you to hear me out. Now. Not Monday at your shop when you could use customers as excuses to send me away.”

“I don’t need excuses, Mr. Steele. And, I’m not running.”

“You are,” he retorted.

“I’m *not*.” God, what is going on here? Blaise felt like she was back in elementary school, fighting with a boy who pulls her hair because he ‘likes’ her.

“Prove it.”

Yep. Elementary school. “Did you really just tell me to prove it?”

“Yes.”

“And, how *exactly* would you like me to ‘prove’ it to you?” She knew. He didn’t have to say it, but she would make him anyway. She just didn’t know what her answer would be.

“Have dinner with me. No, wait.” Greyson cleared his throat. “Blaise Knight, I would be honored if you would have dinner with me.”

Well, shit. Blaise sighed inwardly. “Fine.” When Greyson lifted a brow, that inward sigh came out. “I would love to, Mr. Steele.” She managed to hold back *most* of the sarcasm.

Greyson growled, again. “While we’re on our date, do you think you could *try* to call me Greyson?”

Blaise shrugged with indifference because she knew it would aggravate him. “Maybe.”

Greyson shook his head, and scratched his whiskered cheek. “You are a stubborn woman.”

“Still want that date?”

“Oh yeah. I’m not letting you run away anymore.” As he tended to do, much to Blaise’s consternation, he stepped closer. “You feel this, Blaise. I know you do. You just need to stop fighting it. It’s *going* to happen.”

Blaise ran her hand up his t-shirt, and into the hair at the nape of his neck. She felt a surge of satisfaction when she felt him shiver ever so slightly at her touch. “There is a fine line between arrogance and confidence, Mr. Steele. I abhor arrogance. Be careful how close to the line you get.”

It took a lot of effort not to flinch, or stiffen when Greyson brought his hand up to rest on her hips.

“It’s not arrogance, Blaise. It’s hope and positive thinking. A man has nothing if he doesn’t have hope.”

When he bent his head, Blaise pushed away. If he kissed her now, they’d be doing a lot more than just eating ice cream out here in the hallway. “Friday night. Seven o’clock.”

“I’ll be here.” He eyed her, again, and she could only hope she wasn’t blushing. “As much as I love what you’re wearing, we’ll be going somewhere with a bit more of a dress code.”

“Dress code? That fancy, huh? Trying to impress me, Mr. Steele?” Blaise opened her door, and stepped past the threshold. To her, it was like a barrier between them. Safe. And, she needed safe as she watched him bend down to pick up their trash. *God, that ass.* Blaise brought her eyes up as he straightened, but the knowing look in his eyes told her she’d been caught.

“Yes. I’m trying to impress you, Blaise.” He handed her the ice cream carton and spoons. “And, I’m trying to make up for all the times I’ve screwed up so far. I’m sure there will be more.”

Blaise laughed softly. “And, I’m sure I’ll keep being stubborn. It’s in my nature.”

“Then I doubt we’ll ever have a dull moment between us. Good night, Blaise.”

“Good night, Mr. Steele.”

CHAPTER TEN

Blaise

“RED VELVET?” ELLIE asked Blaise as she stepped through the kitchen door. She had flour streaked across her face, and she was busy rolling out pastry for the day.

Blaise placed a slightly unsteady hand on her stomach. “No.” She had had an extremely restless night after Greyson left. She spent hours in her ‘greenhouse’ working on the Blood Orclip for Ana, but her mind never left Greyson. How had he managed to get her to go against her self-imposed ‘no dating’ rule? She knew it was a mistake. Blaise had never been afraid of going out and playing the game. She knew she would never let her heart get involved until she was absolutely ready. And, she wasn’t ready now. But she wasn’t sure she had the defenses to keep her heart out of whatever was going on with Greyson.

“I’m sorry. Did you just say no to red velvet cake?” Ellie immediately walked to Blaise, laying a flour-covered hand on Blaise’s forehead. “Are you sick?”

Blaise swatted Ellie away. “No, I’m not sick. Did you just get flour all over me?”

“Oh quit fussing, and tell me what’s wrong.” Ellie washed her hands, then walked back around the enormous butcher block island in the middle of the kitchen. It was early enough that the employees hadn’t made it in yet, and

Blaise was thankful for the privacy.

“Nothing is wrong.”

“Bullshit. You’re here at,” Ellie looked at the clock on the wall. “Quarter to six in the morning, and you’re refusing red velvet which you will eat no matter what time of the day it is. So spill it. Does this have to do with Greyson being engaged?”

“He’s not.” Blaise picked up a piece of discarded dough and began rolling it into a tiny dough ball.

“What do you mean he’s not?”

“He had his friend Cade look up my address, and showed up at my apartment. Of course I was *not* expecting company, especially from him, so I wasn’t dressed appropriately. And, I was eating ice cream of all things...”

“Blaise!” Ellie laughed, and threw a handful of flour at her. “Focus!”

The flour ‘snowed’ down on Blaise’s hair, and she glared at Ellie. She shook out her bangs, thankful that she had pulled the rest back in a ponytail. “You got flour on my yoga pants.”

“Doesn’t get you out of doing yoga. Now continue.” Ellie continued rolling out her dough for whatever pie she was about to amaze the world with.

“Well, *you* interrupted me!” Blaise dusted off her pants, and continued to tell Ellie about her night with Greyson. Since it was Ellie, Blaise didn’t leave out any details.

“Wow.” Ellie had stopped what she was doing to listen intently to Blaise’s story. “He *really* wanted to go out with you.”

“I guess so.” Blaise threw her little dough ball onto the counter, watching it ‘splat’ with a small smile. She picked it up again just to have something to occupy her hands. *Nervous energy*, she thought. “I’m scared, El.”

“Why? Sweetie, what is it about love that scares you?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Blaise. We’re talking about you.”

“Because you *never* talk about you!” She didn’t know why she did it. Hell, she didn’t even know she *had* thrown her dough ball at Ellie until a large, flat ‘disc’ came sailing through the air straight at her. Unfortunately, Blaise wasn’t fast enough to get fully out of the way, and ended up with dough on her shoulder.

“Don’t turn this around on me, please.”

“You say ‘please’ like you’re so innocent,” Blaise muttered. “And, yet here I am blanketed with dough.”

“That was your own fault.”

“I threw a *tiny* ball at you! Not an afghan of pie crust!”

When Ellie started laughing, Blaise couldn’t help but join in. They were both holding their sides, and wiping tears from their eyes by the time the laughter subsided.

“God, I needed that,” Blaise wheezed, then sobered a bit. “I just don’t know if I’m ready for someone like Greyson Steele.”

“Because he has the potential to break down your barriers?” Ellie asked, starting on a new crust.

“Yes. There’s so much tension between us.”

“Sexual tension?” Ellie smirked.

Blaise snorted. “Of course. But it’s more than that. Being with him is going to be intense. What if I’m not ready for that kind of relationship in my life? Everything is simple and calm now.”

“Well, sweetie, you could just go out with him and see how it goes. He didn’t propose marriage. Try not to get ahead of yourself.”

“My head knows you’re right. My body, however, may have other plans.”

“Stop thinking with your vagina!” Ellie laughed.

“Have you *seen* Greyson? I think that’s exactly where my brain goes when I see him.” Blaise got up to pour herself a cup of coffee, gesturing with her cup to see if Ellie wanted any. When she shook her head, Blaise took her cup and sat back down. “It’s just dinner,” she sighed.

Ellie glanced up at her, and smiled. “Just dinner.”

Greyson

“ADRIENNE, PLEASE CONFIRM my reservations for two at Mancha.” Greyson sat at his massive cherry wood desk, in his plush ergonomic chair, in the expansive office, and was bored out of his fucking mind. The only thing keeping him sane today was knowing that he would be seeing Blaise soon.

“Yes, sir. For you and Ms. Chapman?” His assistant answered through the intercom.

“No. There is no me and Ms. Chapman.” Fuck. It pissed him off that Pricilla had tried to force herself into all aspects of his life. Showing up here at Steele Industries whenever she damn well pleased, acting like she owned the place. Hell, she’s welcome to it if it meant he didn’t have to be here anymore. “As a matter of fact, if Ms. Chapman ever shows up here, I’m always busy.”

“Y-yes, sir.” His assistant answered.

He knew Pricilla’s presence here wasn’t a welcome one by the staff. She was a bitch. That certainly wasn’t a secret. If she gave Adrienne any trouble for keeping her away from him, he’d handle it. Perhaps a raise, he thought. Greyson pulled out his cell when it began to ring.

“Cade. What’s up?”

“Group of us are getting together for poker tonight, brother. You in?”

“Can’t tonight, man.” Greyson sat back, swiveling his chair so he could look out the floor to ceiling window.

“Come on, brother! We never get all the guys together. We finally got ‘em. Bring some beer.”

“Damn. Sorry, man. I just can’t.” Greyson felt a moment of regret not being able to hang out with his military buddies. But it faded just as quickly when he thought about spending time with Blaise.

“You better be getting some good pussy to miss this, brother.”

“Cade.” Greyson allowed the disapproval, and borderline anger, seep through his tone. “Blaise agreed to go out on a date with me.”

“No shit? Well, fuck, man. I’d miss this game for that!” Cade ‘whooped’ on the other end, and Greyson heard him telling the guys that he ‘got the girl’.

“Already starting the party, man?” Greyson glanced at his watch, grimacing when he saw the time. “It’s only three o’clock.”

“Brother, it is always time to party over here. You’d know that if you worked with me.”

Greyson knew Cade was joking, and that he took his company very seriously. But he also knew he could party hard when the occasion called for it. Having their military brothers there? Definitely the right situation.

“Yeah, don’t remind me. Look, tell the others I’m sorry I’ll miss the game tonight. I have a meeting to get to, then I’m out of here.”

“Will do. Hey, since you’re in with Blaise now, how about talking me up with Ellie?”

Greyson’s brows rose in surprise. “You heard me when I said she has a kid, right?”

“Yeah? Is that supposed to be a problem?”

Greyson noted the annoyance in Cade’s voice, and laughed. “Man, you tell women you’re going back to Afghanistan if you find out they have kids.”

“That was the ‘old Cade’, brother. I’m new and improved.”

“Yeah? Since when?”

“Since I saw the ass on Ellie, brother.”

Greyson barked out a laugh. “Oh yeah. New and improved. I’m not going to talk about you on my date with Blaise, man. But I’ll see what I can do. Good enough for you?”

“Just remember you owe me, brother. I got you Blaise’s address. You got a date out of it. Paybacks.”

Greyson shook his head and laughed when Cade cut off the call. *Crazy son of a bitch*, he thought. But he wouldn’t change him for the world. And, having done a few ‘off the record’ assignments with Cade, Greyson wouldn’t trust his life with anyone else.

His alert went off reminding him of the damned meeting he didn’t want or need to be at. *Just get through this*, he thought wearily. “Then dinner,” he said into the empty office.

Blaise

“I AM NOT wearing that, EL.”

Ellie laughed at Blaise’s reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Why? It would certainly get Greyson’s attention.” She held up the little black dress that was more appropriate for a night on the corner than in a fancy restaurant.

“Yeah, I don’t think I need any more of that,” Blaise responded as she put a touch of mascara on. She was never one for a lot of make-up, but thought tonight called for at least a bit of effort.

“True. Why in the hell did you buy this?” Ellie hung the dress back up where she found it, and continued looking for an outfit for Blaise.

“I didn’t. It was a gift from someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I think it was that bodybuilder I was dating that kept telling me I should show off my legs more.”

“Ooo, Biff!”

Blaise laughed at her best friend. “His name was *not* Biff! It was Glenn. I think.”

“Biff. And, while you do have great legs, this dress would show much more than that! Oh, this one is pretty!” Ellie took down a blush colored, belted, cap sleeve dress.

Blaise looked over her shoulder and nodded. It was casual, yet elegant. And, the Chanel dress fit her like a dream. “I like that one. That’ll work.”

“I’m totally going to borrow this one day.” Ellie hung the dress from the hook on the bathroom door. “And, I would wear your nude Jimmy Choos with it.”

“You can’t fit in my shoes, Sasquatch.”

Ellie laughed. “Shut up! Don’t be a bitch. My feet are *not* that big. And, I meant that *you* should wear your Jimmy Choos tonight.”

“Sounds good,” Blaise answered distractedly. The dress was perfect, and of course Ellie was right with the shoes. It was what she would wear under it all that occupied her mind now. He wasn’t going to see them, of course. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t go the sexy route.

“You’re thinking about your underwear, aren’t you?”

Blaise stopped brushing her hair to glare at Ellie. “You don’t know me.”

“Mmhmm. You’re thinking about wearing sexy lingerie, which I totally agree with, by the way. I’m just not sure he won’t be seeing them.”

“What the hell, Ellie? How do you do that?”

“Sweetie, we’ve known each other for fourteen years. Which means I know this routine of yours. I’ve seen it *plenty* of times.”

“Now who’s being the bitch?” Blaise laughed. She picked out a pair of tear drop diamonds for her ears, with a matching solitaire necklace. Simple, but makes a statement. Exactly how Blaise thought of herself. When she walked into her bedroom, she noticed Ellie had laid everything out for her on the bed.

Including a very racy nude thong.

“Do you want stockings or no?” Ellie asked as she rummaged through Blaise’s drawer.

“Yes.” She took off her robe, not minding one bit that Ellie was in the room with her. They had shared an apartment while at University, so modesty wasn’t something they bothered with. She slipped into her thong and matching bra, then took the stockings from Ellie. Once those were in place, she put on the dress and shoes.

“You look great, Blaise.” Ellie turned her to the full length mirror. “You’re certainly going to make him squirm.”

“It’s just dinner, El. I don’t want to make him squirm.” But she had to admit, she looked damn good. And, if she happened to make Greyson take notice, Blaise was good with that.

“Blaise.” Ellie looked into Blaise’s eyes through the reflection in the mirror. “You’re both adults, so don’t stress over this. Just go and have fun.”

Blaise smiled at her. “Thank you for being here for me. And, for bringing me cake.”

“You’re welcome,” Ellie laughed. “Now I should get out of here before Greyson gets here. It’s a rare night off, so I thought I’d take Jessie to the movies.”

“She’s not mad at you anymore?”

“Oh, she is. The trip was this weekend. I’m hoping that filling her with a bucket of popcorn, a gallon of soda, and a ton of chocolate will get her in a better mood.”

“That or put her in a food coma. Either way, she’ll be putty in your hands.”

“Well, one can hope.” Ellie glanced at her watch when the doorbell sounded. “Someone is eager for the night to begin.”

Blaise laughed and pushed Ellie out of the room. “I’m ready for the night to begin if it means riding in that car again.”

“Again?” Ellie stopped walking, only to be pushed forward by Blaise. “What do you mean again? When was the first time?”

“Really? You want to have this discussion now?”

“Fine. But you’re giving me *full* details after your date.” She opened the

door to a very dashing Greyson Steele dressed in all black. “Looking good, Mr. Steele.”

“Thank you.”

Blaise had to smile at the confused look on Greyson’s face. “Ellie was just leaving.” She gave Ellie one last shove out of the apartment. “Let me just get my purse, and I’ll be ready.” She seized the opportunity to get one more look at Greyson, taking in the black slacks, black V-neck shirt and black blazer. Normally she would prefer a little color *somewhere* in there, but one thing she had to give Greyson, he sure did pull off the look. Extremely well.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Greyson

HE COULDN'T KEEP his eyes off of her legs. Blaise looked absolutely incredible. In fact, no matter what Blaise was wearing—or not wearing if he thought about the night he showed up unannounced at her apartment—she looked incredible. But goddamn, her legs. When she gracefully got in his car, and the hem of her dress shifted up her thigh, it took all of his strength not to reach out and touch her.

“You’re quiet tonight,” she said softly.

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying not to do anything that annoys you right off the bat,” he teased.

“Aww, you were doing so well up until then.” Blaise glanced over at him and gave him a cute wink.

“Actually, I’ve been trying to talk myself out of touching you this whole time. I think I’ve been doing pretty well with that.”

She laughed and his chest tightened. Her laugh was a thing of beauty. Husky and low. Genuine. Not the high pitched, fake laughs he was used to from women like Pricilla.

“Well, then. I commend you on a fine job, Mr. Steele.”

He slanted her a look. “Are you *ever* going to call me Greyson?”

He couldn’t say which he loved more. Her husky laugh, or the mischievous smile she gave him just then.

“Maybe. If you earn it.”

He chuckled. No one had ever challenged him like Blaise did. Even with something as simple as saying his name. He couldn’t wait to find out what she was like in all other aspects of their relationship. *Relationship?* Greyson shook his head. Since when did he think in terms of relationships? *Since Blaise*, he mused. He hadn’t been able to take his mind off of her since the moment he saw her, and he was damned determined to see where he could take this.

“Does dinner at Mancha get me any points?” he asked casually.

Blaise’s eyebrows lifted. “Mancha? The place with the artistic ink blots in the lobby?” Greyson nodded. “That place is nearly impossible to get into.”

“Nearly,” he said cockily. He liked that Blaise was impressed. Hell, at least all of the money and prestige his family held was good for something.

“There’s the Mr. Steele I know,” Blaise laughed.

She was clearly teasing him, and he had to admit that it relieved some of the previous tension between them. He was nervous, which had surprised him. Nerves were not something that Greyson was accustomed to when taking a woman out. Then again, he wasn’t accustomed to a woman like Blaise.



“GOOD EVENING, MR. STEELE.” The maître d’ greeted them in over-the-top excitement. Greyson knew that it was his last name that granted the fabricated respect, but he would use it to his advantage. “Your table is ready, if you would just follow me.”

Greyson turned in time to see Blaise tilt her head, studying one of the blots that reminded him of a Rorschach ink blot. She was examining it so intently that she flinched when he touched her shoulder.

“Sorry.” He raised his chin at the blotch. “What do you see?”

“A pig riding a horse in the meadow.”

Greyson’s eyebrows shot to his hairline, and he looked at the photo tipping his head one way and the other. No matter how he looked at it, he did *not* see a pig, a horse or even a meadow. He knew he was being mocked once again when she started laughing. “Cute.” He glanced down with a half-smile. “Can I expect this type of entertainment for the entire date?” Blaise grinned

mischievously, causing Greyson to shake his head. He held his arm out, feeling a sudden punch of pleasure when she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. He walked proud with Blaise on his arm, noticing the glances in their direction. There was no doubt they made a great-looking couple. Now if he could just convince Blaise of that fact.

He pulled Blaise's chair out for her, receiving a smile and a soft 'thank you' for his effort. The maître d' handed him a wine menu, then offered Blaise a dinner menu.

"Your waiter will be right with you. Would you like to hear the specials for tonight?"

"No. Thank you," Greyson answered succinctly when he noticed the man's gaze lingering on Blaise for too long. When they were alone, he turned his focus back on Blaise who was looking at him with amused eyes. "What?"

"Nothing." She opened her menu, suddenly finding it extremely interesting.

Greyson grinned. Obviously she had caught his little bout of jealousy. Good. Perhaps she would see how serious he was about this. "Would you like some wine?"

"Sounds good."

"Do you have a preference?"

"Whatever you choose will be fine."

"All right. They serve some of the best tapas here. Stuffed mushrooms, Pissaladiere, Camembert, figs and ham tapas. Would you like to get a sampling of each?"

"Get two of everything and include fried asparagus, ham and cheese bundles, and you're on."

Greyson chuckled. *God, what a woman*, he thought. No pretenses, no silly salads. This was a woman who knew what she wanted and had no problems telling you what it was.

Blaise took a sip from her water glass, peering at Greyson over the rim. "What are you expecting, Mr. Steele?"

"Excuse me?"

"You've brought me to a beautifully lavish and trendy restaurant," she explained. "One that is difficult to get a reservation to for mere mortals. What do you expect from your dates in return?"

Greyson frowned. "I never expect anything in return, Blaise."

She lifted a brow. "Really?"

"You are categorizing me."

"Good evening." A waiter dressed in black and white interrupted anything Blaise was about to say. "My name is Mateo. I'll be at your service tonight. May I start you out with a bottle of wine, sir?"

"Yes, perhaps a bottle of Gramona?" Greyson glanced at Blaise. "Is that okay?"

"For tapas, I'd prefer a Rosado if you have it. Perhaps Gran Fuedo?"

The waiter looked to Greyson, and when he received a nod, he smiled at Blaise. "Yes, ma'am."

The remainder of their order was taken, and the waiter hurried away. Once they were alone again, Greyson raised his eyebrows in question.

Blaise

"I HATE IT when they do that," she muttered, then noticed Greyson's look. *He's probably surprised I know good wine.* Blaise tilted her head. "I think *you're* categorizing me, Mr. Steele."

"How?"

"You look at me and see just a flower shop owner who wouldn't know good wine at a fancy place like this. Yet, you don't really know anything about me." She sat back in her chair. "What did you do in the Army?"

The change in subject clearly caught him off guard. "What?"

"I assume you asked me out so we could get to know each other, and not just so you could flirt with me. You can do that anywhere. You *have* done that anywhere. You were," she paused to think, "a Lieutenant Colonel, right? What did you do exactly?"

Greyson sat back as well, mirroring her. "I was Delta Force."

Blaise's eyes widened. "As in dangerous missions, Delta Force?"

"Some of them were, yes." He grinned. "You thought I had some cushy desk job, didn't you?"

Blaise shrugged sheepishly. “Maybe. And, maybe we’re both guilty of stereotyping each other. So, how about we start over.”

“I’d like that.”

“The security company Cade owns? Would you be doing dangerous missions if you were there?”

“Worried about me?” he winked, then shrugged. “They do some missions for the military, but their primary assignments are for private citizens.”

“And, you’re not doing this solely because of family obligations?”

She watched as Greyson’s eyes dimmed. Obviously this was not a good subject, but if they wanted to know each other, every subject should be discussed. Right? Of course, she knew that thought was hypocritical. There are parts of her life she would not discuss, not even with Ellie.

“If you came from a family like mine, perhaps you’d understand. I can’t just open a flower shop, Blaise. My family, and family name, is important.” He stopped and took deep drink of his water. “I apologize for that. I shouldn’t have reacted that way,” he said as he set the glass down.

“Perhaps we should avoid the subject of family,” Blaise suggested, feeling the sting of his words.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to avoid any subjects with you, Blaise. Even when it comes to my family.” He paused, giving her an intense look. “I want to know everything about you.”

“You’re asking for a lot, Mr. Steele.” His look, as well as his words, made her jittery.

“I’ll settle with you calling me Greyson. For now.”

Blaise leaned forward. “Earn it.”



THE REST OF the meal was filled with pleasant conversation and laughter. Blaise found Greyson Steele to be a very interesting and intelligent man. *Crap*. It was going to be extremely hard to resist him. She had spent most of the night watching his mouth as he ate, and the images that put into her head were...

“Blaise?”

Blaise was snapped out of her thoughts when Greyson touched her hand.

“I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

“Where did you go?”

To bed with you. “I’m here.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “Okay. Well, I asked if you would like dessert.”

“If you would like a second date, you’re going to have to learn that ‘would you like dessert’ is really not the question. The question is ‘*what* would you like for dessert,’” she deadpanned.