

A photograph of a person from the back, wearing a bright pink ribbed long-sleeved shirt and blue denim jeans. Two hands are visible, one resting on the person's lower back and the other on their right hip, suggesting a sensual or intimate touch. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a wooden door and a white wall.

# **MINE FOR NOW**

## **The Billionaire's Obsession**

**2**

**By**

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# **Mine For Now (Book II : The Billionaire's Obsession)**

**By J. S. Scott**

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# Chapter 1

Simon woke the morning after his incredible sexual encounter, surrounded by the tantalizing scent of Kara and feeling like something was missing from his bed.

He rolled to his back, his cock hard and swollen, trying not to think about the heart-stopping events of the night before. He pulled a pillow over his face and breathed in her fragrance, a scent that would likely haunt him forever. And every time he imagined her scent, he would think about her taste. Her smile. Her moans. Her absolutely beautiful nude body. Her cries as she came for him, her flesh tightening around him until he found release.

Oh, fuck. He was so screwed.

Last night had been a life-changing event for him. Never again would he be able to settle for just any woman in his bed, an unemotional fuck to satisfy his body.

He wasn't sure whether to be completely pissed off or in awe of the woman who made him feel this way. Sure, he only had one woman at a time. He was monogamous in a fucked-up sort of way, always calling the same woman until he went on to the next one, but not because one was really any better than the one before. Or the one before that. There just came a time, and he could always sense it, when he thought he should move on to avoid any entanglements. Not that any woman had ever really wanted him, but they began to want more and more of what his wealth could provide.

He pulled the pillow from his face, but it didn't relieve the bone-deep ache that he had for Kara. Taking her back to her own bed had been one of the hardest things he had ever done. But she had only offered one night, and he had never been able to sleep with a woman. He wasn't capable of it and had never wanted to...until last night. He had wanted to fall asleep with Kara in his arms, her body draped around his, her warm breath on his face.

He had returned to his room, but he hadn't been able to sleep. He had tossed and turned in a bed that smelled of hot, smoldering sex and Kara. Frustrated as hell, he had gone to his gym and worked out, hoping to exhaust himself, desperate to escape into latent unconsciousness. Unfortunately, he didn't. Instead, he had ended up tired and defeated...and still unable to sleep.

What time had he finally given in and passed out? His eyes went to the clock, realizing with shock that it was almost noon. Generally an early riser, he had never slept this late, even on the weekend. He slid out of the bed and went straight to the shower.

He showered quickly, hating the fact that he was washing away her scent, and made his way to the kitchen, wondering if Kara was still asleep. The kitchen was spotless, the remains of their unfinished dinner from last night gone. He grabbed a cup of freshly brewed coffee and walked around the condo. Her bedroom door was open, the bed made. Obviously she was up, but where in the hell was she?

He shot up the stairs, thinking that maybe she was in his lab playing computer games.

She wasn't.

She's not here.

Simon felt a chill crawl slowly down his spine and experienced a brief moment of panic.

He went back down the stairs two at a time, his heart racing. Rationally, he knew she wouldn't leave. She had no reason to go. They had both agreed to satisfy their sexual urges by spending just one

night together.

One night.

One night, my ass. One night will never be enough. She's mine.

Simon had known it last night and he knew it now. He would never get enough of Kara. She was an obsession that he couldn't get over with one night of incredible sex. He wasn't sure what it was going to take, but it hadn't been relieved by screwing her brains out. If anything, it was worse. Now that he had possessed her once, he wanted her again and again.

The coffee he was drinking churned in his gut. Truth was, he goddamn hated feeling so possessive of a female. Giving a shit about anyone other than his family meant trouble. Hadn't he learned that lesson painfully a long time ago? Apparently...it hadn't stuck, because he cared more about Kara than he wanted to...and it scared the ever-loving crap out of him.

Simon snatched his phone from a coffee table in the living room and sent a text message to her phone.

U ok?

He tapped his finger against the plastic cover of the phone, impatient. Hell, he didn't even know if she had her phone, but he'd be pissed if she didn't. How many times had he asked her to always carry it for her own safety?

A snort escaped his mouth as he carried the phone and his coffee to the kitchen. Like she really listened to him? She patted him on the head and went on her merry way, doing whatever the hell she pleased. Secretly, he loved her independence, but it also drove him insane. There were just too many instances where she was nonchalant about her safety.

The phone beeped, startling Simon enough for him to spill his coffee onto the pristine tile. Fuck, I'm on the edge this morning. Cursing, he read the return text.

Police Station. Tell u about it later.

What. The. Fuck. His fingers flew as he typed another text.

Where? Why?

She answered briefly, giving him the location of the station and another infuriatingly vague explanation and a promise to tell him about it later.

Later, my ass. Nobody goes to the police station on a Saturday morning for shits and giggles. Something's wrong.

Simon ran a frustrated hand through his hair, nearly yanking a few locks from his head. Jesus! At this rate, he'd be fucking bald within a week. He sent her a brief text telling her he was on his way and crammed his cell phone into his pocket. The phone beeped again a moment later, but he ignored it. He already knew it was Kara, probably telling him not to come.

Snatching up his keys, he slammed his feet into the nearest pair of casual shoes and exited the door of the condo, not even flinching when it slammed violently behind him.

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Kara sighed softly as she took a sip from the Styrofoam cup, hoping the coffee would help her

focus. Swallowing hard to get the strong, burnt-tasting liquid down her throat, she looked up at Maddie with a weak smile. "I think we're almost done."

She had already identified the two suspects from mug shots, the angry gunmen who had stormed the clinic that morning demanding drugs. Maddie had been in an exam room and hadn't seen the men, but Kara had gotten an up close and personal look. Grimacing, she wished to hell that she hadn't. Alone in the waiting room, watching over a child whose sibling and mother were in the exam room with Maddie, Kara would probably never forget the dead look in the men's eyes and their haggard faces that told the story of years of drug abuse. She knew the look, had seen it often in her youth, but she hadn't had a gun in her face at the time. That moment, that terrifying instance of not knowing whether the next few seconds would be her last, had been enough to scare the bejesus out of her. She had scooped up the child and raced around the corner, hitting the alarm button under the desk as she tucked the child behind her. The alarm wasn't silent and the ruckus had been enough to bring Maddie running out and the men to scatter.

One of the men had a twitchy trigger finger and his firearm had exploded at the sound of the alarm, the path of the bullet coming so close to Kara's head that she had felt the air ripple at the side of face.

Shuddering, she wrapped her arms around herself, not really cold, but remembering with more than a touch of unease, the faces of the men and their final brutal comment as they escaped through the clinic door.

"We'll get you later, bitch!"

Maddie had only seen their exit, arriving seconds after they had turned to run. Thankfully, everyone had escaped unharmed.

"The nice detective should be back soon and we can affirm the police reports and get the hell out of here." Maddie responded grimly, her eyes focused on Kara. "Are you sure you're okay? You look a little pale."

Kara shrugged, trying to look unaffected. "A little shaken up is all. I'm...good." Terrified. Scared shitless. But otherwise just fine.

The last thing she wanted was to alarm her friend, knowing Maddie already felt responsible Kara nearly getting shot.

Maddie reached across the table and grabbed her hand, squeezing it until almost all of the blood left the extremity. "They shot at you. It's normal to be upset. That was a damn close call. I'm so sorry, Kara."

"Maddie, it isn't your fault-,"

"Who the hell shot at her!" A bellowing male voice came from the door, and Kara didn't even have to turn around to know exactly who stood there. She recognized Simon's blustering tone immediately. The man might not yell often, but he made up for it in quality. No one could roar more ferociously than Simon when his temper flared.

"What in the fuck is going on? The police said you got attacked at some clinic-,"

"My clinic." Maddie interrupted, standing to confront Simon. "Who the hell are you?"

Uh, oh.

Kara stood, ready to jump into the fight. Maddie might have the face of an angel, with fiery red corkscrew curls that surrounded her perfect features, but she could be a furious foe when she wanted to be. Not that people saw that side of her often. Her patients, young and old, adored her and her usually sunny personality. But when Maddie was fighting for a cause or something she believed in, she could be a dangerous enemy.

Kara watched as her friend threw back her shoulders, her white physician's coat floating around generous curves that complemented her angelic features. She forced back a grin as Maddie straightened to try to compensate for her five-foot-three height, in preparation for battle.

"I'm Kara's..." Simon stopped abruptly, as though not quite sure what to say, before finishing hesitantly, "friend. And I want to know why the hell someone shot at her."

"Helloooo. I'm right here, Simon." Reaching out her hand, she gripped his jaw, forcing him to look at her. "I am able to answer for myself."

His face transformed, the anger draining from his features as his still-hot eyes met hers. Reaching out to grasp her shoulders, he demanded, "What happened. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?" His hands ran over her arms before landing again on her shoulders.

Explaining what happened turned into an exhausting event. Simon interrupted, swearing like a sailor and asking what felt like a million freaking questions. Kara tried to answer them patiently to calm him down.

They all took a seat on the flimsy, uncomfortable chairs at the enormous table. Kara talked, first introducing Simon and Maddie, then going on to answer more questions that were flowing from the furious man in front of her, almost faster than she could answer them.

Simon cursed throughout her explanation.

And Maddie just watched with a dumbfounded, perplexed expression.

"Did they catch them?" Simon asked, his voice rough, as though he had been through hell himself.

"No. And Kara needs to be careful since they threatened her." Maddie finally jumped in, her voice protective.

"You neglected to mention that." Simon shot Kara a dark look.

Their conversation was interrupted by a plainclothes detective, a very nice, youngish blond man who had identified himself as Detective Harris. He dropped papers in front of both Kara and Maddie asking quietly. "Can you look at the reports and see if you have anything to add." He put a casual hand on the back of Kara's chair and leaned over her shoulder, perusing the report with her.

A low, reverberating sound came from Simon's throat and she pulled her eyes away from the report to look at him. But he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were shooting fire at Detective Harris, a threatening look that startled her.

Obviously, the Detective wasn't the least bit intimidated. "Boyfriend?" he asked quietly, quietly enough that Simon couldn't detect the words.

"Friend." She mumbled back, hating herself for wishing she could confirm the question with a simple "yes" answer.

She read the report quickly, with enough haste to get through it fast, but not so rapidly that she wasn't accurate. After the official paperwork was finished, she stood, stretching her back as she got to her feet, feeling slightly unsteady.

"Careful!" The detective took her arm to steady her slightly swaying body. "You've had a tough day," he stated kindly. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out two business cards and handed one to both her and Maddie. "My card. Call me anytime. My cell phone number is on the back just in case you need it."

"Is that really necessary?" Simon snarled, his arm curling around Kara's waist, pulling her body against him protectively.

The detective shrugged. "Yeah. It is. Kara was threatened. I want these ladies to be able to reach me any time."

"Thank you, Detective Harris. You've been very kind." Smiling softly, Kara shook the Detective's hand. Maddie did the same, before all three of them exited the building together.

Kara took a deep breath, letting the crisp, refreshing air of the outdoors enter her lungs. "It's a good day to be alive," she muttered to herself, thankful to just be among the living and healthy.

As the three of them descended the stairs, approaching the sidewalk, Maddie asked Simon quietly, "You wouldn't happen to be related to Sam Hudson? I know the last name is pretty common, but I was just wondering."

Stopping at the bottom of the stairs, Simon looked at Maddie with surprise, "Yeah...he's my brother. Why do you ask? Do you know him?"

Maddie frowned. "Oh, God." She let out a heavy breath. "Uh...yeah...I did. A long time ago."

"Were you friends?" Simon asked curiously, looking at Maddie expectantly.

"No! Not really!" Maddie answered abruptly, her face turning as red as her hair.

"Ah...I see," Simon answered. Not ready to let the subject drop he added, "Bad experience with my brother?"

"He's a complete and total snake." Maddie reached up to rake the curls from her face. The wind was brisk and errant spirals were whipping around her head.

Kara jumped as a harsh bark of laughter escaped from Simon's mouth. "Believe me, you aren't the first woman to feel that way. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault that your brother is a slimy reptile. I just hope the two of you aren't similar in some regards," she replied awkwardly. "Take care of Kara."

"With pleasure, Maddie," he replied smoothly, reaching out his available hand. "Bad circumstances, but nice to meet you."

"You too. I think," she answered as she grudgingly shook Simon's outstretched hand. "I know I can't judge one brother by the other, but I hate anything that reminds me of Sam Hudson." Shuddering, she released his hand and hugged Kara. "Take care of yourself. I'll call you. Don't do anything stupid," she warned Kara fiercely in a whisper low enough that only Kara could catch her adamant advice.

Kara threw herself into Maddie's arms and hugged her tightly, well aware of the danger that both

she and her friend had been in and how easily things could have turned out differently. She loved Maddie to death. Although she could be prickly on the outside at times, her friend was a complete marshmallow on the inside. “You too. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Simon reclaimed her, slipping his arm around her waist and leading her to his car as Maddie crossed the parking lot to her own vehicle.

God, what a horrible day.

Tired, shaken, her mind on of the events of the day, she didn’t even balk as Simon led her to his ridiculously expensive Veyron and seated her in the passenger side before climbing behind the wheel himself.

They were both silent, lost in their own thoughts, as they made the journey home.

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## Chapter 2

Simon didn't take them straight back to the condo. He pulled into a parking lot close to home and whipped the small sports car into a vacant parking space.

"We need to eat. This place has the best Italian food in the area, but it's nothing fancy." He hopped out and jogged to the other side of the car, opening her door and taking her hand to pull her out of the vehicle.

"Uh...I'm not exactly dressed for fancy." Still in her jeans and sweater that she wore for the clinic, she knew that she was a mess. Both physically and emotionally.

"You look beautiful. But I know it's been a tough day. Is that okay?"

"It's great. I love Italian and I'm starving."

Surprisingly enough, what she told him was true. She had skipped breakfast because she had gotten up late, and lunch had come and gone while they were at the police station.

Simon held the door for her, guiding her through it with a hand at the small of her back. God, the man had great manners. She'd have to remember to compliment Helen later for raising her son to be polite. Kara couldn't remember the last time a guy had actually run to open her door. Probably... never.

The interior of the restaurant was dim, each table lighted with a large, fat candle in the middle. It wasn't fancy, but it wasn't exactly a dive either.

"Mr. Hudson. How lovely to see you again." The leggy, beautiful blonde who greeted them showed them to a corner table, gracing Simon with a smile straight from a toothpaste commercial.

After they were seated, Simon ordered a beer on tap and Kara asked for an iced tea. She breathed a sigh of relief when the fawning female finally left to get their drinks.

"Flirty woman." Kara wanted to bite her tongue immediately. What business was it of hers if a woman flirted with Simon? Maybe he liked it.

"You mean Kate?" Simon's expression was puzzled as he closed his menu, obviously already decided on what he wanted.

"Is that her name? She didn't introduce herself to me. She seemed much more interested in you." Shut the hell up, Kara. You sound like a jealous girlfriend.

"She wasn't flirting. I'm a regular customer. She has to be nice." Simon shrugged.

Oh Lord, the man was clueless. She studied the menu, trying to let the subject drop. "You've been here before. Any recommendations?"

"It's all good. I'm having the chicken parmesan."

Kara looked at the menu like a kid in a candy store. It had been so long since she'd had so many choices or eaten in a restaurant as an actual customer. "It's so hard to decide."

Simon was grinning when she finally looked up from the menu. "You look like you're trying to solve a major problem."

"Do I look like I don't get out much?" she asked with a light, self-mocking laugh.

His eyes grew stormy as he shot her a look so intense, she could feel heat wash over every inch

of her body. "You are the loveliest woman I've ever seen sitting across a table from me. No one else even comes close."

She blushed, actually flushing rose-red from the I-want-to-fuck-you look in his eyes and the heat of gaze. No man could drive her crazy like Simon did. One word, one statement, one look...and she was flustered like a freaking teenage girl.

Kara was actually grateful to see an older, dark-haired waitress coming to deliver their drinks and take their food order. She decided to make things easy and have the same thing Simon was having. As the waitress left, Kara picked up her drink, puzzled. "I think they made me an alcoholic iced tea."

Simon chuckled as he glanced at the beverage in her hand. "It's definitely an alcoholic iced tea. I didn't know you wanted the real thing."

"What's in this?" she asked, staring at the glass of liquid that was actually pretty close to the same color as conventional iced tea, but it was in a stout drink glass and topped with a cherry. None of the restaurants where she had worked were equipped with a full bar and she wasn't really an expert on drinks.

Simon grinned wickedly. "Rum, gin, tequila, vodka, triple sec...and a splash of cola and sour mix."

Oh, crap. She'd be doing a happy dance on the table. A glass of wine made her tipsy. Holding her alcohol well wasn't a talent she had ever perfected, probably because she seldom imbibed. "Promise you won't let me dance naked on the table when I'm done." She cocked a brow at Simon waiting for his agreement.

She glared at him as he burst into a full belly laugh, gasping for breath as he answered. "Seriously? From a drink or two?"

"It's not funny. I don't drink much," she told him defensively, suddenly feeling pretty damn unworldly and out of place sitting across from a billionaire who had been around the block a time or two. Or three.

Simon grinned at her. "I know. Try it. If you don't like it I'll get you something else." His expression sobered, his eyes alight with heat and something else that she couldn't quite define. "And I definitely promise that you will not dance naked on the table, unless it's at home in a private performance." His voice was gruff, his expression heated, as though he were imagining exactly that scenario and was looking forward to it.

She refused to meet his eyes, the lump in her throat feeling as big as a baseball. Hell, why not? She could use a drink after the morning she had just been through. Sipping cautiously, she let the liquid flow over her tongue and down her throat, swallowing hard to get by the knot that had formed from Simon's sexy comment. "Not bad." She licked her lips. "It doesn't really taste all that strong."

He shot her a wicked smile. "It's deceiving. They're pretty potent."

They enjoyed their drinks and dinner with companionable conversation. Simon talked about his family and told her about some of his projects. Kara shared funny stories from her career as a waitress, and a few from her years in nursing school.

Simon destroyed his entire plate of chicken parmesan and finished hers when she couldn't eat

another bite. He ordered them each a tiramisu and a second drink. The dessert was delicious, but she couldn't finish it. Of course, he was willing to polish that off for her, too. The man could put away a lot of food. Maybe he needed it to fuel that big, sinewy, sculpted body that never failed to leave her panting like a dog after a tempting treat.

"How do you maintain such an incredible body when you eat like that?" she asked him, wanting to kick herself for wording it quite that way, knowing that it was the alcohol that was twisting her words.

Note to self: Do not drink more than a watered down glass of wine from now on.

His eyes shot to her face, his expression mischievous. "Incredible, huh?"

She shrugged. What was the point in denying it? His body was incredible. "Well, it is." Incredible. Rock-hard and sexy as hell. The hottest body on the planet.

"I work out in the gym at home every day. If you think I look good, I guess it's worth it," his incredulous voice informed her.

Oh, hell yeah. Way worth it.

"It shows," she choked out, trying not to be obvious about the fact that she wanted to jump his bones in about a hundred different ways. "It's one of the reasons that women like Kate fall all over you. Not the only reason, but one of them." Oh, shit. Had she really said that out loud? Damn alcohol! She needed to bite her tongue.

"Women don't admire my body, my personality or anything else about me except my money," Simon told her in a matter-of-fact tone.

Kara looked at him, flabbergasted. Did he really believe that? "Oh, so it doesn't matter that you're insanely handsome, a genius, funny and extremely kind? Women just want the cash?" God, he really was infuriating. Didn't he know? Didn't he realize that he had so much more to offer than just his money?

"Yes."

Her heart ached, knowing that he really did think that money was his only asset. Hard to believe, especially when she had been on the receiving end of his generous nature so many times. Also difficult to comprehend as she glanced yearningly across the table at the most handsome, desirable man she had ever laid eyes on. "I do." He looked at her with a bewildered expression as the words slipped from her mouth in a heated rush. "I want you. And it has nothing to do with your money." The words spilled from her lips without pause, uncensored. She looked away from him, slightly mortified at what she had revealed, but his constant refusal to realize his own value made her insane. "I don't give a shit about your money."

"Yeah...I noticed that," he said in a graveled voice.

Finally, she looked up at him and his expression was unreadable. Confusion? Disbelief? Distrust? Hope? They were all there, but she had a hard time figuring out which one took priority.

She tipped up her glass, finishing the last of her second iced tea. "I'm done." If she had another drink, she'd be stripping off her clothes and begging him to take her. Right now.

Kara wondered if she would regret her spontaneous outburst later, and decided she most likely wouldn't. Somehow, she needed to get through to Simon, even if it was uncomfortably humbling. He

was so self-contained, so controlled, but there was an underlying vulnerability lurking beneath the surface. That self-doubt that she occasionally spotted in those gorgeous eyes should never linger there. No man as handsome, kind and generous should ever know a moment of uncertainty.

Simon was, without question, an alpha male, but she had to question if his need to have a woman helpless and blindfolded during sex was a domination issue. Certainly, that type of domination was erotic, so hot that she creamed her panties every time she thought back to the night before, but she hated to think that Simon was constrained to only one type of sex because of distrust. Unfortunately, that was her suspicion. Gut instinct was clawing at her insides, telling her that his issue had nothing to do with domination and everything to do with some type of trust issue.

They stood and Simon pulled out his wallet, dropping some cash on top of the check. She sighed as he grasped her hand tightly, tugging her gently through the door. It was early evening and the cooler air helped clear her foggy head. She couldn't remember every one of the ingredients in the drinks, but they had certainly loosened her tongue.

The drive back to the condo was only a few blocks, but it left Kara squirming in her seat. Simon was too close and smelled way too tempting, and she was still embarrassed about the fact that she had basically spilled her soul to him. Oh, maybe not everything, but admitting how much she wanted him and getting no real response was pretty deflating.

What did I want him to say? I want to help him and that means expecting nothing back. He never promised anything except for mind-blowing sex. And he gave me that. In spades!

Really, she hadn't expected anything, but having him say that he wanted her too would have been nice. She felt raw, exposed. And being in his company was anything but comfortable at the moment.

I don't understand him. I don't know what motivates his behavior.

But she wanted to. There was nothing she wanted more than to understand every one of Simon Hudson's secrets.

She breathed a sigh of relief as they entered the condo. Wandering through the kitchen, she headed for her room to take a shower. She was about to call a brief goodnight to Simon when a large, muscular arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her against an equally large, masculine body.

"Don't go. Not yet." Simon's husky voice against her ear sent a shiver of need through her body, momentarily stunning her into silence.

He lifted her, cradling her against his chest as he strode into the living room and sat on the couch, her body sprawled on his lap. "What's wrong?" she questioned softly, feeling the restless tension in his body. His muscles were bunched tight as she fanned her hands over his shoulders.

"I need to hold you for a while. Please. You took twenty years off my life today, Kara. I'm going to end up old, bald and crazy if you keep having incidents like this." He wrapped his arms around her, plastering her body tightly against his.

"I'm sorry." She laid her head on his shoulder, relishing the abrasive feel of his whiskers against her cheek, trying not to let her spirits soar because he was hinting at a future for them.

"I can't take it. I can't stand the thought of anything happening to you," he said in a strangled voice.

The living room was dim, lit only by residual light from the kitchen. Her heart raced as she

pulled back to stroke his rough jaw. He was afraid for her safety. She couldn't help but be touched by it. There had been very few people in her life who had really cared about her in that way, and certainly never a male, except for her father. Her ex probably would have shrugged it off and told her that it was her own fault for volunteering in that part of the city. He hadn't exactly been the nurturing type.

Capturing her hand, he drew it to his lips, dropping light, soft kisses to her palm. "I had a very hard time not going for your cop's throat today."

"Why?"

"For God's sake, Kara, the man was eye-fucking you right there in the station." His answer was harsh.

"He was just being nice-,"

"He was imagining what it would be like to fuck you," he informed her in a raspy voice. "I'm a guy. Believe me. I know. And I fucking hated it. I don't like to share."

Gulp. Was he insinuating that...

"I didn't know that I was yours." Was she?

"You are now."

"Since when?"

"Probably since the first moment I saw you. Definitely since the moment I touched you. And absolutely since last night." His hand moved to the back of her neck, guiding her mouth to his.

He flipped her in one smooth motion, his mouth never leaving hers. One moment she was on his lap, and the next, she was spread out on the massive sofa beneath him. He kissed her until she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, she could only feel. Legs parting to accept his body, she wrapped her arms around his muscular back, trying to get as close to him as she possibly could.

She needed this, needed him. She slid her tongue along his, desperate to get closer, wanting to crawl inside of him. Her hips shifted longingly against his groin, whimpering into his mouth when she felt the hard erection straining against his jeans, pushing against her mound, making her crazy to feel him inside of her.

Pulling her mouth away from his she gasped, "I need you to fuck me, Simon. Please."

He buried his face in her neck with a guttural sound. "Bedroom."

"No. Here. Now. Right now," she panted. She didn't want to move, didn't want to be blindfolded and tied this time. Wrapping her legs around his waist in silent entreaty, she brought her hands to his ass, pulling him against her as she undulated her hips.

"Fuck! I can't think when you do that. I don't want to wait," he rasped, his hands sliding beneath her ass, pulling her tight against his raging erection with a low, tormented groan.

"Don't wait. Please." Her body was igniting like tinder on a raging forest fire.

"You know I can't." His voice was angry and frustrated, but he didn't release his hold on her ass.

"You can." She wanted him like this, spontaneous and needy. Unwrapping her legs from his waist, she bucked and slipped her hands between their bodies, unsnapping her jeans and ripping at the

zipper to get them undone. She wriggled, making Simon lift up while she lowered her jeans and panties enough to kick them off her legs. "Touch me."

Simon groaned as his hand slipped between them, his fingers sliding into her drenched pussy. "Oh Jesus, you're so fucking wet."

"For you," she answered fiercely. "So don't tell me that no woman wants you for anything other than your money. I want you so damn desperately that I'm begging you to fuck me," she told him furiously, trying to make him understand that what she felt was far from monetary.

She couldn't tell him the depths of her need. She wasn't ready to strip her soul and Simon wasn't ready to hear it. And maybe she wasn't ready to deal with it. But, damn it, he'd take this. He'd take her. Now.

Her body shuddered as his fingers glided through her tender, wet flesh, zeroing in on her throbbing clit. "Yes. Touch me." She was lost, her body reacting to every sensation, every brush of his fingers. Her head tossed wildly as she abandoned herself to his bold, undaunted stroking.

"You're so hot. So damn responsive. It's so hard to believe that you want me like this. Tell me. Again," he demanded, his strokes becoming harder, more demanding.

"I need you, Simon. Fuck me."

"Only me?"

"Only you. You're the only one who makes me feel like this." And he was the only man who could make her this crazy with a simple touch. She knew it was a weakness, but at the moment, she couldn't bring herself to care.

He reared up and tore open his jeans, yanking them down until his cock was liberated, springing out throbbing, hard and needy. "I want you so fucking much, Kara, but I'm not sure I can do this." His voice was both passionate and angry.

She recognized his need to dominate. The cause wasn't clear, but she knew he needed to be in control. "Hold my hands, Simon. Take control. Fuck me how you need to. I don't care, as long as you do it now."

She wanted to grasp that beautiful cock and put it where she most needed it, but reached her hands up and grasped both of his. Both of his hands were clenched in a tight fist, but they opened slowly and wrapped around hers. He entwined their fingers and lowered their joined hands over her head.

"Yes. You have control. I'm exactly where you want me. Now take me," she pleaded, needing him to take her this way. She had enjoyed last night, but she wanted him to bind her and blindfold her because it was erotic and sexy, not because he needed to. Instinctively, she knew it was critical that he learn to trust in small steps, make love instead of just fuck.

Nearly ready to weep as he lowered his powerful body over hers, she moaned at the feel of his cock poised against her tight opening. She swirled her hips until they were in position.

And then, miraculously, he entered her with one strong thrust.

She hissed as his cock slammed into her, stretched her, possessed her completely. "Yes. You feel so good." She wrapped her legs around him, wanting to savor the feel of him.

“Shit. You’re so wet. Nothing between you and my cock. There’s no fucking better feeling than this,” Simon panted against her neck, his chest heaving against her breasts, abrading her swollen nipples.

Hands entwined, his fingers squeezing hers until they were nearly numb, Simon pumped his hips as she answered him by grinding up against him, meeting him halfway.

Her heart ached as her body joined again and again with Simon’s, knowing that this moment was pivotal, extraordinary and special.

Her heels dug into his rock-hard ass, urging him deeper, faster. His strokes became powerful, forceful. In and out. Over and over.

His mouth covered hers, his kiss almost violent as he ravaged her mouth, owning it, as his velvet-soft tongue swept through every inch of her mouth, thrusting in the same rhythm as his cock.

Overwhelmed by his strength, absorbed in the cadence of pummeling cock and thrusting tongue, Kara lost herself in Simon. Completely. Utterly. Willingly.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she whimpered into his mouth, her body trembling, pulsating, in the most incredible climax she had ever experienced.

Her channel clenched, her flesh tightening and releasing around Simon’s cock as he pounded in and out of her body with furious abandon.

He groaned into her mouth, entwining his marauding tongue with hers, as he buried himself one last time deep inside her, his big body trembling above her as he came, flooding her womb with heat.

Dragging his mouth away from her lips, his face fell against her neck. “Holy fuck. Holy fuck. Holy fuck,” he chanted breathlessly against her skin.

She yanked on her hands, needing the return of her blood circulation. She freed herself and wrapped her arms around him, threading her hands through his sweat-soaked hair, cradling his head against her neck. His weight was heavy on top of her, his body relaxed and sated, but she wasn’t ready for him to move.

“I think I just died,” he huffed, still breathing hard.

“I guess I must be dead right along with you then. I was there,” she answered with a gasp, her hands still sifting through his hair.

Later, she would wonder how long she and Simon had laid there in a world of their own, stunned and astonished by what had occurred, but at that moment she just absorbed the peace that came after the turbulent storm.

After an unknown amount of time, Simon rolled off of her. “I’m heavy. I’m sorry.”

Curling into his side, she sighed heavily. “It was fine.”

“It was beyond fine,” he growled, playfully and intentionally misunderstanding her.

“Thank you, Simon,” she whispered softly.

“For what?” he asked, puzzled, as he wrapped one arm around her protectively and stroked the hair from her face with another.

“For what just happened.” For trusting me. For letting go of a few ghosts. For giving me what I

needed. For giving yourself what you needed.

She couldn't see his face, but she didn't need to. She could hear the grin in his voice. "Sweetheart, don't thank me. I should be worshipping at your feet."

"Ah...well...if you must...go ahead." She answered like a queen addressing one of her subjects, trying to lighten the mood.

Small steps .

He snorted. "Can't right now. You wore me out."

"Ungrateful cad." She swatted his shoulder with a smile.

"I don't need to be at your feet. I already worship you," he whispered gently as his lips brushed over hers and he released her to tuck himself back into his jeans.

She sat up, groping for her own jeans and panties. "Yeah, yeah...men will say anything after a decent orgasm." Denim brushed her fingers and she hopped up, quickly pulling the panties and jeans over her hips.

Simon snagged her hips as she turned to leave. "It was a lot more than a good fuck. You were crying. Just tell me if they were good tears or bad tears," he asked, his voice warm with concern.

"Good. Definitely good." Unwilling to say anything more, she brushed her lips against his and forced herself to walk away. She knew how Simon felt about sleeping with someone. She'd have to be content with what had just happened for now. "I need to shower. Someone made me all...wet."

Laughing at the low growl she heard behind her, she slipped away to her own room to shower and crawl into bed, falling into an exhausted but contented sleep.



# Chapter 3

Everything ok?

Kara smiled down at the text message from Simon as James drove sedately toward Helen's Place. She hadn't talked to Helen in several days and they had made arrangements to have coffee. Since Helen couldn't stand to tear herself away from the restaurant, Kara usually popped in after school during the slower hours to chat.

She sent a return text. Yes Daddy. All's well.

It was Friday, almost a week since the incident at the clinic. Simon checked in with her every day, usually several times a day, to make sure everything was okay. She might joke with him about being like an overprotective father, but she secretly found it touching that he cared about her safety.

They hadn't gotten physical since the night of the incident at the clinic. They joked, they talked, but they didn't screw. It was almost as if they were both afraid that what happened couldn't be repeated. Or maybe it had just scared the shit out of both of them. It had certainly frightened the hell out of her. She had never experienced anything quite that intense.

Her phone beeped again.

Be careful. Let me know when u leave. RU there yet?

She replied. Pulling up now. Will obey orders, sir.

The car pulled in front of Helen's restaurant as her phone beeped again.

I wish. Only in my dreams do you ever obey orders.

She snickered as she put the phone in her front pocket, almost able to hear Simon speaking those words out loud in a disgruntled voice. "Thank you, James. I'll see you in a little bit." She smiled at the kind, elderly man as she reached for the door handle.

He grinned broadly at her. "Have a nice visit, Ms. Kara. I'll be here waiting for you. Give Helen my best."

James had worked for the family for several years and knew everyone.

"Will do." She slid from the vehicle, lifting her hand in a wave to James as she reached the door.

Even during the slower hours, Helen's Place wasn't lacking customers. The place was well known in the area for having reasonable prices and great food. Kara made her way to a corner booth and was about to seat herself when Helen came rushing from the back doors, a wide smile on her face and her arms open wide.

Kara hugged the older woman fiercely as she arrived beside the booth, breathing deeply, taking in the welcoming scent of vanilla that always seemed to radiate from Helen.

Helen pulled back and grasped Kara by the shoulders. "How is my son treating you? You look good. Rested."

"Let me get us some coffee." Kara went behind the counter and snatched two mugs, filling them with steaming coffee, before making her way back to the table, grabbing a bowl of creamer on her way. "I'm doing well. Classes are good. It's getting to crunch time." She slid a mug in front of Helen.

before seating herself in front of her own.

“Honey, you don’t have to serve coffee. You aren’t an employee anymore.” Helen shot her a grin, one so similar to Simon’s that Kara was momentarily distracted.

Leaning back, she studied Helen for a moment, trying to find other similarities to Simon. There really weren’t many. After viewing tons of photos of the two brothers with their mother, Kara had come to the conclusion that Simon must take after his dad, even though she had never seen a photo of his father. Helen looked like Sam, with her short, wavy, blonde hair and green eyes. Her friend had always dressed with casual elegance. Today, it was a paisley calf-length skirt with a button-down pink sweater. Large, pink, dangling earrings fell from her delicate ears, bumping against the side of her neck every time she moved her head. Helen’s rather flamboyant earrings were the only ostentatious thing about her. She was a truly kind, gentle soul.

Kara smiled. “I need my caffeine fix.” She dumped liquid creamer into the steaming brew. “I just got you some at the same time.” She added sugar and picked up her spoon to stir the mixture. “And Simon is treating me fine. More than fine. He’s a wonderful...friend.” Kara nearly choked on the last word. Well, Simon was a friend.

Helen sighed. “He sounds happy. I talk to him almost every day. I haven’t heard him so upbeat in a long time. He sounds completely smitten.”

“He’s not.” Kara answered quickly, nearly choking on a sip of coffee. “We’re not. I mean, we’re friends.” God, she couldn’t lead Helen to believe there was anything permanent in her relationship with Simon.

“Uh huh. And Simon talks about you every day, nonstop for an hour because...why?” Helen shot her a teasing look over the rim of her mug.

Kara shrugged. He did? Really? “I live in his home. He’s helping me. It’s only natural that he talks about a roommate. We see each other every day.”

Helen snorted. “Sweetie, he and Sam see each other every day, too, and he certainly doesn’t ramble on about his brother. And he’s never talked about a woman before.”

Kara tried to get her hopeful heart under control. Just because Simon mentioned her in his conversations with his mom didn’t mean anything. “He and Sam don’t live in the same home.”

“You like him. And he likes you. A lot.”

Her shoulders slumped as she set her mug back on the table and toyed with a napkin. She had never been able to hide much from Helen. “I do. I just don’t want to expect too much. Simon isn’t into commitments. I get that.” Sort of. “He’s never even had a steady girlfriend.”

Helen reached out her hand, resting it over the fingers that Kara was using to slowly rip up a paper napkin. “It doesn’t mean that he can’t or won’t.” Helen let out a heavy breath. “Something happened to Simon when he was sixteen and he’s never been the same, Kara. He’s always been quiet, my intelligent little boy with his face firmly planted in a book and as studious as any parent could ever wish for. But he was also humane, the type of child that would rescue any stray. I remember how badly Sam used to tease him about his bleeding heart. There was hardly a day that went by that Simon wasn’t dragging home a lost animal or trying to right some wrong.” Helen squirmed uncomfortably on the bench seat. “But I think he lost that when he was sixteen.”

Kara squeezed Helen's hand. "He didn't lose it. It's still there. Look at how he's helping me. I know something happened. I don't know the specifics, Helen, but he's still as kind as he's always been."

"That's just it. He wasn't before he met you. You're the first person outside of the family who he's cared about in a whole lot of years. It gives me hope."

Kara flinched. "Please, don't get your hopes up. We're friends. That's it. Just consider me a stray that he's rescuing."

Helen beamed as she pulled her hand away and grasped her coffee mug, shooting Kara a knowing look. "Yeah, well, then you're the first stray he's taken in for about sixteen years. I'd say that's kind of significant."

Kara did the math, her heart pumping. Of course, the party. Simon's turning thirty-two tomorrow.

"I'm sure that's not true. He probably just didn't tell you." Certainly, she couldn't be the first person he had helped since the unknown incident that had changed him at the age of sixteen.

Helen laughed and said cryptically, "I'm his mother. I have eyes in the back of my head. Ask my boys. It irritates the hell out of them that I know things even when they haven't told me."

Do you know that Simon can only have sex with women if they're blindfolded and tied? Kara was pretty sure that Helen wasn't privy to that information, and she sure as hell wasn't telling her. There were just some things that mothers shouldn't know. Still, she wondered about Simon's supposed years of isolation, of containing his rescuer tendencies. It made her chest tight to think about what had happened to Simon, what had changed him from that sweet young boy to an isolated, detached adult.

Was he really changing? He was aloof at times, and a little bit insular, but Kara didn't think she could ever imagine him as uncaring or completely solitary. There were some things that were just... Simon.

Gruff...check.

Cranky...check.

Bossy...check.

Controlling...sometimes.

Kind...definitely check! Beneath his rough exterior he had a very good heart.

Sexy...check, check, check.

He was also witty, smart and completely irresistible in more ways than she could count.

"Hopefully, he'll tell me what happened some day." Kara whispered to herself.

"I hope he does. He needs to talk about it and leave it in the past." Helen replied quietly.

Oh, hell. Simon's mother had heard her comment. In addition to eyes in the back of her head, Helen must also have supersonic hearing.

"Do you know what happened?" Kara asked her friend curiously.

Looking uncomfortable, Helen replied, "I know the event. He nearly died. But I don't think

know everything.” Helen’s expression was grim.

“It’s a painful memory for you. I’m sorry.” Kara vowed to never take her friend down this road again. She hated seeing the woman who was like a second mother to her looking so forlorn.

“There are a lot of memories in the distant past that are painful. I can’t always avoid them. My boys went through a childhood that they never should have had. That no child should ever experience. I should have done more, protected them better.” Helen’s eyes were filled with pain, as though remembering that painful past and the toll it had taken on them all.

“Stop. Right now. Simon and Sam both turned out fine. They’re sons to be proud of, Helen. You did your best and it shows.” Kara hated that mournful expression on Helen’s face. “You don’t have to have a perfect childhood to grow into a terrific adult. Look at me.” She smiled broadly, trying to cheer Helen up with humor.

Helen smiled weakly. “Sometimes I forget how hard you’ve had it, sweetie. You’re parents left you alone too young, but they raised you right.”

“And you raised your boys right. I don’t know Sam, but I do know Simon. He’s a wonderful man,” Kara told her friend honestly. Hoping to change the subject and see Helen smile again, she was determined to change the topic. No good could come out of Helen wishing that she had raised her children differently. Kara knew Helen, and that her friend had done her best to raise her two boys, whatever the circumstances might have been. “Simon invited me to Sam’s party tomorrow.”

Helen laughed. “Simon’s annual birthday bash, hosted by none other than his brother, Sam. You are going to go, aren’t you?”

“Yep. Simon wants me to go. Are there going to be a lot of people there?” Kara couldn’t keep the apprehension from her voice. How in the world was she going to blend in with a bunch of wealthy guests at Simon’s birthday party?

She had been surprised when Simon asked her attend the event. Not only had she not known that he had a birthday coming up, but her own birthday was the day after Simon’s.

“Are you nervous?” Helen lifted her brow, giving Kara an inquiring look.

Damn. Was there anything that Helen couldn’t get out of her? “A little. It’s not exactly a crowd that I’m used to mingling with.” That was an understatement. Things done for pleasure or relaxation weren’t events she attended at all. Between work and school, she had never had the time.

Helen’s delighted chortle filled the air around them. “One thing I’ve learned over the years is that rich people aren’t really that much different than normal folks. Some are nice. Some are not so nice. You’ll be fine. Having money doesn’t make any of them better than you are, sweetie.”

Rationally, Kara knew that. Still, she was nervous. Her anxiety wasn’t caused so much by the wealth as the idea that she didn’t want to disappoint Simon in front of his friends, business acquaintances and family. Her social skills were sadly lacking from years of neglect, her only practice her customers at the restaurant and very young college classmates.

Kara’s phone beeped, startling her back into reality. She pulled the phone from her pocket. “Simon,” she informed Helen with a smile as she glanced at the text message.

RU done talking about me yet?

Really? Like she and Helen had nothing better to do than talk about him? Her fingers flew as she

flipped back a message.

Your name hasn't even come up. Arrogant much?

A reply came almost instantly.

No. But I know my mom. If you don't come home soon, I'm cooking dinner.

"Oh my God, I have to leave." She gave Helen a grin and an expression of mock horror.

"Why?" Helen asked, her expression perplexed.

"Simon's threatening to cook if I don't get back to the condo."

Helen's tinkling laugh shimmered around Kara, making her chuckle along with the older woman. Helen sucked in an amused breath and replied. "An ominous threat coming from Simon. He's likely to hurt himself."

"Yep. He's a culinary disaster if he tries anything except sandwiches or microwave dinners." Kara answered Helen as she typed.

I'll head that way soon. Please, do not cook.

"Sneaky, manipulative man." Kara whispered fondly as she slid out of the booth.

"He's obviously missing you. It's romantic." Helen sighed, a dreamy look in her eyes as she stood up beside Kara. "Just don't let him get away with too much."

Kara hugged her friend with an amused expression. It was more likely that Simon was hungry and didn't want a sandwich, but she didn't want to squash Helen's lofty ideals about her son. "I'll see you tomorrow night." Kara answered, heading for the door.

She searched for James and the Mercedes with eager eyes, ready to be back at the condo with Simon. He might not be truly missing her, but she missed Simon. The best part of her day was evening, spending time with him, talking about what had happened during their day, throwing around opinions and ideas. They could talk about important things, or just little things. It never seemed to matter.

Oh God, I'm pitiful.

Spotting James, she picked up her pace to get to the car, realizing with shock that she had been incredibly lonesome before she had met Simon. Strange, but she had never felt alone. Every day, she had been surrounded by people, customers, students, crowds. Yet, the loneliness had been there, buried deep inside of her, shoved beneath exhaustion, hunger, and the need to survive. Waiting.

Pulling the car door open, she slid into the front seat beside James, still wondering why she had never recognized her yearning for the company of a male.

Because it wasn't there. Not until I met Simon. It's him. I don't want just any male.

Damn it, it was true. She knew it. There was something about Simon that called to her, beckoned her to bring him closer, so close that she may very well get burned. Nevertheless, the lure was there and it was seductive, Simon's come-hither vibrations were enticing and impossible to ignore.

Why am I so drawn to him? We're nothing alike.

Shaking her head against the supple leather of the seat, Kara admitted to herself that in some superficial likes and dislikes...they were different. But in many ways...they were so very similar.

After being burned by Chris, she was wary...just like Simon. The causes might be different and she was fairly certain that Simon's were much more traumatic, but the two of them circled each other like frightened children, not quite sure if they wanted to be friend or foe, whether they wanted to trust or not.

She knew Simon had given her a valuable gift when he had trusted her enough to take her without his usual procedure of bondage and blindness. She just wished she knew what caused his distrust. And why the blindfold? The man had a body to drool over.

She shivered and shot a weak smile at James as he pulled the vehicle into traffic, weaving his way slowly toward the condo.

She blew out a long, shaky breath, desperately hoping that she wasn't inadvertently putting her head on the chopping block by getting so involved with a man like Simon.

Just go with it. Relax. Enjoy what you have while you have it.

She bit back a self-deprecating laugh. She didn't relax, she didn't roll with the flow and she had never, ever lived in the moment. Those were all difficult things to do for a woman who needed to worry about where her next meal was coming from and if she could scrounge up enough money to pay her rent every month.

But you don't need to worry about that now.

No...she didn't. It might not last very long, but for a brief time, she knew she had a bed to sleep in, a roof over her head, and plenty of food to eat. Because of Simon, she had time and space to actually breathe.

Her heart stuttered as she pictured him, as he was last week on the couch, vulnerable, yet so very strong. How could she not admire that strength and determination to beat whatever phantoms of the past were haunting him.

He did it for me. Because I wanted it.

Drawing power from her memories, Kara gathered her backpack. She was home. James had delivered her to the front of the massive building. "Thank you, James." She gave him a sheepish grin, suddenly noticing that she hadn't spoken a word to the driver on the short trip home.

"You're most welcome, Ms. Kara. As always. Have a nice evening."

"You, too." Sliding out of the seat, backpack in hand, she closed the door and jogged toward the entrance.

She would have a nice evening. How could she not? She had a dark, sexy, handsome man waiting for her. He might want dinner, but she was determined to give him something more than just food. It was time to give back to Simon. After all, he had trusted her, sheltered her, made her feel like she was someone special.

She hoped he was hungry, and not just for food.

Waving at the watchful doorman, she slipped silently into the elevator that went to the penthouse.

Live in the moment. Don't think about the future.

It might feel totally alien to her, but she was going to try.

## Chapter 4

Simon cursed as he wrapped a white towel around his waist, pissed off at himself for forgetting to bring clean clothes. After his workout, he had headed straight for the shower that was attached to his gym, completely forgetting to grab something to wear from his bedroom. The damn towel barely covered his family jewels.

He scowled at his sweaty, stinking workout clothing. There was no way he was putting them back on after he had just washed the stench from his body.

Kara wasn't home yet. He should have time to make it to his room. Finger-combing his wet hair, he opened the bathroom door, ready to sprint down the stairs and to the master bedroom.

Cold air blasted him as he left the steamy bathroom behind. Shit. The gym was freezing. He'd cranked the temperature down for his workout, and he was feeling the chill.

"Simon, are you-,"

The light, feminine voice startled him. Halfway across the gym, he froze, his heart thundering as Kara came breezing into the room.

He flinched as her eyes roamed over him, ready for her look of distaste...or worse. The scars on his chest and abdomen were glaring, something that he went to great lengths to hide from the world...especially from women.

He tried to get his feet to move, to turn around and take him back to the bathroom. But as his eyes met Kara's, he was paralyzed.

She advanced slowly, her eyes huge and round, but she didn't look appalled. She looked...hungry. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips as she said reverently, "God, you're huge. Muscular. I knew you were ripped, but you make male strippers look like a joke."

Simon swallowed hard as she reached him and dropped her backpack on the floor. "I'm scarred." Fucking brilliant, Hudson. Like she hadn't noticed?

She was close enough that Simon could smell her sweet scent. He inhaled, his cock rising as she craned her neck to glance up at him with a look of longing that slammed into his gut like a freight train.

Her voice trembled as she said in a breathy whisper, "Please don't ask me not to touch you, Simon. I need to touch you. I think I'll die if you don't let me."

He'd expected any number of reactions from her, but not this. His whole body flooded with heat, with the need to feel her small, capable hands on his body. How could she look at him with this sort of need?

"I don't like to be touched," he said, his voice husky.

"Don't like it, or aren't used to it?" she queried softly.

Fuck. He was such a liar. There was nothing he wanted more than Kara's hands on his body right now. Right. Fucking. Now. "I don't know," he answered honestly, shaken by her reaction to him.

"You have a beautiful body, Simon," she told him as she lifted her hands to his chest.

He braced himself as her hands caressed his chest lovingly, gliding over his skin, setting his

whole being on fire. The contact felt like pure sex, so erotic, so sensual. Gritting his teeth, he willed his body to relax...but it wasn't listening. Her fingers slid slowly over his abdomen and he heard her breath catch.

"You're so hard, Simon."

Yeah. He was hard. Everywhere. "Fuck! Kara." His breath started coming in hard pants as her moist, warm lips joined her roaming fingers, her tongue lapping at his chest.

"Mmmm...you smell so good. Taste even better."

He nearly came in the towel as her teeth latched onto one of his flat nipples, followed by a soothing lave of her tongue.

Holy Christ! His whole body was trembling, ready to go up in flames. "Stop," he groaned. No, don't stop.

She grasped the towel around his waist and tugged. The material gave way easily and she dropped the towel to the floor. "You feel so good, Simon. Don't make me stop," she crooned as she palmed his engorged member in her small hand. "I want to taste you."

Seriously? Did she mean-

"Everywhere."

Oh yeah, she did.

Her blue eyes darkened as she looked up at him with a pleading glance. Dear God, he couldn't turn away. He wanted those luscious lips on his cock more than he wanted to take his next breath. "Kara...I haven't. I don't-," He'd always needed to dominate, to tie women up. He had never wanted to shove his cock in their mouths while they were lying helplessly beneath him. And none of them had ever wanted him to.

"Good. Then you won't know if I don't do it well." Her look of vulnerability floored him making him forget his own insecurities about his scarred body, and he had the sudden urge to pound her ex into the ground.

"Not possible that it wouldn't be incredible with you," he told her harshly, his voice graveled with rampant desire. He snaked his hand behind her neck and brought her mouth to his, his other hand splaying over her ass to tug her closer to him.

She doesn't care about my scars. She still wants me. There's no woman on this earth who could fake her reaction.

He took her mouth over and over, wanting to somehow show her how much her acceptance meant to him.

She returned his kiss with a fire that heated his blood. Her tongue entwined with his and she moaned one of her sweet little noises into his mouth, a needy sound that nearly made him lose it.

She pulled her mouth from his and slowly lowered herself to her knees, trailing her tongue along his chest and over his abdomen as she went. Jesus Christ! He wasn't sure he was going to live through this.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, dripping slowly down his face. Blood pounded through his ears, the swooshing noise of his heartbeat deafening him. All he could do was feel.



The first touch of her tongue was sublime. It twirled over his sensitive tip, licking a drop of pre-cum like it was her favorite candy.

“Shit. Kara.” He pulled the clip from her hair and buried his fingers into the silken mass, shuddering as the soft waves flowed over his hands.

He inhaled sharply as she closed her mouth over his cock, taking him into the moist, hot clasp of her lips, pulling the swollen shaft as far as she could possibly take it, bumping the back of her throat.

Fuck. Fuck. Heaven. Hell. Bliss. Agony. He’d never experienced anything like the exquisite sensation of that talented tongue sliding over him, tasting him with an erotic pleasure that was about to make the top of his head explode. She sucked and glided, twirled and tugged, until Simon thought he was losing his mind.

“Oh Christ.” The words exploded in a tortured voice that he could barely recognize as he looked down at her, watching her devour his cock with obvious enjoyment. Her eyes opened, her look scorching as their gazes met and locked.

Simon felt his balls tighten and the gathering pressure at the base of his shaft. He was going to come...hard. Their eyes lost contact as he threw his head back, his hands guiding her head in a rapid rhythm along his pulsating shaft.

Her hands cupped his ass, her nails scoring over his sensitized skin. “Oh, hell yeah. I’m gonna come.” he grunted, unable to verbalize anything else, knowing he needed to give Kara a warning that he was about to erupt like a fucking nuclear explosion.

She didn’t move away. She moaned around him, the vibration sending him over the edge. Her nails dug into his ass and she practically swallowed his cock as he released himself with an agonized cry, his muscles screaming as they tensed and released from his violent orgasm.

Simon panted heavily as Kara continued lave his cock, licking every drop sensually, languidly.

He wanted to kiss her, needed to kiss her, but his pants were coming so heavily that he couldn’t catch his breath. Hauling Kara up and into his arms, he simply held her, his arms wrapping around her body, her face in his neck.

He gulped, trying to force air into his burning lungs as he molded her sweet body against his.

“Was it good?” she asked him quietly as her mouth nuzzled his neck.

Simon laughed, wheezing as he replied, “Sweetheart, if it was any better it would have killed me.” God, this woman was special. So sweet, so sexy. So...his.

Mine.

A hard wave of possessiveness swept over him and his arms tightened around her.

“I actually was coming up to ask you what you wanted for dinner,” she informed him in a matter-of-fact voice, her apparent nervousness about not performing well seeming to have vanished. “But seeing you gloriously nude took away my appetite for food. I wanted to take a bite out of you.”

Her hands swept over his body and his chest ached with the realization that she really did lust for his body, scars and all. “I wasn’t nude until you stripped me of my towel,” he reminded her.

“How do you expect me to resist? You’re a walking temptation. A testosterone menace in a tiny little towel,” she sniffed, but there humor in her voice.

Simon chuckled softly against her hair. He couldn't help it. Kara was a fucking miracle. His miracle. "How about I take a bite out of you, now?" he murmured warmly, his body more than ready to start rising to the occasion.

She broke away from him and picked up his towel, snapping his abdomen with it as she demanded, "Oh no, you don't, mister. I'm starving now. Put that thing away. It's dangerous." She tossed the towel at him with a delighted giggle that struck him right in the chest. Catching the towel in mid-air, he wrapped it around his waist, his cock already half hard again for her.

It was strange, how comfortable he was with his body exposed around her. He was still shaking his head over her obvious delight in seeing him nude, but he wasn't going to question something that had him happier than he had been in...well...ever. "Come on, sweet thing. Just a tiny nibble," he growled as he stalked her.

"Nope. No way. Put it away. I need food." She laughed out loud as she scampered for the door.

He roared and lunged, chasing her down the stairs and into the kitchen, her laughter ringing through every corner of his empty house.

And filling every inch of his empty heart.

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What in the hell am I doing in this dress?

The next evening, Kara stood in front of a full-length mirror in her room, contemplating her appearance.

Simon didn't want to go to this party, had admitted that he hated Sam's annual birthday bash.

Who hated birthday parties?

Kara frowned at herself in the mirror as she turned one way and then the other, trying to decide if she was overdressed. Or underdressed. The burgundy dress was beautiful, but the clingy silk material draped every curve, ending at mid-thigh and leaving a considerable amount of her legs on display. The nude silk stockings that ended in delicate lace at the tops of her thighs did little to warm her long legs and the drape across only one shoulder left the other one completely bare.

She had flinched when she pulled the dress from the closet, shocked by the price tag still attached to the garment. Holy crap! Who wore a dress that cost as much as her previous grocery allowance for six months? Seeing the outrageous price had been enough to make her want to shove it back in the closet. The only reason she hadn't was because she had nothing appropriate to wear.

She slipped her feet into a pair of matching shoes, the stiletto heels high enough to ensure that she would be as tall as some of the male guests.

Except Simon. No shoes would ever put her eye-to-eye with Simon.

Nervous, she shoved her long hair over her shoulder. Leaving it loose might not have been the best plan, but she had no idea how to do fancy styles. Her long, dark hair was generally more of a nuisance than anything else, making her think about cutting it short more than once over the last several years.

Staring back at herself in the mirror, her eyes looked enormous. She had added make-up, something she rarely bothered with because of the cost and time involved, the result not something

that she was sure she liked. Was the red lipstick a little too much? Oh hell, she just didn't know. It wasn't like she attended parties or gatherings of this type. Actually, she hadn't been to a party of any type for more years than she could remember; probably the last one had been when her parents were still alive. After that, her life had been a constant cycle of work and survival.

She shoved her sagging shoulders back, trying to tell herself that she would not be intimidated. Simon had asked her to go, wanted her to be there, and she wouldn't let him down. It would be so much easier to play chicken and tell Simon she wasn't feeling well and couldn't go, but she couldn't do it. Simon was good to her, had literally saved her life.

Taking one last look in the mirror, Kara scooped a small, black bag from the bed and headed for the kitchen. She shifted one hand to her belly, trying to quiet the swarm of butterflies that seemed to have invaded her stomach.

Calm down, Kara. It's just a birthday party. No big deal.

Stopping at the entrance to the kitchen, she saw Simon dressed, ready and none too happy. He was standing near the cupboard, handsome as sin in brown dress pants and a gorgeous cream-colored fisherman's sweater. Hair neatly groomed, his evening dark whiskers already showing, he looked good enough to eat.

You already did that. Yesterday.

Kara flushed, the room suddenly way too warm, as she remembered the day before. Her behavior had been so out of character. So brazen. But it been difficult to see Simon, in all his glory, looking slightly insecure and trapped. It had kicked in a protective instinct, a bold and audacious behavior that had surprised her. When had she become such a bold seductress? She was sexually repressed, totally not the type of woman to come on to a man like Simon. His look of uncertainty had spurred her on, made her determined to show him how incredibly sexy he looked, how tempting he really was. And he was tempting. Sure, he had some scars on his chest and abdomen, some small, some not so small, all white from age and standing out on his olive complexion. But Lord, it had been impossible to walk away, to not touch that ripped, muscular body. The scars did nothing to detract from his sex appeal. Simon was simply...splendid.

"Oh good. You're here. I was just-" Simon stopped in mid-sentence as he looked up at her.

"I'm ready," she told him, trying to sound confident as she stepped into the kitchen.

His eyes turned dark, his gaze roaming her body. She wanted to squirm when his perusal continued, his jaw firming as his eyes lingered on her exposed lower limbs.

"D-Do I look all right?" Oh, shit. Maybe she was dressed all wrong.

"You're stunning," he answered in a husky voice, his eyes finally landing on her face. "But you're showing way too much skin. And your hair is down."

She tilted her head quizzically. "Is that bad?"

"I'm not sure that I want other men to see you this way." He prowled forward, stopping in front of her. One hand on her naked shoulder, he slowly caressed the exposed skin, making her shudder from his light, sensual touch. "You're way too much of a temptation."

Kara let out a breath that she hadn't realized she was holding, relieved that he thought she looked acceptable. "I think you're the only one who thinks so, Simon. I think you need your eyes checked,"

she told him lightly.

“You’re so fucking beautiful that it almost hurts to look at you,” he rumbled as his lips grazed her temple. “My cock got hard the minute you walked into the room.” He grasped her hand, bringing it to his arousal. He was so firm and erect that her panties dampened and her stomach clenched.

God, he smells so good.

Kara kissed his whiskered jaw, breathing deeply, loving his masculine smell. Her fingers spread over his engorged member, totally unable to stop herself from copping a feel.

“Kara, you drive me insane,” Simon ground out as he trapped her wandering hand and lifted it to his lips, placing a warm, lingering kiss to her palm. “If we start this, we’ll never get to the party. Not that I mind,” he growled.

“It’s your party,” she answered with amusement. “You can’t blow it off.”

“Kiss me and see,” he answered provocatively, his arm sliding around her waist.

She could feel his warm breath on the side of her face. His tempting mouth was close, so close, and slipping away from him was almost torture. “Your mom would never forgive me. Let’s go party-boy.”

He pouted like an infant whose favorite toy had been taken away, but the curse that sprang from his mouth was anything but boyish.

“You need a coat,” he told her, his tone protective and demanding.

“I have one. I’ll grab it. And I’m sure Sam’s house is warm,” she mused quietly.

She went to her room, returning quickly to the kitchen with a black, tailored jacket in hand.

Simon held his hand out, pulling the jacket from her grasp. He held it out and she slipped her arms into the garment, appreciating the luxurious feel of the silk lining.

Turning her around, he did up the large buttons on the front, every single one of them.

He frowned. “Do you think that will be warm enough?”

“Yes. It’s fine. We only have to get in and out of the car. I probably wouldn’t have even worn a jacket if you hadn’t mentioned it.”

Kara sighed lightly as she pulled her hair from the jacket, surprised by her delight in Simon’s little gestures that made her feel cared-for. It had been so long since anyone had cared about her wellbeing that his actions were alluring and heady for a street-smart woman who had been so alone for so long.

“I’m still not sure I like you showing that much skin,” he grunted as she picked up her handbag and headed for the door.

Kara bit her lip as shivers ran down her spine. His sexy voice was so possessive, as though he were claiming her.

Don’t even think about it. He doesn’t mean anything by it.

“It’s not that sexy,” she told him wryly, wishing she were as irresistible as he made her feel.

“It’s way too sexy. Every man there will be thinking the same thing as I’m thinking,” he told her, his expression unhappy as he ushered her out the door and locked it.

She pushed the button with the down symbol for the elevator and turned to him. “And what is that?”

“That I want to fuck you,” he answered bluntly, his hand coming to rest at the small of her back.

Her breath hitched as the elevator bell rang, the doors swooshing open in front of them. Would she ever get used to Simon’s blunt remarks? Her cheeks flushed and her body was way too warm. Hot, actually. Extremely hot. “Simon!”

He shrugged as he entered the elevator behind her. “It’s true.”

“You’re terrible,” she admonished him in her best teacher-like voice.

“Oh, I can be bad. Very, very bad,” he told her in a seductive, low whisper, his hands trapping her against the elevator wall, one on each side of her head. “Kiss me and I might behave. For now.”

Kara looked up into his glowing eyes that presently resembled hot melted chocolate. Oh hell, she loved chocolate, so she did what any self-respecting chocolate lover would do.

She kissed him just as the elevator doors closed, locking them briefly in a silent little world all their own.

## Chapter 5

Kara released a startled squeak as Simon's hand reached out and slapped the stop button on the elevator. She'd been lost in his kiss, oblivious to the motion of the elevator as he kissed her into a coma. But the loud, smacking noise of his palm hitting the button and the lurch of the moving elevator car coming to an abrupt halt yanked her out of her alternate reality. Damn it.

"What in the hell are you wearing underneath this dress," Simon growled against her lips as his wandering fingers stroked lightly over her ass.

"Stockings, panties." She nipped at his bottom lip as she answered.

His hand reached for the hem of the short dress, lifting it and spinning her around. Momentarily confused, she let him.

"Christ. Those aren't underwear. Your ass is showing." His tone was low and husky, his hands exploring the supple cheeks of her exposed backside.

Her cheeks flushed as she remembered pulling on the tiny black thong and matching bra. The wardrobe that Simon's assistant had purchased for her contained mostly racy lingerie. "You bought it. Matching sets. All very similar to this one."

"It's not that I don't appreciate it." He answered in a slow, sexy utterance as his fingers slid underneath the tiny back strap.

"I thought you said you were going to behave." She answered breathlessly, her conscious mind slipping away as his fingers slid lower and lower.

"I lied. That was before I felt these panties and had to see them. Now I want to see the matched set."

Oh, God. She groaned as he turned her to face him, his fingers nimbly unbuttoning her coat and dropping it on the plush carpet in the elevator.

"Simon, we're in the elevator. We can't do this here." She replied with a combination of mortification and desire.

The zipper of her dress gave way under his searching hands and she could feel the light brush of his fingers down her spine as he pulled it down in one smooth jerk.

"Private elevator for the penthouse. It's not like someone is waiting to use it." His breath hitched as he exposed her upper body, letting the dress catch at her waist. "You're so beautiful."

She sucked in a trembling breath as he trailed a finger from her cheek, down her neck, and along the exposed swell of her breasts over the top of the lacy bra. Heat pooled between her legs, soaking the tiny scrap of material between her thighs. His thumbs rubbed lightly over her thinly covered nipples as his mouth lowered to trail over the hot flesh above them. His whiskers abraded her seductively as he licked, nipped and suckled, driving her half mad to have him inside of her.

"I can smell your need and it's making my mouth water for a taste of you." He lifted his head, his dark eyes appearing almost black with hunger.

His hand trailed down her quaking belly and underneath the dress pooled at her hips. She hissed as his blunt fingertips slipped beneath the saturated silk of her panties. Suddenly, she didn't care if she was half naked in an elevator. All she wanted was Simon.

Knees weak, she steadied herself by putting her hands on his shoulders and took whatever he was offering. As he pulled his midnight gaze from hers and kissed his way down her taut stomach, she knew that what he was offering was pure bliss, and she wasn't about to fight it.

He ripped the delicate material of her panties, pulling the garment forcefully from her body. Her naked pussy tingled as it was exposed to the ambient air. She gripped Simon's shoulders tightly as he dropped to his knees in front of her, the sight of his dark head dipping under the hem of her dress making her legs unsteady and her whole body shiver with hot need.

Scorching hands ran from her knees to the tops of her thighs, gliding smoothly over her thin stockings. She held her breath as his hot tongue explored the sensitive flesh of her thighs at the top of the lace before finally parting the folds of her pussy slowly, exploring the flesh of the protective lips.

"Oh, God. Simon." She moaned as her head fell back and her eyes closed, wanting to watch him devour her, but unable to tolerate the intensity of her desire.

Heat snaked through her belly, slithering over every inch of her skin as he pushed his tongue deeper. And deeper. She wanted to grasp his head, pull his mouth harder against her needy flesh, but she didn't. It was one small step at a time with Simon. She didn't want to push any buttons that might cause him to stop. Curling her nails into the heavy sweater on his shoulders, she clutched the fabric like it was a lifeline, her body whirling as Simon's sizzling tongue found her clit, flicking over it with bold, fast strokes.

Whimpering, she thrust her hips forward, silently begging for more. And he gave it to her. His big hands cupped her ass, bringing her forward, jerking her tightly against his plundering mouth, the sound of him lapping at her plentiful juices erotic and hot.

She exploded in his mouth with a long moan, her body quaking, her pussy flooding with welcome relief. Simon continued to lave, drawing out her climax until she was a quivering mess, before he drew himself up and kissed her.

Her arms tightened around his neck. She stretched and yanked his head down, frantic for contact. The taste of herself on his lips as he kissed her senseless made her undulate her hips, feeling his rock-hard erection rubbing between her thighs. She needed him inside of her. Desperately.

"Fuck me, Simon. Please." She begged without any shame, feeling the emptiness that only he could fill.

"Upstairs." He groaned as his mouth pulled away from hers. He gripped her ass, grinding himself against her.

"Here. Now," she insisted as she turned and faced the wall of the elevator. Placing her hands on the wall, she bent at the waist and opened her legs wide and told him, "My hands will stay on the wall. Please. Just do it. I need you now."

"Fuck!" His curse was frustrated, but so passionate that Kara wasn't surprised to hear the zipper of his pants lowering.

Yes. Another victory.

"I need you." Simon's hoarse whisper was almost inaudible. Kara knew he hadn't meant for her to hear him, but she did. The quiet, harshly uttered words echoed in her mind, drawing forth an answering primal response that nearly brought her to her knees.

The air in the elevator was steamy and the only sound in the small, cramped space was the ragged, uneven breaths coming from their mouths, as she waited for him to impale her, to feel him filling up the lonely places inside of her. "Please, Simon. Now."

Kara nearly sobbed with relief as she felt the blunt head of his cock brush the needy flesh between her spread legs. His large hands gripped her hips with an almost savage strength, pulling her back against him, his cock slamming into her slick channel with one powerful, hard stroke.

She gasped from the pure elation of Simon's possession. "Did I hurt you?" Simon rasped as she felt his body tense. "You're so tight."

"No. No. It just feels so good." She pushed back against him, urging him to move.

"Jesus, Kara. You deserve better than getting fucked in a damn elevator." Simon groaned as he pulled back, tightened his grip on her hips and buried himself to the root inside of her again. "But I can't stop. Never want to stop."

"You can't stop. I couldn't take it if you stopped. Harder, Simon. Give me more." Her head fell back as Simon started an even, deep rhythm that threatened to drive her insane. The coarse wool of his sweater abraded her spine as he leaned forward, his body curling around her protectively as he kept up a hard, punishing thrust with his hips. In and out. Over and over. She quivered as his hot, uncontrolled breath hit the side of her face as he nipped at the tender flesh of her neck.

Never had she experienced a need so volatile and untamed. Yearning to hold him as he pounded into her, she gripped the metal balance bar and shoved her pelvis back, meeting Simon stroke for stroke, needing the contact of skin on skin wherever she could get it.

One of his hands left her hip and slid down the front of her, between her thighs. He caressed the springy curls before his fingers slipped lower, so very close to the swollen bud of flesh right above his pounding cock.

"Oh, God!" Every nerve in her body throbbed as Simon's fingers circled her clit, making her hips slam back on his cock with a strength that she didn't know she had. "Touch me. Please."

"Come for me." Simon's deep voice commanded as his fingers zeroed in on the tiny bud of flesh that was aching for his touch.

Whimpering, her head fell forward and she was blinded by the curtain of hair that was swinging wildly from Simon's brutal thrusts. She closed her eyes, nearly unable to bear the waves of pleasure that coursed through her body as his fingers stroked relentlessly over her clit while his cock possessed her channel, owning her, taking her, melding their bodies together until she wasn't sure whether the ruthless desire belonged to her or to Simon.

Her climax hit with a jarring explosion that had her crying out his name as spasms wracked her body, a body that was held in helpless thrall, unable to do anything except ride out the sharp, endless orgasm that was rocking her body.

"Fuck!" Simon's hand returned to her hip, both hands gripping her firmly, tightly as his cock cleaved into her faster, deeper. A groan that held both agony and anguish sprang from his throat as he buried himself to the hilt, flooding Kara with the heat of his release.

She would have sank to the floor, her legs unable to hold her up, had Simon not wound a steely arm around her waist, keeping her upright. He turned her gently and wrapped his strong arms around



her utterly limp body. Their breathing was heavy and labored.

She lifted her arms around his neck, resting her head against his shoulder, unable to think.

Simon supported her weight, stroking her hair gently as his breathing slowed.

It took her several minutes to speak. "I'm a mess. I need to go back to the condo for a few minutes." Looking at the remnants of her underwear lying on the floor she added, "I guess I need to get a new pair of panties, too."

Simon's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "Did you lose them?"

She pulled back, her heart melting at the naughty, amused look in his eyes. "No. Some caveman ripped them off of me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Must have been some lusty encounter." He pushed her hair back from her eyes, draping it softly over her shoulder. "I'll buy you more."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't need more. I have several drawers filled with lingerie. I could go without doing laundry for a month. I've never owned so much lingerie in my entire life."

"I'll still get you more. If what you have is as sexy as the pair I just destroyed, it won't last long." His voice was hoarse with a touch of warning flowing through his words.

His warm gaze caressed her partially clad body, lingering on every inch of bared skin.

She shuddered, imagining Simon ripping off various articles of lingerie in a fit of passion. "You can't ruin all my lingerie. Those things are expensive."

"I didn't hear you complaining a few minutes ago." His voice was hot, sultry and filled with a promise of things to come. "I'd buy lingerie for you every day if what just happened is the result. Hell, I'd buy it for you just to see you smile."

Kara's heart skipped a beat, her chest aching from unexpressed emotion. How much longer could she do this? How much longer could she hide the powerful and sometimes painful emotions that Simon wrung from her with just a casual comment or a simple touch? Her brain, which had always ruled her life, and her heart were in conflict. She knew that nothing more than a casual sexual relationship and friendship would ever exist between her and this incredible man who was holding her as if she was the most important person in his life. Still, she wanted him. How pathetic was that?

Backing away, she slipped her arms back into her dress. "Can you zip me?" She hoped she sounded casual as she gave him her back.

"Do I have to? We could skip the party."

"Yes." She bit her lip to keep from smiling. He had sounded so hopeful that she couldn't help being amused.

He didn't answer, but she felt his finger sliding lazily over her spine before he slid the zipper up with a masculine sigh.

Turning her around, he placed one hand on her shoulder and tipped her chin up with the other, searching her face with a frown. "Did I hurt you? I was a little rough."

Kara knew she would probably have a few bruises on her hips from his strong grip, but his rough, raw possession was something she had been begging for, something she needed. The intensity of her passion for Simon wouldn't have been satisfied with anything less. She lifted a hand to his

rough jaw. “I was there, Simon. I think I was begging for it. No, you didn’t hurt me.” Her orgasm had been intense, but the fact that he cared about whether or not she minded his gritty, feral possession made her care just a little bit more.

I can’t believe I just had some of the hottest sex I’ve ever had in an elevator.

“Oh God, I hope nobody heard me.” She groaned as she picked up her purse and jacket snatching her shredded panties from the floor and shoving them quickly into her handbag.

“I doubt anyone heard you although I’m surprised--” The red phone on the elevator panel rang interrupting Simon in mid-sentence, piercing the silent space with a noise so shrill that Kara jumped. “that nobody called.” Simon smirked as he finished the comment.

“Oh God.” Kara slumped back against the wall, mortified. While she was in the grip of ecstasy, she hadn’t thought about the fact that others would question the sudden stop of the elevator.

Simon snickered and snatched the phone from the wall. “Hudson.” His voice was instantly professional and impatient.

She couldn’t hear the conversation at the other end, but she could tell that the voice was male.

Simon shifted as he zipped his pants, his hip leaning against the balance bar, his expression serene as he listened. How in the hell did he do that? No one would ever know that she and Simon had been screwing like their lives depended on it only a few moments ago. He looked cool and calm; she was sure she looked like she had just been thoroughly ravaged.

“No. Everything is fine. I needed something and I stopped the elevator to look for it.” Simon’s voice was nonchalant, but he shot her a dark, wicked look, his eyes hooded, a half smile forming on his lips.

Her face heated and she shot him back a murderous glance.

“Yes. I’m quite ecstatic that I found it. Thanks for checking. Have a good night.” Simon dropped the phone back on the hook and slapped the button to return to the condo.

She punched his shoulder. “How can you tell such a whooper without blinking an eye?”

Simon shrugged and pulled her into his arms. “I’m quite sure I probably blinked since the average person blinks every ten seconds. And what I said is absolutely true.” He kissed her lightly on the forehead before continuing. “I needed something. I found it here in the elevator. And I was definitely ecstatic.”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. “And I was orgasmic.”

The elevator lurched, stopping at the penthouse. “I know. That’s why I was ecstatic.” He answered in a husky, quiet voice. “Hearing you come is the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.”

She swallowed, trying to push down the lump that formed in her throat. Her nipples hardened as Simon reached around her body to unlock the door of the condo. His words were dripping with blunt, raw honesty.

Uncertain how to answer his comment, she made a beeline for her room as soon as he opened the door. “I’ll be out in a minute. Try not to get my new pair of panties wet this time.”

She heard a satisfied, male chuckle behind her. “Getting your panties wet is becoming my main goal in life.”

She smiled as she entered her room and pulled out a fresh pair of underwear, trying to push her own jumbled emotions aside.

Simon had trusted her enough to fuck her without binding her. Again. Maybe some day...

Small steps, Kara. Don't expect too much. Whatever is eating at Simon has been there for a very long time. It could take years to gain his trust.

And she wouldn't be here for years. She grimaced, her scalp crying out in protest as she ran a brush ruthlessly through her disheveled hair.

Do what you can. Enjoy what you have while you have it. And for God's sake don't take all of this too seriously.

Enjoying her time with Simon was not the issue. She cherished every moment in his company because being with him filled her lonely places in a way that she had never experienced before.

I'm poor. I'm pragmatic. I am not a woman who believes in soul mates; one man and one woman who complete each other and are meant to be together.

Problem was, her parents had been like that. Poor as they had been, they had also been completely happy. In many ways, it was almost a blessing that they had gone together because Kara was almost certain that one would not have survived without the other. They had been so connected that either of her parents would have been tormented and miserable without the other. It was hard not to believe in real, soul-binding love after watching her parents for eighteen years.

She heaved a sigh and set her brush back on the vanity. Okay...maybe she did believe that love could be that intense, that consuming. But not with Simon. Never with Simon. The man was heartbreak waiting to happen. He didn't do committed relationships and she was already on emotional overload with him.

The only way to survive her relationship with Simon was to keep it casual, not let her heart get involved.

Scooping up her jacket and purse, she sauntered toward the kitchen, hearing only two words running over and over in her head and her own self-deprecating laugh echo through her mind.

Too late. Too late.

## Chapter 6

Samuel Hudson had a lavish mansion in South Tampa, an area so affluent that Kara had never been there before, even though she had grown up in the city. She had to force her open mouth to close as James pulled the car around the circular driveway, letting them out in the front of the palatial residence.

“This is...spectacular,” she whispered to Simon as he took her hand to help her out of the car.

“You see why I decided not to drive?” he said in a lazy voice, his eyes scanning the expensive vehicles lining the long driveway.

“You draw quite a crowd, Mr. Hudson,” she told him softly, her eyes roving over his handsome face. “Happy Birthday. I have a present for you, but I’ll give it to you later.”

His face lit up in a wicked, wicked grin as their eyes locked in a heated gaze. “I thought you gave it to me last night. And tonight.”

“Simon!” She refused to blush again. She wouldn’t. Absolutely not. She was a mature, adult woman and she didn’t blush over a simple sexual comment. She was an almost-nurse for God’s sake, used to seeing the human body in all states of dress. It wasn’t like she was a young girl, but it was an infuriating fact that Simon could make her feel like one sometimes.

“Well...just saying. But I won’t argue if you want to do it again. In fact, we could go home right now-,”

“In the house, birthday boy.” She laughed as he slipped his arm around her waist and led her to the door, a small, satisfied smirk still present on his lips.

“Tomorrow night we’re going out alone,” he muttered, his arm tightening around her body as he led her to the front door.

“Tomorrow?” she said, confused.

“For your birthday. I’m taking you out. Alone.”

She turned to face him after they had climbed the marble steps, stopping at the huge double doors. “You aren’t taking me out. You’ve done enough. It’s not necessary.”

“It’s very necessary,” he answered, his voice harsh. “I want to. It’s your birthday.”

The door swung open before she could answer.

“Hey, bro! Glad you finally decided to join your own party.”

Kara immediately recognized Sam Hudson. Simon had been right. He was movie-star handsome. Dressed similar to Simon, his sweater was an emerald green that nearly matched his eyes. He looked like an enormous, blond, mythological god...but in Kara’s opinion, he lacked Simon’s sex appeal. Although she could aesthetically appreciate Sam’s handsome face and gorgeous body...he had nothing on his younger brother.

Sam stood back and motioned for them to enter. Kara could feel Sam’s eyes studying her, his brain working furiously to figure her out, put her in a box. As she entered the marbled entryway, she wondered what Simon had told his brother about her.

“Kara, this is my brother Sam,” Simon introduced them casually, his hand reaching out to take

the jacket she was discarding. An elderly man, obviously an employee, took the coat from Simon's arm.

"Well, bro, no need to ask why I haven't seen much of you lately," Sam said softly, his tone mocking.

Kara extended her hand politely, "It's nice to meet you, Sam. I've heard a lot about you from your mother."

"A pleasure." His hand engulfed her smaller one in a firm grip, holding it a little longer than necessary. "Mom's talked about you a lot, too. All of it good, of course," Sam answered, his smile brilliant and his manner persuasive.

He's good. I see why Helen says he can charm anyone. It's really too bad that his smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

Kara reclaimed her hand by pulling it out of his grip and letting it drop to her side.

"Eat, get a drink, have a good time," Sam suggested jovially, slapping Simon on the back. "Happy birthday, little brother."

"Yeah, thanks for the party," Simon grumbled, shooting his brother an I'll-get-you-for-this look that only brothers could exchange as he nudged Kara toward a cluster of guests and the food in the living room.

"You love me. You know you do." Sam smiled, his voice teasing and arrogant at the same time.

"Not today," Simon snarled back.

Sam laughed wickedly as he moved away, advancing toward a group of people who were motioning for him to come over.

"Bastard," Simon said in a low, irritated voice.

Kara rolled her eyes, keeping her amusement to herself. "He's your brother, Simon."

"Not today," he repeated, his hand sliding across her back as he lead her to the lavish food and drink tables.

Sam's home was stunning, surprisingly decorated in white, light, airy décor that made the already-spacious mansion appear even more enormous and grand. Well-dressed guests chatted in groups, their wealth and status obvious by their dress and their ease with the sumptuous surroundings.

Kara tried not to gawk like the penniless woman she really was, but it was difficult to keep her gaping mouth closed. The women were dripping with diamonds and gems and their expressions were cool. The men smelled of money and power, gathering in groups, probably discussing business or golf scores.

Simon filled their plates from a large buffet that was bursting with elegant-looking appetizers that were being continually replenished by silent employees. She picked up two napkins that were folded so precisely that she almost felt guilty about messing them up. The dishes were obviously fine china and Kara frowned. Crap...she'd hate to have to clean all of these dishes and wondered how many servants it took to clean up the mess after the party was over. Hadn't the wealthy ever heard of paper plates and napkins?

She didn't have any idea what she was eating, but she downed every morsel on her plate after

she and Simon had found a quiet corner to eat. Every bite melted in her mouth and she licked her lips as she consumed the last delicate treat, hoping she hadn't left crumbs on her face.

"God, that was delicious," she uttered appreciatively as she handed her empty plate to a roaming waiter.

"May I get you anything else, madam?" the older waiter asked politely.

"No, thank you. I'm full." She smiled as the little man gave her a polite bow and moved away.

Simon had discarded his plate and snatched two full champagne flutes from a passing waitress. "I love that about you," he said quietly as he handed her a glass.

"What?" She gave him a confused look as she accepted the glass, sipping slowly at the drink, trying to decide if she liked champagne. It was dry, but not bad.

"You enjoy your food. You don't pick away at it or eat like a bird. I'm almost jealous when I watch your face. If it's good, you look well-pleasured," he answered before taking a healthy sip from his glass. "Watching you eat is almost an erotic experience."

She shrugged as she lowered the glass from her face. "If you don't have an endless supply and you're never sure when your next meal will be, you appreciate the taste of good food."

"Will food always be an orgasmic experience for you?" he asked casually, but his eyes were full of mirth.

She tried not to smile, she really did, but her lips twitched as her eyes met his. "Probably."

"Simon!"

The male tenor voice carried across the room and both of them turned to see a middle-aged man raising his arm, trying to get Simon's attention.

"You better circulate, birthday boy. You are the guest of honor," she told him with a smile. "I'm going over to talk with your mom for a while."

He didn't look happy, but he left her side and went to greet the man waving frantically for his attention. She sipped her drink and watched as Simon moved around the room, greeting people, his smile charming. While he might not have quite the charisma that Sam had, Simon could work the room. Not for one second did he look uncomfortable with these people. He was able to chat and make small talk, taking total command of himself, moving in and out of the crowds as if he belonged here.

Because he does. He may not always like socializing, but he plays the game well.

Her gaze stayed riveted on him, marveling over this part of Simon that she had never seen before. The man had so many layers, so many facets to his personality.

Forcing herself to stop staring like a complete idiot, Kara looked around for Helen, finding her at the buffet table.

She chatted for quite some time with Helen, until her friend was pulled away by another acquaintance. Not wanting to appear as though she knew no one else – which she didn't – she strolled to a set of ornate doors, fairly certain that they led outside, knowing the view would probably be spectacular.

There were more people outside, seated at small, intimate tables. Not all of them were occupied. It was getting later and the air was brisk, but it felt good to Kara after being inside the

crowded house for so long.

She took a deep breath as she stepped outside. There was a lighted path in front her, a cobbled walkway that appeared to lead down to a boat dock. Before she could follow the path, a conversation right next to her stopped her in her tracks.

“I thought we could spend some time together, Simon. I saw this divine diamond bracelet that I’d love to have.” The female voice was artificial and simpering.

Kara drew a deep, bracing breath, hoping that she wouldn’t see the Simon that had, just a short time ago, left her breathless in an elevator.

She turned her head slowly, knowing that she had to know. Her breath caught as she took in the broad shoulders, the dark hair and the sweater that she knew were Simon’s. He was no more than five feet away, his back to her, a slim set of arms around his neck and perfectly manicured fingers resting casually against the nape of his neck.

“I’ve heard about your...arrangements. I was hoping we could come to an agreement.” The sugary voice was seductive and the woman’s hands wandered over Simon’s shoulders like she owned him.

Nausea began to rise in Kara’s throat and she moved soundlessly away from the couple to creep to the steps. She didn’t want Simon to see her and she didn’t want the nameless woman to think that she was spying on them. Not that blondie would probably care. The woman looked a cat with its claws solidly imbedded into something it wanted and wasn’t about to be distracted.

The light wasn’t as bright as it was inside, but it took only a brief glance back at the couple to see that the woman in Simon’s arms was everything that Kara was not. She was blonde, thin, her make-up and hair perfect. In other words...sickeningly gorgeous.

Kara couldn’t move, couldn’t function, her eyes were riveted on the couple and her feet felt like they were embedded in cement. She could hear the woman murmur something softly, but she couldn’t make out the words. Cherry-red lips curved into a calculating smile before the blonde grasped the back of Simon’s head, pulling his lips down to hers.

Her heart thundering, Kara took the steps leading down to the path faster than she should have in thin, delicate heels, needing desperately to get away from the scene that had been playing out in front of her like a horror movie. Her heels got caught up in the cobbles on the path and she kicked her shoes off, scooping them up with barely a pause.

Breathe. Just breathe.

She reached the dock panting and nauseated. She gripped the wooden railing on the dock to steady herself, trying desperately to calm her ragged breathing.

Breathe. In. Out. In. Out.

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. The sex life of Simon Hudson was none of her business. She wasn’t committed to Simon and he certainly wasn’t committed to her. They had sex with no strings attached.

In. Out. In. Out again.

Her breathing settled, but the nausea refused to go away. No wonder Simon had never had a girlfriend. There was obviously an endless supply of women to entertain him...for a price. An

arrangement? Really? No wonder Simon had never had a real relationship. Women used him and he used women. Her stomach rolled and she gripped the wood harder.

Forget about it. It doesn't matter.

It shouldn't...but it did. It hurt that Simon could be making a casual agreement to screw another woman while he was still making time with her. They had nearly fucked each other to death a few hours ago. Or so she thought. Maybe it had only been earth-shattering for her. Maybe he missed tying up his women, having them helpless and blindfolded. Maybe he needed it.

Did you think you were someone special, the person who was going to help Simon break free of some of his past insecurities? Maybe he really doesn't have any. Maybe he likes his life exactly as it is. Maybe you're just a complete bonehead who can't comprehend a billionaire playboy who can buy any woman he wants.

Her thoughts grated, ground her down until she wondered if everything she had convinced herself was true about Simon was actually a big fat lie, a self-created falsehood, a man she only imagined.

You don't really believe that.

"The problem is...I don't really know anymore," she whispered softly to herself, her voice trembling.

Her illusions were shattered, and she had no idea what to believe in anymore. She had trusted Simon, had thought he was a decent but troubled man, and his actions left her confused, raw and completely devastated.

She stared numbly at the lights that were blinking over the rolling water and wrapped her arms around her shivering body. How would she ever erase the memory of Simon kissing a blonde bombshell, a woman so perfect that it made Kara wonder what Simon had ever been doing with her?

She blinked and a lone tear slid silently down her cheek. Most likely, she wouldn't forget. The memory, the sense of betrayal, and the crushing pain were likely to hang around for quite some time.

Lost in her thoughts, Kara stood on the dock like a shadow, unmoving, no longer feeling the chill, wishing that she never had to go back and face reality.

She would. She had to. But she would avoid it as long as possible.



## Chapter 7

“Whatever my brother is giving you, I’ll give you more if you come to me when he’s finished with you.” The sultry male voice pierced the silence right next to her ear, startling her so badly that she would have toppled over the dock railing if a strong male hand hadn’t gripped her waist. “Whoa. Steady.”

She whipped around to face the voice, already recognizing it as Sam’s. He crowded her, resting one hand on each side of her, keeping her from escape.

“W-What did you say?” The man left her cold and she didn’t appreciate his familiarity.

“I’ll pay. Whatever you want. However much you want.” His eyes were cold and she shuddered.

Oh, God. She was going to be sick. Gulping, she stared up at Sam’s diety-like appearance, barely able to believe that he was actually propositioning her.

Like a harlot.

Like a prostitute.

Like a whore.

Anger rose inside of her like a phoenix, climbing higher and higher, stronger and stronger. She could barely see through the haze of red that clouded her vision as her body trembled.

“Simon won’t mind,” Sam assured her as his hand moved to her bare shoulder.

His comment resonated through her, making her snap. What the hell was with the Hudson men? Did they think they could buy any woman they wanted to fuck? She drew her hand back and let it fly... hard. It connected with his smirking face with a satisfying smack that exploded in the near-silent evening, cracking through the peace of the night.

“Maddie was right. You are a complete snake,” she hissed, her body shaking with rage.

“Maddie? Maddie Reynolds?” Sam’s expression was complete astonishment and shock. She wasn’t sure if it was the slap or the mention of Maddie’s name, but she didn’t wait to find out.

She pushed his arm out of the way and ran, deviating from the path to run across the well-manicured lawn to the front of the house.

She tore down the driveway and ran until she found James waiting patiently in the Mercedes. Tearing the front door of the car open, she dove into the front seat. “Please take me home,” she choked out, tears clogging her throat and making her voice raspy. “Please.”

“Ms. Kara. Are you all right?” She couldn’t see his face in the dark, but the concern in the driver’s voice was evident.

“I’m not feeling well. I need to go home,” she stated, not able to keep a pleading note from her request.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes. Take me home. I’ll be fine.”

She wouldn’t be fine. Not now. Not tomorrow. Probably not for a very long time. But she didn’t tell him that.

James, bless him, didn't ask any more questions. He started the vehicle and headed directly toward the condo.

Kara knotted her shaking hands around the soles of the shoes in her lap, trying not to let the tears flooding her eyes to fall. She couldn't cry. There wasn't anything to really cry about. The Hudsons were just doing what they normally did. She was the one with the problem.

Somehow, she had done an incredibly foolish thing. She had allowed herself to fall in love with Simon Hudson. Deeply, passionately, completely in love. It wasn't like the love she had harbored for her ex. This was a confusing, soul-shredding, rip-your-guts out love that was going to hurt. Big time.

Swallowing down a bitter sob by biting her lip until it bled, she turned her head to the right, watching the city fly by as James drove her competently toward home.

You've gotten through loss before, Kara. You'll get through this.

Since the death of her parents, she had used encouraging words, pep talks, to get herself through her toughest battles. They had always worked before. Hadn't she made it this far?

You'll forget him. It will just take time.

An uncomfortable weight settled on her chest, hard, heavy and totally crushing.

For the first time in her life, Kara Foster felt like she was lying to herself.

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"Kara!" Simon bellowed loudly as he slammed the door of his condo behind him, tossing his keys carelessly on the kitchen counter.

There was a small, neatly wrapped present on the counter with a card, but he ignored it and raced through the condo like a man possessed.

"Kara!"

He yelled her name until he was hoarse, but every single room was empty. Her room looked basically untouched, except that her backpack was missing.

"Shit!"

He went to kitchen and lifted the gaily wrapped package, finding a personal check from Kara in the amount of ninety thousand dollars and a single sheet of paper under the card and gift.

I'll repay the rest as soon as I get a job. I left all of the things you gave me except for a few pairs of jeans and a couple of shirts. Thanks for everything. I'll always be grateful.

Kara

What. The. Fuck. He didn't want her damn gratitude. He wanted...her.

He crumpled the paper in a tight fist, his knuckles white from the effort.

She had left him?

No explanation.

No goodbye.

Just...gone.

He scooped up the gift and the sealed card, carrying them both to the living room while he poured himself a stiff drink. After knocking back a whiskey in one gulp, he poured himself another and dropped into a leather chair, setting the drink on the coffee table beside him.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, wishing he could get a do-over on the evening, starting with the part where he and Kara had left the condo for the party. If he could have a do-over, they would never have left the condo.

He had nearly killed his own brother tonight, had happily beat the shit out of him after he had found out that Sam had hit on Kara. It hadn't been hard to figure out. Kara had been missing and Sam had a tell-tale handprint on his face, an obvious souvenir from a pissed-off female. Furthermore, Sam had led Kara to believe that Simon wouldn't mind if Sam fucked his woman.

Granted, Sam had been two sheets to the wind, but Simon had been so out of control when his brother had made his drunken confessions that he didn't care. He had pounded his brother into the ground, stopping only when his mother got between the two of them.

It was the only physical fight that he and his brother had ever had. Sam had never laid a finger on him, and Simon would have never imagined punching his brother. Until tonight. Until Kara. The thought of any other man touching Kara made Simon completely insane.

It hadn't made Simon feel any better to know that Kara had rebuffed Sam, bitch slapping him hard enough to leave a mark. She had probably been scared, confused. And she had left him. It made him want to lay into his stupid-ass brother all over again.

He opened his eyes, noticing that he had crumpled the card in his lap. Smoothing it out, he opened it.

Simon,

Happy Birthday! I wanted to give you something that I didn't have to buy with your money, something special. I know you collect coins, so I thought of this gift.

This belonged to my father. It was his lucky penny. He found it on the exact same day that he met my mother. He swore it was only moments before he saw her for the first time. He always said it brought him the luckiest event of his life.

I've always carried it with me. I've made it this far, so I guess it has been lucky.

I know it's not much, but I want you to have it. I know you don't really need luck, but I'll feel better knowing you have it. I hope it always keeps you safe.

Kara

Simon tore open the package and stared long and hard at the small, worn plastic case. He finally popped it open, and glanced at the lucky coin.

Astonished, he flipped it over and then over again. Hell, it was 1955 Double Die Obverse. And in very nice condition. He wasn't a professional grader, but he was willing to bet that it would grade high.

Did the crazy woman realize that she had been carrying around such a rare coin? A coin that would probably feed her for several months if she sold it?

Probably not. And he knew that Kara would probably rather die than sell something so

sentimental, something that belonged to her dad.

But she had given it to him. She had parted with something extremely dear to her to give him a birthday present.

He closed the case and gripped the coin hard, placing it over his heart as pain ripped through his sternum. Why had she parted with this? Why had she given it to him? Instinctively, he knew it was special to her, so special that she always kept it close.

Simon knocked back his second drink and put the coin in his front pocket. It wouldn't leave his possession until he could give it back to her. Personally.

Grabbing his cell phone, Simon dialed his security manager, Hoffman. He answered on the second ring.

"Are you tailing her?" he asked his security chief gruffly, not bothering with niceties.

"Of course. I wasn't sure what was going on, but she seems settled for the night. Good neighborhood, decent house. Belongs to a Dr. Reynolds," Hoffman informed him.

"She left. Keep a team on her twenty-four-seven. I want to know if she sneezes."

"Okay, boss. Will do."

Simon disconnected with a sigh. Obviously she had gone to stay with her friend, Maddie. She'd be okay there. For now.

He had never told Kara, but she had been guarded every moment of every day since the incident at the clinic had occurred. Hoffman's team ran in shifts, always watching, always ready. The police had never caught the junkies who had shot at her and robbed the clinic, and Simon wasn't willing to take any chances. Kara had seen their faces, had helped with composite drawings. Until the assholes were caught, she needed to be safe. Simon needed to know that she would be okay.

Every instinct, every cell in his body was screaming at him to go after her, to drag her back over his shoulder if necessary. He wanted to, but he couldn't win her over that way. The incident with Sam had obviously upset her. Giving her some time would help. Hauling her back would only settle the problem for a short time, and Simon wasn't in this for the short haul. He needed Kara, had to have her forever. Anything less was unthinkable.

If someone had told him several weeks ago that he would meet a woman he couldn't live without, he would have laughed until his ribs hurt. But he wasn't laughing now. Kara had become his life, and he couldn't even think about going on without her.

What kind of life had he lived before her? As he thought about all of the women he had fucked in the past, he frowned. Women who had to get half- drunk and be offered expensive gifts, just to give their bodies to him. They had been empty experiences, women who tolerated him for his money. They may have temporarily satisfied his urge to get off, but they had left him with a huge emptiness that he had never even thought about before he met Kara. Now that he knew what it felt like to be with a woman who actually wanted him, he acknowledged that he could never go back. He needed Kara as much as he needed the air that he breathed. God knew, he didn't deserve her, but he would have her.

Forcing himself to his bedroom, he stripped out of his clothes and headed for the bed. Turning around abruptly, he headed back to the pile of clothing on the floor and fished in the pocket of his pants. Pulling out the coin that Kara had given him, he kept it in his grasp and slid into bed, not sure if

he could even sleep, but longing for some sort of oblivion.

Having Kara gone was the ultimate torture. The house was too quiet, too empty. Her presence had been palpable since she had first arrived and now he could feel only the ghost of her essence, echoes of her laugh.

Sliding the coin under his pillow, Simon flopped onto his back, already restless. He prayed for sleep to take him away...but God must have been busy because he lay awake most of the night, trying to decide the best way to get Kara back.

He would get her back. That was the only option. It was just a matter of figuring out how to accomplish his goal.

Dawn was breaking before he slipped into a troubled sleep, visions of Kara tormenting him in his dreams.

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## Chapter 8

Kara pulled the heavy wooden door of the restaurant manager's office closed behind her and leaned against it with a heavy, broken sigh. It was her eleventh interview in the last ten days, all of which had been a complete waste of time, and this one hadn't gone any better. No one wanted to hire a student who was only a few months away from graduation. No restaurant wanted a waitress who was likely to leave within six months for a position in her chosen profession. While Kara couldn't blame the prospective employers for their judgment, she really needed a freaking job.

The familiar sounds of clanging dishes, barking cooks and sharp-tongued servers filtered through her mind as she took yet another walk of shame through the back halls of another restaurant that wasn't willing to take her on as even a part-time employee.

Okay, it wasn't as if she would starve. She still had ten grand in her bank account, the loan she had given herself from Simon. Biting her lip as the pain of thinking about him crashed over her, she exited the main door of the restaurant, letting herself lean against the cool brick exterior to gather her thoughts after the disastrous interview.

Actually, she had more than ten thousand dollars in her account. Nine days ago, on her own birthday, Simon had sent several delivery men and a messenger to Maddie's home with all of the items that she had left behind. The delivery guys had been loaded with her belongings, all of which had been purchased by Simon, and the messenger came bearing several dozen red roses and an envelope with a note.

Kara,

I am returning your check. Please accept the money as a birthday present from me and don't fight with the delivery people. They have been instructed to put the items wherever you want them or leave them on the doorstep. As they work for me, they will follow instructions.

I'm sorry about what happened with Sam. Please come home.

Happy Birthday. I wish we could spend it together.

Yours,

Simon

Kara choked back a sob and rubbed unconsciously at her upper thigh, feeling the stiff paper of his note that was resting in her front pocket.

I'm going to have to talk to him.

Kara had hoped that giving herself a little time might help her feel more grounded, less mired in depression. But it wasn't working. Every day she didn't see Simon seemed like an eternity, and she was just fooling herself if she thought that a week or two would help her get over her longing for him. If anything, she sank deeper into the darkness as each day passed.

I have to talk to him. Make him take my check. Work out terms to repay what I borrowed. Return the things he bought.

She had bawled like a baby when she had turned on the laptop he had given her and realized that Simon had downloaded every game that she had ever played on his computer lab. Myth World - both games - had been first on the list.

Wiping furiously at an escaped tear rolling down her cheek, Kara knew she had to stop mooning over Simon Hudson, she just wasn't sure how to do it. The silly, thoughtful things that he did, such as taking the time to download all of those games, tugged at her heart. Then, she would remember the sight of the blonde supermodel on Sam's porch pulling Simon's lips to hers and she'd be pissed all over again. How could any man be so thoughtful, yet be such a dog when it came to women?

"Hello, Kara." A deep, rumbling voice sounded right next to her. Her eyes jerked up to discover Sam Hudson leaning a shoulder against the wall next to her. Instinctively, she backed up several steps, putting distance between her and a man she didn't like or trust.

Sam advanced, but left space between the two of them. "What do you want?" Her tone was sharp and she put her hand up to stop him from coming any closer.

He raised his eyebrow at her defensive move. "I just want to talk." He looked as arrogant as he had at the party, even dressed in casual jeans and a black t-shirt, but there was a thread of remorse running through his words, and his green eyes were clear and bright. "Please." That addition actually sounded painful coming from Sam, as though he had to force it from his throat.

"I don't know you and I have nothing to say." She snipped at him, eager to get away. The last thing she wanted was to chat with Sam Hudson.

"I'm not going away until you talk to me, so you might as well do it now."

Kara wanted to stomp her foot in frustration, but she wouldn't give Sam the satisfaction. "Just say whatever it is you have to say and leave."

He motioned toward the restaurant door. "I could use a cup of coffee. It's been a long day."

She shook her head. "I just interviewed there. I really don't want to go back in there."

He waved to the eatery across the street. "We can go there."

Rolling her eyes, she answered, "Been there, done that one, too. There isn't a place in this neighborhood where I haven't interviewed."

Taking her arm lightly, Sam led her into the fast food place next door. She jerked her arm out of his hold, but followed behind him. It was obvious that she needed to let him have his say or he wouldn't leave her alone. He had the same stubborn, Hudson male look that Simon got whenever he wasn't going to budge until she relented or compromised.

They both ordered a coffee from the front counter and Sam took a small booth in the corner. She stalled, loading her coffee at a side table with cream and sugar before joining him. Fingering the disposable cup, she finally looked up to find Sam watching her with intensity of a hawk ready to swoop down on its prey. Squirming and uncomfortable, she still refused to look away. Sam's gaze wasn't sexual. It was as though he was trying to examine a perplexing microbe underneath a magnifying glass. If he wanted to do some intensive search of her personality...so be it. It wasn't as if she had done anything wrong, except fall in love with Simon Hudson.

Interestingly enough, Sam caved in first. "I'm sorry." He diverted his eyes as he muttered the statement. It was sincere, but she could tell it wasn't something this man said very often. "That was a shitty thing I did at Simon's birthday party. I was so drunk I could barely stand, but that isn't an excuse. A man needs to be responsible for his actions, drunk or not."

"Why did you do it? Why are you doing this? Did Helen send you to apologize? I didn't mention

a word about what you did. I'm not sure how she would know." Kara had only spoken to Helen once, and she hadn't mentioned Sam's appalling behavior that night to his mother.

Sam shot her a dark look. "My mother knows everything, and I appreciate the fact that you didn't mention it. You didn't have to. Simon figured it out and beat the hell out of me when I confessed. Our barroom brawl ended the party rather abruptly, soon after I came inside and you left." He hesitated, taking a swig of coffee. "And no, my mother didn't send me here. I'm here because I want to be. Because Simon is miserable and I was wrong. He doesn't know I'm here and would probably smash my face in again if he knew I'd approached you." He stared out the window beside them.

Kara searched Sam's face, noticing the faint bruises above his left eye and his right cheek. Simon must have done a job on his brother. Ten days after the event, Sam still had a faint bruising to his face that she hadn't looked close enough to see before. "Why? Why would Simon do that? He was already in the process of lining up another woman. I saw him kissing her on the terrace when I walked outside. It makes no sense."

Sam's head jerked back to her. "He didn't line up anyone. What did she look like?"

"Tall, thin, blonde, perfect make-up but she'd probably look just as good without it." Kara frowned at Sam. "Beautiful."

His head nodded once. "Constance. I saw her march in as I was stepping outside. I saw you go out on the terrace, but I got caught up by a client for a few minutes before I could follow you. If it makes you feel any better, he didn't take her up on her offer. Connie was coming in angry, and Simon was already gone." Sam's gaze dropped to his cup, fidgeting with the half empty container. "Simon would never fuck Connie. She's married to a man old enough to be her grandfather, but her husband isn't exactly generous with his money. My brother doesn't do married women. And if he was fu... uhh...having a relationship with you, he certainly wouldn't be arranging another one. Simon may not get emotionally involved, but he only has one woman at a time."

Kara sputtered, nearly choking on her coffee. Sam's comment about Simon not getting emotionally involved hit her hard. She could believe that Simon wasn't having an affair with a married woman. For some reason, she believed that just wasn't something that he would do. Simon might not believe in relationships or marriage for himself, but he just didn't seem like the type of man to step over that line. But really, did it matter? Maybe it made her feel better to know that Simon wasn't tying up, blindfolding and screwing the centerfold woman who had been kissing him at his party, but the fact that Simon didn't do relationships hadn't changed. She was so connected to Simon that she could barely breathe. In the long run, she would end up completely shattered when he moved on. "Thanks for telling me all of this. And for apologizing." She tried to keep her voice flat, free from emotion.

Sam looked concerned, his eyebrows drawing together as he looked at her. "He cares about you. I didn't know or I would never have made you an offer."

"Why did you? I'm sure there are plenty of women who throw themselves at you every day."

"Because I'm a billionaire." He answered, his tone disgusted, his expression harsh. "I saw how happy Simon was after you came to live with him. I've heard my mother talk about you. I guess I thought that once you and Simon split, that I could grab a little happiness for myself. I was drunk. Feeling sorry for myself. I'm an asshole. You're the first woman my brother has ever cared about and I betrayed him. And I insulted you. You didn't deserve that."



Kara leaned back against the hard plastic of the tiny booth seat, stunned. “Simon doesn’t care about me that way. But I admit, I was insulted. You can’t buy any woman you want, Sam. And I don’t believe it was really me you wanted.”

Sam released a ragged sigh. “I wanted...something. I guess in my drunken pity party I was ready to try anything. And there’s only one woman who cared about anything except my money in the past. And I blew it.” His voice was filled with an aching sadness and remorse. “Are you going to accept my apology?”

The charming smile was back, lighting up his face, bringing back the Adonis she had seen at the party. Strangely, it didn’t bother her now. Sam Hudson was troubled and the radiant smile that he was throwing her way was nothing more than a cover for a man who wanted much more than monetary gain in his life. She had seen a small crack in his unemotional façade. “Yes, I accept. I guess we all say and do things that we wouldn’t normally do when we drink.” Her words brought back the day that she had told Simon he had an incredible body and that she wanted him after she had had a few drinks at the restaurant. “But I’m not sure why it matters to you.”

Sam’s eyes grew stormy and he grasped her wrist as she went to slide out of the booth and make her escape. “Kara, Simon cares. He’s had a rough time and he may not know how to express it. But he does. Please don’t judge my brother because I was an asshole.”

His detaining hold was gentle. She tugged lightly and he released her, a pleading look in his eyes. Dammit. She couldn’t leave Sam thinking that this was all his fault. It wasn’t. She was in love with Simon Hudson and it would have ended up a disaster even if Sam hadn’t caused things to fall apart. His actions had only hastened the bad ending. “It isn’t you, Sam. It isn’t what you did.” Shaking her head, she reached for her backpack.

“What is it? Tell me. I’ll fix it.” He sounded desperate.

She barked a short, humorless laugh. Maybe the brothers weren’t so different after all. He sounded just like Simon. Did they both think they could fix anything with money? “You can’t. Just know that it isn’t your fault.”

Nope. It’s my fault for being stupid enough to fall for Simon Hudson.

“You don’t like or respect me at all, do you?” He sounded resigned and slightly dejected.

She turned her body toward him as she scooted to the edge of her seat with her backpack. “I don’t know you well enough to like or dislike you. And money doesn’t buy respect for me.” Her lips turned up in a slight smile as she saw his surprised expression. “But I do respect you a lot for loving your brother.”

He stared at her as he answered gruffly. “Who says I love him? He’s a pain in the ass and he messed up my face so bad that I couldn’t step outside of the house for a week.”

She gave him a sad smile and placed her hand over his on the table. “I’m sorry. I know you and Simon are close and I would never want to be the cause of any problems in your relationship.”

Sam shrugged. “We’ve been through tough times before. We’ll get through it.”

She pulled her hand back. “Are you speaking?”

He laughed weakly. “Trading insults. It’s a start.”

“Do you know what happened to him? How he got scarred?” The words flew from her mouth

before she could censor them.

Sam's jaw dropped, his expression shocked. "You've seen his scars? All of them? Is that why you're avoiding him?"

Anger simmered and her palm itched to slap his face all over again. "Jesus, do you think every woman is that superficial?" Trying to get a grip on her irritation, she continued. "Your brother is the most attractive man I have ever met, scars or no scars. He's hot enough to melt glaciers in Antarctica. Obviously, he suffered a severe trauma and I hate that for him. But I don't give a damn about his scars."

"You think he's better looking than I am?" The question was arrogant, but Sam sounded damned delighted by the fact that she was hot for his brother.

"Yes. No contest. Sorry." Her answer came out severe, but she was a little touched by the fond look in Sam's eyes. Chewing her lip, deep in thought, she mused aloud. "I wonder if you could give Simon something for me."

Sam shrugged and looked at her with curiosity. "What?"

"A check. I need to pay him."

Sam snickered, his lips forming into a wicked grin. "That good, was it?"

"He put money in my account. I want him to have most of it back. I intend to pay back the rest later when I get a job." Kara ignored his innuendo. Simon's brother might look like a blond angel, but she already knew that he had a set of devil horns hidden somewhere in those loose, abundant curls.

"You want to pay Simon? Newsflash...in case you didn't realize it, he's a billionaire. If he wanted you to have the money, I'm not taking it." He put his hands up in the air in a defensive gesture. "He'd really chew my ass up and spit it out. He's in a lousy mood."

Her shoulders sagging, she gave him a flimsy smile. "Yeah. I didn't think about that. I don't want him mad at you. I just wanted to get it back to him."

"Without having to see him?" Sam hit the nail on the head. "Guess you'll just have to do it personally." He sounded pretty happy about that whole idea.

"I'd better get moving. I have studying to do." She stood up.

Sam rose and stared down at her. "Are you living with Maddie Reynolds? Redhead? Beautiful?" He breathed the last two words reverently.

"Yes." She was surprised. Sam didn't sound nearly as hostile toward Maddie as her friend was toward Sam.

"How is she?" He was trying to sound nonchalant, but there was a brief glint of pain in his hooded eyes.

Kara hesitated, not wanting to betray Maddie. "She's good. She has a private practice and does some work in a free children's clinic."

"She made it. She graduated from medical school." Sam's answer was quiet, almost as if he were talking to himself. He sounded like he admired Maddie.

"Yep. One of the best and kindest physicians I've ever met. And an awesome friend." Sam looked like he wanted to ask more questions that Kara didn't care to answer, so she scooted in front

him and headed for the door. "Take care, Sam. Bye." She dropped her empty cup in the trash without breaking her stride and pushed on the heavy glass door.

It was dark as Kara slid outside, heaving a large sigh of relief as the light wind hit her in the face.

Everything and nothing had changed as a result of her conversation with Sam. While she was very glad that Simon hadn't set up a liaison with the woman at the party, it didn't alter the fact that she was just too emotionally involved with a man that didn't do relationships. It was either going to hurt now or destroy her later. Simon was kind and Sam had said that Simon cared about her. Maybe it was true, but it wasn't enough.

Please come home.

That line from Simon's letter echoed in her head as a fist clenched around her heart, making it hard to breathe. Oh God, how she wanted to go home, back to Simon. They had started...something. He had trusted her, let her touch his naked flesh, let her see his scars, fucked her without restraints. How she wished she had the courage to finish it, help Simon find freedom from his past. But her self-preservation instinct was fierce, warning her away from danger, letting her know that in helping Simon, loving Simon, she would destroy herself.

She set her emotionally spent body in motion, heading toward Maddie's house. Lost in thought, her spirits low, she wasn't very aware of her surroundings. That was a mistake that Kara, a woman who had been raised in a less than desirable area, usually didn't make. The lack of concentration bit her in the ass.

Two men approached quickly, one on each side. Her arms were seized and she was being dragged along the sidewalk before she even realized what had happened. She struggled, kicking out at the brutal men who were hauling her forcefully forward, trying to wrench her arms from their grips. With startled horror, she realized that they were pushing her toward a dark vehicle at the curb, the back door open, ready to claim her.

It was dark, but the area was lit just enough to see the faces of the two men who had broken into the clinic.

They'll kill me. I'll die. Have to fight.

She screamed without pause, trying to make her voice carry to anyone who was in the area, as she kicked out, trying to hit vulnerable places on the two hulking males.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch." A menacing, foreboding voice grunted as her foot connected with his kneecap, an action that earned her a punch to the face.

Momentarily stunned from the powerful blow, she faltered as they shoved her forward.

Fight, damn it. Fight.

As the junkies hefted her body to toss her into the car, she raised her legs and planted her feet, one on the door, the other on the body of the car next to the open entrance.

Don't let them get you into the car. If you do, you're dead.

Her feet slipped, sliding lower as one of the men grabbed her by the hair and started slamming her head against the metal top of the open door. She could hear the horrific sound of her skull cracking against steel and her head swam, her vision starting to blur.

I should have told Simon that I loved him.

She was still screaming, but the sound weakened as the men continued their ruthless attempt to render her unconscious.

“Fucking bastards!” Another male voice sounded, one that she recognized.

A muscular arm wrapped around her waist, yanking her away from the two thugs. She was quickly jerked back against a hard chest, her head spinning like she was on a tilt-a-whirl. Looking up, her vision spinning, she could make out Sam Hudson’s furious face as he lowered her gently to the sidewalk and sprinted back to the car.

Panic rose as she realized that Sam was going to take on the two men by himself. Amazingly, the men looked unsure of what to do. Sam was slightly larger, but there were two of them.

Gotta help him. Gotta get up.

She couldn’t let Sam get killed after he had saved her life. Kara came to her knees, trying desperately to fight her obscured vision. Unable to stand, she started to crawl just as Sam engaged the first man, landing punishing blows to his face.

Pounding feet approached, hitting the pavement beside her. Two men she didn’t recognize entered the fray, grabbing Sam’s arm and subduing the man that Sam was hammering on.

“Don’t hurt Sam,” she whimpered, afraid they might injure Sam in the confusion.

“Sorry, sir. Didn’t recognize you.” The man released Sam’s arm.

One bad guy was on his stomach on the sidewalk, with one of the newcomers that had entered the fray on top of him. The other bad guy was scrambling into the driver’s seat of the car, a gun waving wildly at Sam and her other rescuer.

“No. No.” Tears were flowing down her cheeks, her heart slamming against her chest as she silently pleaded with Sam and the other innocent man not to provoke the junkie with the gun.

Sam lunged, but the man had already hit the gas and the dark vehicle sped into the night, the door yanking closed as he flew down the street, disappearing almost as fast as she could blink.

Her terrified eyes raking over the scene, she saw that the two rescuers and Sam were unharmed, though Sam was releasing a stream of obscenities as he raced to her side.

“Kara! Are you ok? Fuck! You’re head is pouring blood. What were you doing?” Sam gently lowered her to the sidewalk to rest on her back. He continued to whisper soothing words as he pushed her hair from her face.

“Wanted to help you,” she rasped, her throat dry.

“Crazy woman.” Sam shook his head, but his voice was light and sweet. Then, in a harsh, booming voice he ordered, “Get an ambulance. Now. She’s hurt.”

Darkness started to encroach on her vision and she struggled, determined not to lose consciousness. “Tell Simon...” Her voice trailed off, her mouth so dry that her tongue was sticking to the roof of her mouth. Her eyelids fluttered. She tried to focus on Sam, but he became just a large, unfocused blur.

She sighed as Sam clasped her hand and grumbled. “You can tell him yourself. He’s on his way and pissed as hell.”

Simon's coming?

Her heart skipped a beat and she gave Sam's hand a feeble squeeze as a humming noise started in her head. It grew louder, so loud that she could barely make out the sound of approaching sirens that were screaming through the night.

"Kara. Are you still with me?" Sam's voice sounded panicked and desperate. And distant.

A blanket of darkness completely consumed her as the low-pitched droning sound in her head reached the very top of its crescendo.

"Simon." She whispered his name, not knowing if it was even audible, as she slid into complete darkness and blessed silence.

~\*~ **The End** ~\*~

**Thank you for reading Mine For Now, Book 2 of The Billionaire's Obsession trilogy. Please read Mine Forever, Book 3 for the conclusion of Simon and Kara's story.**

**The Billionaire's Obsession (Kara And Simon's Story) Includes:**

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