



MINE FOREVER

By J. S. Scott

The Billionaire's Obsession 3

Mine Forever (Book 3: The Billionaire's Obsession Trilogy)

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Chapter 1

Kara opened her eyes slowly, blinking several times to clear her blurred vision, and feeling like her head was in a vise. Temporarily disoriented, she lifted her hand to her head, poking at it experimentally only to feel her forehead wrapped with gauze. What the hell?

Her memory returned slowly, trickling back in bits and pieces. Sam and his apology. The attack. Sam and two other unknown men saving her life.

She remembered waking briefly several times in the Emergency Room, Simon right next to her holding her hand, murmuring encouraging words while she...oh God...had she really thrown up all over him?

Right after the attack, everything had been so intense: the dizziness, the nausea, the blurred vision, the desire to escape back into the darkness and blissful relief of sleep.

Her surroundings were dim, the only light illuminating what appeared to be a hospital room a small square and narrow overhead light near the door.

Her eyes scanned the room. It was set up for double occupancy, but the bed beside her was empty and completely undisturbed.

Compared to the way she had felt in the Emergency Room, the headache she was experiencing seemed like a major improvement. Her stomach was slightly queasy and she obviously had suffered an open wound to her forehead, but she was still alive. She sucked in a deep, tremulous breath, releasing it slowly as a wave of adrenaline washed over her body, experiencing some delayed anxiety from the experience that had happened...uh...when?

Crap...I really need to get my head together!

Squinting at the clock, she could see that it was four a.m. Nine hours had passed since the terrifying experience that had left her alone in a hospital room, thanking the Almighty that she was still among the living.

She flinched as she moved her left arm, stretching the tubing of the I.V. that was inserted in the back of her hand, causing stress at the insertion site. Damn, that hurt. Replacing the limb to its former position, she attempted to cautiously stretch her other arm, finding it trapped, encapsulated inside of a large, strong, warm prison.

"Simon," she whispered softly, suddenly realizing that she wasn't alone, her eyes landing on the place where their skin touched, finding his fingers entwined with hers, his head resting next to their joined hands, his eyes closed.

Her heart contracted as her gaze swept over him, taking in every feature of his beloved, handsome face. She drank in the sight of him, feeling as if it had been forever since she had seen that handsome face. Even in sleep, he looked tense and fierce, the lock of wayward hair that slithered over his forehead the only thing that softened his appearance in slumber.

Slowly disentangling their entwined fingers, she stroked his hair back, enjoying the texture of the thick, disheveled strands between her fingers.

Had he been here all night? Had he ever left the hospital?

He was dressed in a pair of light blue hospital scrubs, a sure sign that her memory of tossing her

cookies down the front of what was probably a very expensive sweater, was probably accurate.

I love you.

The recollection that she had spoken those words between retching violently and feeling like she was about to die made her hand stop pawing his hair and her body tense with trepidation.

Oh God, did I really say those words to him?

Yeah, she had said them - the memory flashed vividly in her mind. Knowing that she had babbled that particular phrase to him, she pulled her hand completely away, wondering how he had taken those words, or if he had even really heard them. At the time, she had been desperate to say them, to let him know how she felt in case she didn't make it through the night. With no idea what her injuries actually were, she hadn't hesitated to say them, didn't want something to happen without him knowing how much she cared.

Now that she knew that she was obviously going to live, she wasn't so sure that she should have confessed, bared her soul.

"Kara!" Simon shot up into a sitting position, his hand reaching reflexively for hers, twining their fingers back together. He was instantly awake, his eyes jerking to her face, scanning it with obvious uneasiness. "You're awake."

Her throat was dry, her tongue felt like it was swollen enough to take up the entire space of her oral cavity. She reached for a cup of water from the bedside table. Simon sprang from his chair, reaching it first, unwrapping a straw and placing it into the plastic cup, before directing it to her mouth. She took slow sips, her hand covering his as she let the moisture slide over her tongue. "Where am I?" she asked quietly, licking the moisture from her lips.

He told her what hospital was she in and explained that her CT scan was normal, but they were keeping her overnight for observation. "You have several stitches from a cut on your forehead. From what Sam told me, you're damn lucky they didn't crack your skull." Simon's voice was rough and slightly irritated.

"I have a hard head." She answered lightly, remembering the force of the blows, amazed that she had suffered nothing more than a few stitches and a hammering headache.

He shot her an aggravated look. "Like I haven't noticed?" Setting the glass down on the bedside table, his eyes locked with hers, staring intently, his gaze like liquid fire. "You're never leaving me again. Ever."

Her breath hitched as she looked at him, fascinated, unable to break the compelling, silent communication. "Forever is long time." she answered, unable to come up with a more intelligent response while his eyes were shooting volatile sparks, a clear warning he was about to get stubborn.

"I don't give a fuck. You're going back home with me, and I'm not leaving your safety in the hands of a few green security agents. If Sam hadn't been there..."

"He saved my life, Simon. Your brother risked his life for me," she murmured, silently Sam for being there, for getting to her before those men had gotten her into the car.

I'd be dead if he hadn't.

Running a frustrated hand through his already-tortured hair, he growled, "He damn well should have seen you home. And the security guys were inexperienced. They should have been tailing you so

close that they could hear you breathe. Their reaction time was unacceptable."

"I left. I didn't give Sam a chance to offer to take me home. He was asking questions about Maddie and I wanted to leave. And the agents got there fast. These guys were quick. It all happened in seconds." Even though it seemed like hours.

"Sam shouldn't have been there at all. You would have been home and safe," he rumbled, his chest vibrating with emotion.

She squeezed his hand. "You don't know that. They might have gotten to me anyway. It could have been worse if Sam hadn't been there. Please don't blame Sam or the agents. I'm grateful to all of them."

"Doesn't matter. You're coming home with me tomorrow. And you'll have better security than the President Of The United States. Even Maddie agrees that you're safer at the condo. Although I'm not sure she's thrilled about you being in such close proximity to any Hudson." He sat back down in the chair without releasing his powerful grip on her hand or his intense, relentless stare.

"Maddie was here?" she asked curiously, wondering how her friend even knew that she had been injured.

"She just left an hour or two ago. I called her. She was here all evening. You don't remember?"

She shook her head. "Everything that happened after the actual attack is just snippets of memory. Did I really vomit on you?"

"You remember that?" He searched her face, looking for something, as though he were trying to figure out what she did and didn't remember. "Maddie found me a pair of scrubs and a shower after you got settled in a room.

"Oh God. I'm sorry." Was there anything more mortifying than puking all over a man like Simon Hudson?

"Why? You didn't do it on purpose. And I was actually relieved that you were awake."

Kara found it pretty damn amazing that a man had actually stood beside her, holding an emesis basin while she heaved, without being completely grossed out. "Is Sam all right?"

"Fine." He barked a short, humorless laugh. "Except for the fact that he had to be in the same room with Maddie Reynolds. Sam looked uncomfortable as hell and Maddie looked like she wanted to kill Sam, slowly and painfully."

"I wish I knew what happened between them," she breathed wistfully, wincing as the squeezing sensation in her head increased in intensity, beginning to feel as if she had a huge boa constrictor wrapped around her head.

Simon frowned. "You want some pain medication? I can call the nurse." He reached for the call button.

"No. Wait." She took a deep breath, knowing she had to set Simon straight. Going back to the condo with him wasn't an option. "I can't go home with you, Simon. I'll go back to Maddie's. I'll be fine. They caught one guy and the other one is probably running scared. I doubt his main concern is to come after me."

His body tensed, the pressure on her hand increasing as his fingers clenched and released, shooting her a dangerous glance. "The matter isn't up for debate. You. Are. Coming. With. Me." he answered with a growl.

She released a frustrated breath. "You aren't my keeper. I don't need one. I've been alone for a long time." And lonely, missing Simon, although she hadn't known who she was missing at the time.

The pain was horrific when I was away from him. I can't go through another goodbye later. Spending any more time with him is dangerous. It will just hurt twice as much to part from him after spending more time with him, making more memories to torture myself with when I'm alone again.

"Yeah...well...get used to having company, sweetheart," he snorted, his eyes gleaming with possession, his expression raw and feral. "As long as you're in danger, I won't be very far away. And you won't be without protection."

She shuddered, trying to pull her hand from his fierce grip. He wasn't hurting her and his grasp wasn't tight enough to make her uncomfortable. It was actually just the opposite. Simon made her feel safe, and that terrified her. There was no possible way she could let herself get used to being treated like she was actually a woman he cherished. "You can't tell me what to do. We've only known each other for a handful of weeks. Why are you concerning yourself about my safety?" Her voice was rough, emotional and probably slightly panicky. She needed to distance herself, but it was difficult. Needy and raw after her experience the night before, she wanted nothing more than to throw herself into Simon's arms and let him hold her there, safe in his warm masculine embrace until she recovered her equilibrium.

"Your safety has been my concern for over a fucking year!" he blasted back at her, his voice low and husky. "And there hasn't been a day that has passed in all that time when I haven't been completely obsessed with whether or not you were safe."

"But we just met a few weeks ago..." Her voice was barely audible, confused.

He blew out an uneven breath, his face ravaged with uncertainty as he looked away, staring blankly at the sterile, white wall in front of him. "Mom talked about you all the time. She pointed you out to me over a year ago while you were serving in the restaurant." He sighed, as though resigned to completing his explanation. "I can't really explain it because I don't understand it myself, but from that moment on, I felt compelled to look out for you. Fuck, I even followed you home every night just to make sure you got to your apartment safely."

Stunned, she asked in a hesitant voice, "Like I was your friend because I was a friend of your mother's?"

He turned his head and gave her heated, masculine look. "No. Like a goddamn obsession that I couldn't control. Like you're mine to protect." He hit her with his I-want-to-fuck-you-until-you-scream stare, the heat rolling from him in waves.

Should it bother her that Simon had been watching her, following her like a pseudo stalker? Maybe it should, but it didn't. Instead, she felt eerily calm, her heart melting inside her chest as she watched his tortured expression. He had stayed in the background, silently watching over her like a dark guardian angel, never expecting anything in return. Thinking back on her conversation with Helen at the restaurant, she was relieved to see that Simon's protective, rescuer instincts were still intact. "Why me? There must be tons of women who could use your protection."

Simon shrugged, but the intense look on his face was far from nonchalant. "I have no idea. You're the only woman who's ever made me feel this way." He choked out the last few words, obliviously damn unhappy about his lack of control, his inability to control his actions.

She shook her head gently, still trying to come to terms with the fact that Simon had been trying to protect her for the last year. Really, what sort of guy did something like that? What gorgeous billionaire took the time to check on the safety of a nobody, a woman who kept a low profile, a woman who should have been far beneath his notice. She didn't think herself beneath anyone simply because she was poor...but reality was reality. Men of Simon's status simply didn't notice women like her. They were too busy building more wealth, being king of their empires. "Looking out for me because I was your mother's friend was very kind of you. But you can't protect me forever."

He got up from his chair slowly and seated himself gently on the bed, facing her. "You don't get it, do you? I'm not the least bit kind." His words belied his actions as he carefully tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his index finger trailing lightly over her temple and stroking over her cheek, as light as a feather. "My behavior wasn't magnanimous or unselfish. I wanted to fuck you. I think that's a pretty damn self-serving motivation." His tone was dry, self-mocking.

She bit back a smile, wondering why he always had such an aversion to someone calling him kind. "If that was your motive, then why didn't you? You could have made your presence known, asked your mom to introduce us. I think it's pretty obvious that I'm attracted to you." More than attracted.

He jerked his hand away from her face, averting his eyes. "I forgot about your pain medication. I'm sure you're hurting." He slapped the call button for the nurse.

A response came immediately from the small speaker attached to the call button. "Can I help you?" The voice sounded young and female.

"Ms. Foster needs some pain medication." Simon's answer was abrupt: he came to his feet as he spat out the order.

"Someone will be right there." The faceless voice answered as the call light went from red to black.

Kara's head was still spinning from his brusque dismissal...or was it avoidance?...of her question. She tipped her head back to look at his face. He was scowling down at her, his face implacable.

Crossing her arms in front of her, she met his ferocious look with a small smile. "That tactic won't work on me anymore," she told him quietly.

"What tactic?" he rumbled, his arms crossing just like hers, challenging her, his expression unreadable.

"The one where I'm supposed to feel like I'm Little Red Riding Hood and you're the big, bad wolf." She lifted an eyebrow, refusing to look away from his disgruntled face. Simon Hudson could scowl, growl and snarl all he wanted to, but she had his number. Somewhere beneath his gruff, bossy exterior, there was a layer of compassion and benevolence that he would probably never show to the world. But she saw it, she recognized it. If he had really just wanted to screw her, he could have come forward, met her in person. It would have saved him valuable time.

He leaned down slowly, so slowly that her breath seized, as those molten dark eyes glinted with tiny flames and focused intently on her, making her want to squirm. Her body quivered, the waves of intense masculinity that were pulsating around her making her body react. His mouth lowered to her

ear, the heat of his breath heavy against her neck and the side of her face. "Don't be so sure that I'm not the big, bad wolf, little girl. I'd gobble you up in a heartbeat." His low, menacing voice sent a shiver down her spine, but not from fear. Longing slammed into her body with hurricane force.

Her pent-up breath escaped in a tremulous sigh as the nurse entered the room, forcing Simon to straighten up and move away from the bed. The efficient, middle-aged woman gave Kara her medication and took her vital signs. After doing a quick assessment, the woman left, only after asking if there was anything else Kara needed and getting a negative reply.

"I'm surprised that I don't have a roommate," she muttered quietly after her nurse had departed. "This hospital is usually pretty busy." She had done clinicals at the facility and at this time of year, the rooms were generally filled as soon as they vacated.

Simon flipped his chair around and sat in it backwards, his forearms resting casually along the wooden back. For the first time since she'd opened her eyes, he grinned.

"There are some benefits of being a billionaire who just happens to be a generous donor to medical charities." The chair was close to the bed, his teasing eyes close enough to be visible in the muted light.

"So you asked for a private room because you donate?" Her lips twitched, but she tried to make her voice admonishing.

He shrugged. "Not me. Sam took care of it while I was taking a shower. And I doubt he asked."

She rolled her eyes, positive that Sam Hudson rarely asked for anything. He demanded, expecting people to do as he commanded. However, just like Simon, Sam hid a tender heart under layers of ice.

Her eyes grew heavy as the powerful medication started to kick in. Yawning, she felt Simon's hand clasp hers, his thumb running loosely up and down her palm. "Pain medication. I'm not used to it," she murmured, suddenly feeling exhausted.

"Sleep. I'll be here," he replied in a husky, concerned voice.

"You should go home and sleep. You've been here all night. I'm fine."

"I'm not leaving until you can come home with me," he answered, his tone adamant and inflexible.

"Not coming home with you," she grumbled as her eyelids fluttered.

"We'll see. Just sleep." His tone was soothing, pacifying.

And she wasn't fooled for one single second. He'd try to bulldoze over her later.

Not having the strength or the desire to fight with him at that moment, she slept.

Later that morning, Simon tapped every resource he had to convince her that going home with him was the best option.

She received visits from Maddie, Helen, Sam, her attending physician and Detective Harris, each person stressing the importance of her being in a safe environment and naming Simon's condo as the most secure place for her to stay. Maddie gave her the advice grudgingly, obviously not very keen on the idea, but trying to consider the best option for Kara's safety.

Wonder how much he had to bully Detective Harris and her attending physician to get them to agree that his home was the safest?!

Privately, Simon told her if she didn't intend to go with him, he'd throw her over his shoulder and drag her back to his condo, kicking and screaming if necessary.

It wasn't his threat or the fact that she really had nowhere else to go that convinced her to get into the Mercedes and let James drive them home to the condo. In the end...it was the exhausted, wild, frantic look in his eyes while he made the demand that swayed her.

Honestly, he looked like he hadn't slept in days, his five o'clock shadow dark, his handsome face marked heavily with stress and weariness.

He's scared. Worried about me.

Her chest aching with tenderness, unable to let him go on freaking out about her, she caved in and let him take her home.

She'd worry about her additional pain later, when it came time to leave again. For now, she wanted Simon to relax, sleep and eat.

Screw her fears of hurting later. The look of despair on Simon's face hurt more than any pain she would suffer in the future.

I'll just have to suck it up!

Really, what other option did she have? She could watch Simon suffer, or she could worry about the pain later.

She chose the second option, the relieved look on his face worth every bit of hurt she would suffer in the future.

Chapter 2

A few nights later found Simon tossing and turning in his massive bed, unable to sleep. Rolling onto his back, frustrated and pissed-off, he stared up at the ceiling, his eyes wide open when they should be closed, catching up on lost sleep. Shit! He hadn't slept more than a few hours every night since the evening that Kara had left him. Now that she was back, he was still restless.

I love you.

Her whispered confession in the Emergency Room haunted him every fucking minute of every day. Had she meant it? Had she even been talking to him? She had been confused, disoriented, barely aware of her surroundings. There was no evidence that she even remembered speaking those words, so how did he know who she meant them for? Maybe it was just mindless babble, brought on by her injuries. He didn't even know if he wanted those words to be intended for him.

Oh, hell yeah, I do.

Groaning softly, he shoved another pillow under his head, trying to ignore his swollen cock as it pulsed beneath the sheets, creating a large tent underneath the coverings. Christ, could he ever think about Kara without his balls turning blue?

Actually, yeah, he knew he could. Scared shitless after the attack, his cock hadn't been his primary concern. Seeing her appear so fragile, pale and helpless in a hospital bed, had nearly destroyed him, making him ache in other areas above his waist. For several days, his driving need to protect her, to keep her safe, had been his primary motivation.

His lips turned up in a small smile as he remembered her outrage over the fact that he had contacted the college, explaining the situation and getting her absence for the rest of the week approved. He had thought he was being helpful, smoothing things over so she had time to recover. His crazy woman had actually thought she was going to return to classes the day after she was discharged from the hospital, and she had raked him over the coals for interfering in her life. She had gotten right up in his face and ripped him a new asshole. Kara had no problem challenging him, and her intelligent mind was provocative. Maybe...just maybe...part of him enjoyed it. Had a woman ever opposed him, questioned him, called him out for a behavior she didn't like? The women in his life used him, let him use their bodies. None of them had ever cared enough to get in his face about anything.

She's getting to me. Bad.

He could feel his internal walls beginning to crumble and it wasn't a comfortable sensation.

Fuck. Pay. Move on.

It was the way he had interacted with women his entire adult life, but Kara was changing all that, tempting him to trust her. And fuck, he was tempted. It might be excruciatingly painful when her eyes bored into him as though she were peering into his soul, but knowing that she cared enough to do it? That was intoxicating, bewitching.

She didn't give a shit about his scars, his money or elevated social status.

And she thinks I'm hot enough to melt glaciers in Antarctica.

Sam had told him about his conversation with Kara, how she had declared Simon the hottest

Hudson. He and his brother had never been competitive. They had always been too busy working together to survive and then to thrive. Although they liked to verbally spar, Simon loved his brother. Fiercely. Yeah, Sam was fucked-up when it came to women, but he could hardly chastise his brother for that when he was just as bad. Probably worse. However, he had gotten perverse satisfaction from knowing that Kara had verbally slapped Sam down during her conversation with him at the fast food place before the attack.

I love you.

Gritting his teeth, he rolled to his side, punching his pillow and trying to get comfortable. He had to forget, get a grip on his emotions, stop wishing for more than her presence. He had the comfort of knowing she was safe. Wasn't that enough? At least he wasn't going insane from not knowing where she was, if she was okay.

A piercing, terrified female howl made Simon shoot straight up in bed, his muscles clenched, his heart racing.

Kara!

Panic held him in its grip for a few seconds as the screams grew louder, more intense.

His feet hit the floor, protective instinct making adrenaline pump through his body as he raced down the dark hallway to her room. Flipping on the light without even breaking his stride, he halted abruptly at the side of her bed.

Her arms were wrapped protectively around herself, tears flowing like a river down her sweet face. Hair tangled, head down, she was whimpering and gasping for breath.

"Sweetheart, what happened?" He sat next to her on the bed. Her sheets were snarled and twisted, as though she had been fighting World War III on her mattress.

"Dream," she whispered, as though still trying to convince herself. "Just a dream."

She was shivering violently. He scooped her up and placed her in his lap, pulling her unresisting body into his, trying to warm her in his embrace. Heart racing, he enfolded her, pulling her head into his neck.

"What were you dreaming about?" He stroked her silky hair, letting it slide over his fingertips, as he took a deep breath, trying to calm his hammering heart.

"The attack. It was so real," she murmured, shuddering against him.

"It's over. You're safe. You'll always be safe." Right here. With me.

Sliding her off his lap, he went to stand, only to have her arms tighten around his neck, holding on for dear life.

"No! Please! Don't go yet." Her vulnerable cry stabbed him straight in the gut.

She needs me.

And he was going to be there for her, insecurities be damned. "It's okay. I'm not leaving you alone." I'm never leaving you alone.

He didn't bother trying to pry her fingers apart. Shifting his body, he lifted her into his arms and came to his feet, trying not to notice that she was scantily clad in a silk, pink, lacy garment that barely covered her ass. He suppressed a groan as he adjusted her weight against him; the lace abrading his

chest as the silk caressed his skin. He strode out of the room, making his way down the hallway and into his bedroom, with the most precious thing in the world to him held safely in his arms.

Simon lowered her into his massive bed, coming down with her because she still hadn't loosened her death grip around his neck. Her panic abated slowly and Kara relaxed her arms, allowing him to pull the covers and a quilt on top of them before he slid in behind her, spooning her body against his, and wrapping his warm, muscular arms around her body protectively. Kara sighed, sinking into his warmth, as she relaxed her head back to rest against his shoulder, relishing the security of his huge, masculine body.

"Okay?" he questioned softly, his breath ruffling her hair.

"Yeah. I'm sorry I woke you. I'll go back to my own bed in a minute." She didn't want to go back. She wanted to stay right where she was, warm and safe in his arms. But she respected the fact that he liked his space when he slept.

"You're not going anywhere," he rumbled against her hair.

"But you won't sleep," she protested, feeling suddenly selfish for wishing she could stay.

"I won't get a fucking minute of sleep unless you're here. I haven't slept worth a shit for two weeks." His arms tightened around her waist.

Her body plastered against his, she could feel a hard protrusion against her ass. "You're naked."

"Yeah. I sleep in the raw, sweetheart. Get used to it," he murmured, his voice husky. "You want to tell me about the nightmare?"

Actually, what she wanted was to forget. But she turned around in the circle of his arms, needing desperately to wrap herself around his warm masculine body. She wasn't a tiny, delicate female, but as she buried her face against his bulky, solid chest, she felt like one. "It was just a dream about what happened. Only in the dream, they got me into the car. They were going to rape me before they shot me in the head. I fought, but they were ripping at my clothes. They were so much stronger. All I could think about was that I wanted to die before they could violate me, but the one that got away was on top of me, the other holding the gun to my head." She was shaking her head, trying not to get emotional. It was only a dream. It hadn't really happened. "But it was so real. I could smell their body odor, see those evil eyes. I woke up just as they..." her voice trailed off in a shaken whisper.

Simon rocked her, running a hand over her back as though he were comforting a small child. "Shhh...it's okay, sweetheart. You're safe. They can't get to you anymore."

Her body quaking from the nightmare, all she wanted was to wipe away the bad memories, to bury herself in sensation, to indulge herself in the incredible body of the man who was comforting her. The one man who could make her forget the last few days, wipe it away with his sensual touch. "Make love to me. Make me forget," she whispered, her voice seductive and tremulous.

She felt his body tense as she pushed him gently, rolling him on his back. Her hands roamed over his chest, savoring the hard, sinewy muscles and taut, hot skin. Unhurried, she traced each muscle from his shoulders to his abdomen, caressing the enticing swirl of hair that led from his navel to his groin.

"Shit! We can't do this!" Simon groaned, catching her wandering hands in his strong grip. "There's no better feeling than having your hands all over me, but you just got out of the hospital."

"Several days ago. And I'm not hurt. I feel fine. I have a little cut on my forehead. There's only one

place where I really ache." She pushed his unresisting hand to the heat between her thighs, parting her legs. Maybe she was coming on too strong, begging too much, but she didn't care. She needed Simon's possession, needed him inside of her. "Please." Her voice was pleading, desperate. Pulling her hand from his grasp, she slid her hand down, lower, wrapping it around his engorged cock.

"No! Christ! I'll come if you touch me." His voice was strangled as he captured her hand, holding it against his chest. The hand between her thighs breeched the elastic of her tiny panties, his fingers slipping easily between her saturated folds. "You're wet. So fucking hot."

"Because I need you." She moaned as his large, blunt fingers explored her, moving sensually over her clit and the tender flesh surrounding it. Mindless desire devoured her body whole. Not thinking, only able to react to the relentless need that was pounding at her, she yanked the soaked panties down her legs, kicking them into the sheets, and clambered on top of him, straddling him. Placing a hand on each side of his head, she kissed him.

One minute she was on top of him, her lips covering his, ready to lose herself in the power of his touch, and the next moment...she was flat on her back. He had flipped her, tearing his mouth from hers.

"No. I can't. I fucking can't." His voice was tortured, his torso imprisoning her, his hands gripping each one of her wrists at the side of her head.

His breathing was labored, ragged. She could hear harsh sounds coming from his throat as he attempted to get air in and out of his lungs.

Shaking her head, starting to emerge from her erotic fog, she looked up at the massive figure looming over, a man in obvious torment.

Shit. What did I do? Did I push too hard?

The moon provided some muted light in room, but it still wasn't enough illumination to see his eyes...but then, she didn't have to. The sound of his voice, his breathing, his trembling body, his tight hold on her wrists told her that she had sent him plummeting into his own personal nightmare.

"Simon. It's me. Kara." She pulled on her wrists, but she couldn't free them. "Talk to me."

"I know who you are. I just can't fucking do it." Chest heaving, he stayed locked in place.

"Kiss me."

Trapped under his body, under his dominance, she still wasn't sure that she could assuage his fear. He wasn't hurting her, but she wanted to bring him back to the here and now. Somehow, she had inadvertently hurt him, sent him into a panic.

Her heart was racing and it seemed like forever until he finally lowered his head slowly, fitting his mouth over hers. He kissed her like a man who had come unglued. His tongue speared into her mouth, conquering, lashing, over and over.

His wild, dominant embrace released a primal instinct inside of her, as if her body was automatically responding to her mate. She moved her tongue against his, surrendering herself to him, letting him be her master.

"Kara." He breathed her name as he released her mouth, burying his head in the side of her neck.

"Yes. Just you and me, Simon. Just us."

"Need to fuck you." The statement was muffled, his rumbling voice vibrating against her neck.

"Do it. Just like this." Something about her being on top, being in control had flipped his detonation switch. But his lust was still there. She could feel it, rock-hard and hungry, pushing against her thigh.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. It felt so good, but I just couldn't --"

"No. Don't. It doesn't matter. I just want you inside of me." She parted her legs, and pulled at her wrists. "Can you let go of me?"

Slowly, he loosened his powerful grip as he moved between her thighs. "Yeah. I think so." He answered in a tone filled with trepidation.

Her heart stuttered as she pulled her wrists out of his now only slightly resisting hands and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "I just want to hold you. You have control."

"Around you, I doubt I'll ever really have any control," he muttered quietly, his voice filled with reluctant resignation.

"Make love to me, Simon." Her voice was pleading, but she didn't care. His momentary fear and vulnerability had crushed any self-preservation instincts left in her body. She needed to help set him free, to obliterate whatever was in his past that held him prisoner. He was too good a man, too kind a person to remain trapped, unable to move forward.

Not to mention the fact that I love him and want him so desperately that it's painful.

It was past time to stop being in denial, thinking that she could keep Simon at an emotional distance. She'd been a coward, so afraid of destroying herself that she had selfishly tried to deny the totally amazing connection that she had with him. And it was a two-way connection. She wasn't the only one struggling with it, uncertain how to deal with it. For Christ's sake...he had followed her around, protected her, for over a year. He had literally plucked her off the streets, giving her everything a woman could ever dream about, and not just materially. He comforted her, stayed by her side when she was sick. He listened to her as though her concerns, her thoughts, her dreams, were important to him. Obviously, he felt something! The question was, could it be the same fascinating, beguiling, impossible-to-resist coupling that she felt for him? In her case, that incredibly mystical chemistry had turned into a gut-wrenching love, evolving so fast that it had had taken her breath away...along with her common sense.

"Touch me, sweetheart. Please." His voice was ragged and edgy, full of desire and longing, more of a desperate command than a request.

Her hands moved slowly, stroking his wide, strong shoulders, touching every inch of solid muscle, savoring the strength radiating from his powerful body. She traced up his spine, her hands landing on the nape of his neck. Pulling his head down, her lips traced his collarbone lightly as she speared her fingers into his hair. She moaned softly as her mouth moved over the pulse at his neck, the masculine scent of him flooding her body with carnal heat. She breathed deep, letting his fragrance consume her, his galloping pulse beneath her lips letting her know that he was as swamped in erotic need as she was.

He groaned, his massive body starting to move, his hard member finding a warm resting place between her thighs. His velvety cock slid along her tender folds, saturating itself with wet heat.

Every nerve in her body caught fire, and she opened her legs wider, silently begging him to satiate her, to satisfy the violent need that was clawing at her relentlessly.

Suddenly, he reared up, making her whimper as he deprived her of his heat. Reaching for the hem of her short nightie, he pulled it over her head, tossing it onto the floor beside the bed. "Nothing between us," he growled as he lowered himself over her again.

She hissed as his fiery body met hers from breast to groin, savoring the sensation of being skin-to-skin.

"Mine. You're mine. Say it." The demand exploded from him as though he couldn't help himself.

Dominant Simon had returned with a vengeance, and Kara shuddered. He did love control, and that had nothing to do with his past. That was simply, utterly, completely...Simon.

His hand snaked between their bodies, positioning the blunt, silky head of his cock against her tight opening, starting to enter her oh-so-slowly.

"Say it." His tone grew more demanding, more possessive.

Oh God, how she relished his dominance, his strength. "I'm yours. I need you."

He rewarded her by filling her with one smooth stroke, burying his cock completely to the root. The carnality of the action nearly made her climax.

"Fuck! You feel so good." He pulled out slightly and buried himself again, rolling his hips, making her take every inch of him. "I'm not sure I know how to make love. I only know how to fuck."

She clutched his shoulders, trying to find her balance, her sanity. "I'm not sure I do either. I guess we'll learn together," she told him breathlessly.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, needing to get closer. A low choked, reverberating sound came from his throat as he pulled back and sank into her again. And again.

His head swooped down, capturing her distressed whimper, his mouth seeking, his tongue conquering. Every touch of his tongue, every thrust of his cock was a branding, a claiming. And she could do little else but surrender.

Tearing his mouth from hers so they could both take a much-needed breath, his hips continued to piston into her, as he rasped, "Mine!"

His teeth nipped at her neck, making her shudder with primal desire. Hips lifting, meeting every furious pump of his hips, she moaned as her fingers left his hair, sliding lower, clenching at his back. Her short fingernails dug into his flesh as he changed angles, never slowing his heated, frantic pace.

Just when she was ready to scream with frustrated need, he started to grind his groin mercilessly against hers with every deep penetration of his cock, stimulating her sensitive clit. A scream ripped from her throat as she shattered. He swallowed it with his mouth, his groan vibrating in her mouth as her channel pulsed around his silken cock.

He panted harshly as his mouth moved to her shoulder. "Nothing better than feeling you come around me." He buried his shaft deep, connecting their bodies tightly, fusing them together.

Still quivering from her explosive climax, she felt his muscles tighten and his big body tremble as he flooded her womb with scorching heat.

I love you.

Her eyes moist, she tightened her arms around him, never wanting to let go. Emotion welled up inside her, ruthlessly fighting to be freed. She choked it back with an audible gasp, grappling with the

overwhelming need to say those words aloud.

"You okay?" he questioned breathlessly and with gruff concern.

He rolled to one side and she mourned the loss as she loosened her hold on him, reluctantly allowing him to rest beside her. "I'm fine." He had obviously thought he was crushing her. Like she was a delicate flower? She was taller than some men in her bare feet. Simon was the only one who could make her actually feel petite.

She sighed as he hoisted her easily into his arms, pulling her against his side as he tucked the covers over their entangled bodies. She burrowed into him, her head on his shoulder and one arm flung over his mammoth chest. His muscular arm pulled her closer with a firm grasp around her waist.

"We made love," he grumbled, his voice weary.

Smiling slightly at his disgruntled announcement, she simply answered, "Yes."

Making love wasn't about the mechanics, it was all about emotion, although she had to admit that he was pretty damn incredible with the mechanical portion of the act. It didn't matter how they touched or in what way they came together; it was the emotion and the intensity of the experience that got her. The truth was, the sex tonight had been no different than anything that had happened between them before. It had been just as explosive, just as emotional, and just as earth-shattering. The man rocked her entire world every single time. And it was never indifferent or detached. It had been wild, passionate, intense love-making every single time. At least, for her it had been.

I wish he could trust me.

The deep, steady cadence of his breathing told her that he slept.

Small steps.

Simon didn't sleep with anyone, didn't allow himself to be in the same bed with another person when he was vulnerable. The fact that he was sleeping with her plastered against him was bigger than a step; it was more like a huge stride.

Moving a little to get comfortable, her heart flipped over when he grumbled an incoherent protest and yanked her back against him.

Yep. They would need to have a talk about his trust issues tomorrow. She needed to know something about what happened to him, why he had reacted the way he had earlier. It wasn't possible to combat a ghost she couldn't see, couldn't understand.

Never again did she want to see Simon in the grip of panic, lost in an unknown fear. His vulnerability had nearly ripped her heart out.

A fierce protective instinct flowed over her as her eyes fluttered closed, completely spent and exhausted.

He'll dodge and be evasive. He won't want to talk about it.

If he wasn't ready...well...she'd wait until he trusted her enough to discuss it.

Satisfied that things would work out fine, she yawned against Simon's shoulder until her breathing matched his, deep and even, and fell into a dreamless, contented sleep.

Chapter 3

Three days later, Simon scrawled his signature on the last of a stack of mile-high documents that his secretary had dropped on his desk earlier that morning. Slamming the gold pen on the top of the pile with more force than necessary, he leaned back in an enormous leather chair with a frustrated sigh, wondering how many more days he could take of the tension between himself and Kara.

No sex. No touching. No waking up in the morning with her delectable body wrapped around mine like a silken blanket.

God, that morning three days ago had started off as the best morning of his life.

Unfortunately, what happened at breakfast also had it ranking right up there with one of the worst.

She had wanted to talk about the night before.

He didn't.

Oh, he had been more than willing to talk about and repeat what had happened after his freak-out. The actual panic attack?...not so much.

Raking his hand through his hair, he leaned back and tried to relax his body, admitting to himself that the distance between the two of them really wasn't really her fault. Much. She had taken his unwillingness to discuss it gracefully, giving him one of her sweet smiles and telling him that she would wait until he was ready. But then...just when he was thinking she might end up waiting until she was old and gray before he wanted to discuss it...she dropped the bomb.

I can't make love with you, Simon. Not until you trust me enough to tell me what happened. I just can't.

Then, after turning his world upside down with that comment, she had kissed him on the forehead like he was child, wished him a good day, and sashayed her sweet little ass out the door. And she had done it all with a smile. What. The. Hell.

To her credit, she hadn't been a bitch to him, hadn't raised her voice or thrown a tantrum. Shit, he wished she would. Maybe he could generate a lot more anger at her to help him through his current torment.

The only thing that really pissed him off was the fact that he did trust her. He just didn't want to talk about that.

"You look like a man who's ready to attend his own execution. What's the matter, little brother? Getting tired of Kara? 'Cause if you are I would gladly--"

"Touch her and you die." Fists clenched on the desk in front of him, Simon leaned forward, the threat of fratricide on his face, as he watched his brother saunter across his office. "Don't you fucking knock?" He knew Sam was goading him about Kara, trying to push his buttons. In reality, his brother would never come near her again. Sam had made that perfectly clear to Simon when he had apologized for his behavior at the party. However, it didn't stop Sam from trying to irritate the hell out of him.

Sam shot him a cocky grin as he dropped into a chair in front of Simon's desk. "Why would I? I own the company."

Simon decided that the only thing worse than owning Hudson with Sam was the fact that they had

both had an office on the same floor. "Last time I checked, so did I," he snapped back at Sam, not in the mood for his older sibling's bullshit.

"I'm older. It gives me seniority." Sam propped his Italian leather-clad feet casually on Simon's desk.

Simon waited, watching his brother relax back into the chair. The bastard. Leaning forward, Simon swept one muscular arm across the desk, knocking Sam's feet into the air. "Get your feet off my damn desk."

Really, was there anything more amusing than watching a man in an immaculate designer suit flailing his arms like a baby bird, trying to catch his balance before his chair flipped over? Simon didn't think so. Not when it was Sam fluttering his arms as his chair tilted. The only thing that would have made it better is if his brother had tipped the chair over and landed flat on his ass.

Sam's feet found purchase on the floor. He glared at Simon as he opened the buttons on the jacket of his perfect suit and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Was that really necessary?"

It was Simon's turn to grin, but his smile was evil. "I thought so."

"It's not my fault that you made the mistake of falling in love and now you're miserable. Shit, I thought you'd be happy now that she's living at your place again." Sam sat back and laced his fingers over his stomach, his expression grim.

Simon's head jerked up. "Who said I love her?"

Rolling his eyes, Sam replied, "You didn't have to say a damn thing. I think I figured it out when I ended up practically blind from the swelling when you beat the hell out of me just because I touched her."

"That doesn't mean I love her," Simon grunted. "And it wasn't because you touched her. It was the intent."

"When was the last time you thrashed me because I touched a woman?"

"Never."

"Exactly."

Simon sighed. "Kara and I had a slight disagreement." Okay, for him, it was more than slight, but he didn't mention that to his brother.

"About?"

"She wants me to trust her. Tell her about the incident that left me scarred." Simon's voice was hoarse. "She thinks I still have--" he hesitated before choking out, "issues."

Eyes narrowing, Sam asked, "And do you? Still have issues?"

"No! Hell no! For Christ's sake, it happened over sixteen years ago." Simon answered quickly. Too quickly and too defensively.

"Time doesn't necessarily make everything go away, Simon." Sam answered thoughtfully. "Maybe you should just tell her. Maybe you need to. Is your silence really worth losing her? She obviously loves you, and whether you want to admit it or not, you love her too. Guess you just need to decide if she's worth it." Sam leaned forward, spearing Simon with a sharp glance. "Don't fuck up. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you do."

Pain? Regret? Sorrow? For a fleeting moment, Simon could see every one of those emotions reflected in his brother's eyes. By the time he took a deep breath and opened his mouth to ask his elder brother about it, Sam's expression had turned indifferent and apathetic. Simon snapped his jaw closed, recognizing the look on Sam's face, the unequivocal signal that meant his sibling didn't want to talk about it.

"She's being unreasonable." Simon grumbled, returning his attention to his current problem. He wouldn't push Sam to share his pain if his brother didn't want to.

"Admit it. You love her." Sam crossed his arms and shot Simon a knowing look.

"She's stubborn."

"You love her."

"I trust her. I tell her everything else."

"You love her."

"Fuck!" Simon slammed his fist down on the desk so hard the solid oak shook on its foundations. "She makes me crazy. She makes me happy. I think she's so beautiful that I want to just sit and look at her for hours. One minute I'm perfectly sane, and the next I'm totally losing it. She couldn't give a shit less about the fact that I'm rich, and I think the woman is blind because I swear she doesn't ever notice that I'm scarred. The way she looks at me sometimes makes me feel like I'm ten feet tall. And she's looking at me. Not the billionaire, not the wealthy executive. Just the man. She can be as stubborn as a damn mule, but I even like that because she's determined. Smart. Kind. And she puts up with my cranky ass, accepts me exactly as I am." Breathless from his tirade, Simon sucked in a trembling, uneven gulp of air. He slumped forward, his anger spent. "So, yeah. If these wild, lunatic, possessive feelings for her that I have every fucking minute of every day are love...I'm screwed. I can't even imagine having to live my life without her." Voice vibrating with emotion, he looked up his older brother, his expression tortured.

"Then don't." Sam answered simply, his brow lifting, meeting Simon's questioning glance. "We built this company together. We started in a crappy, one-bedroom apartment, bro. Now we're wealthy beyond our wildest dreams and a major player worldwide. If you can accomplish that, you can handle this." Sam's voice went from serious to teasing as he added, "Pull your head out of your ass and solve the problem."

Simon's lips curved up in a small smile. He hadn't heard Sam say those words in years. It had been a frequent statement back in the days when they were still building Hudson. If one of them got stalled in the business by a roadblock, the other would kick them in the rear with those exact words. It had become their mantra, but they hadn't needed it in a very long time. They had plenty of employees who were paid very well to solve those problems before they ever got to Sam or himself. "Sometimes I think that I'd rather rebuild a whole business than to have to deal with this."

Sam shrugged. "Business is business. It's not always easy, but the outcome is fairly predictable. Relationships are messy. You have no data, no statistics. Nothing to justify taking the leap except emotion." Sam shuddered, as though the thought of jumping into a serious relationship was akin to torture.

"Then why in the hell are you telling me to do it?" Simon pierced his brother with an irritated glare.

"You need her." Sam stood abruptly and buttoned his suit jacket. "But if you ever decide you don't want her--"

"Don't start!" Simon rumbled, his voice lacking venom. If he had realized anything today, it was the fact that his brother had his own secrets, a woman in his past --very likely Maddie, judging by Sam's strange reaction to the curvy redhead--who still haunted him. He suspected that whoever she was, she was the reason that Sam went through women so fast, so unemotionally. Sam was trying to fill a void, trying to forget. Simon shook his head, knowing that his elder brother was smart enough to figure out eventually that it just wouldn't work. If a woman got under your skin, she stayed there. Simon's whole world revolved around Kara now, and no other woman could ever be a substitute, could ever fill the black, huge vacuum she would leave inside of him if she ever walked away.

Sam's charming smile was back. "You love me. You know you do."

"Not right now." Simon answered automatically.

Sam swaggered to the door, not a hair out of place, his suit and tie undisturbed. No one would ever know that he had just watched his younger brother practically have a nervous breakdown before his eyes.

Sam placed his hand on Simon's door. Before he could exit, Simon called after him in a husky voice. "Sam?"

Sam turned back with a quizzical expression. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for listening."

The look that passed between them spoke volumes. Simon wanted to tell his brother how much he cared, but a lump formed in his throat. They sparred like brothers often did, but Sam had sacrificed a lot for Simon and his mother. Worked his ass into the ground for all these years.

"Nobody deserves happiness more than you, little brother. It's within your grasp. Take it." Sam answered, his voice full of brotherly support, as he exited without another word.

Blowing out a shaky breath, Simon stood and grabbed his briefcase, looking around the plush, executive office. Other than his desk and chair, everything was decorated in art deco, a design that he really didn't like. How in the hell had that happened?

The office had been done years ago, but he'd never really noticed, never really cared.

Maybe because you told the decorator to do whatever she wanted.

Yeah, that's exactly what he had done years ago. He couldn't have cared less what decor the interior designer chose. He came to work, took care of business, and retreated back to his condo so he could immediately bury himself in his lab at home. Maybe he grunted a greeting to his secretary and personal assistant when he arrived and departed from the high rise building every weekday morning. Or maybe not. He was usually so hyper-focused on work, so enclosed in that bubble, that he didn't even remember.

He jerked at the knot in his expensive burgundy tie to loosen it and undid the top button of his shirt. Christ, how he hated wearing a suit.

Careful with the tie. It's one of Kara's favorites.

Actually, that might not be true. He wasn't exactly certain that she had a favorite. She told him

every morning how handsome he looked when he arrived in the kitchen dressed for work in a business suit and tie. But the very first time she had told him that, he had been wearing this tie. Since that day, he found himself reaching for this particular tie pretty damn often on his work days.

He snorted softly as he walked toward the door of his office, his stride nearly silent on the plush carpet. Christ, he was going off the deep end.

When had he started caring which tie he wore, how his office was decorated, whether or not he was cordial to his employees every day?

It was definitely time to go home.

Home. Kara makes me think of the condo as home. Her laughter. Her voice. Her smell. Her very presence makes it home, not just a place where I go when I'm done in the office.

He exited the office, letting the door close softly behind him. He glanced at Nina's desk, halting abruptly in front of it.

"You need something, boss?" Her tone was professional, but she had a genuine smile on her face.

He looked over the top of an abundant bouquet of roses that was placed prominently on her desk, frowning at his gray-haired assistant. Had he forgotten her birthday? No. No, he hadn't. Nina's birthday was in September. And his secretary, Marcie, always reminded him. "Nice flowers. What's the occasion?" He asked curiously.

Nina gave him a puzzled look, peering at him over her reading glasses. "Boss, it's February Fourteenth. Valentine's Day. You know...hearts, flowers, romance." The little woman smiled broader. "My Ralph has sent me two dozen red roses every Valentine's Day for thirty-seven years." She sighed. "He's still so romantic." Her voice vibrated with affection and adoration.

Valentine's Day? Yeah, he knew the holiday, he had just never paid any attention when it came and went every year. It was just another day, a twenty-four hour period of time when he saw a lot of Cupids and red hearts, when he chose to notice them, which wasn't very often.

He shot a quick glance at his blonde secretary, her desk situated next to Nina's. "Where are your flowers?"

Marcie paused, turning her head toward him and away from the computer that she had been clicking away on diligently before his question. "Haven't gotten them yet. My hubby will give them to me before we go out to dinner. He always does."

"Uh...is this normal? Dinner? Flowers?" He looked back at Nina with a scowl. Shit, he hadn't planned anything for Kara. She deserved romance, hearts, flowers and whatever else a man did for a woman on a day for lovers.

"It depends. Most couples make their own traditions." His assistant answered, her eyes questioning. "Are you okay?"

Damn it. He didn't know what to do and he hated that feeling. What else was traditional? What else would make a woman happy, feel cherished? Had Kara gotten flowers from her ex? Had he taken her out for dinner?

Setting his briefcase on the floor, he tried to squash the jealousy and possessiveness that were rising up inside of him. It didn't fucking matter what some man had done for her in the past...Simon was determined to do better. She was his woman now. His to protect. His to cherish. He wanted to

make her Valentine's Day so memorable that all she could think of was him from this day forward. Except he had no idea how to accomplish his goal.

He leaned over Nina's flowers and told her in a hesitant, low voice. "Kara."

Nina grinned. "She's a gem, boss. A wonderful young woman."

Only one woman could make him say three words that he never thought would come out of his mouth. "I need help." Really, for Kara, the words weren't all that difficult. "I'm not sure what to do. Can you help me, Nina?"

His assistant sprang out of her chair with an enthusiasm and speed that really shouldn't be normal for a woman of her age, motioning vigorously to Marcie to join her. The two of them surrounded him, peppering him with questions.

He should have been embarrassed, but strangely enough, he was not. Simon Hudson, billionaire and co-owner of one of the most powerful corporations in the world, in a huddle with two female employees, listening raptly to every word the women spoke, to every bit of advice they gave.

Sam passed by them, smirking as he made his way to the elevator, obviously able to pick up a part of the conversation even though they were speaking in low, conspiring voices.

Simon shot his brother a one-finger-salute when he saw Sam's mocking expression, barely taking his eyes away from the two women in front of him who seemed to know the answers to all of the mysteries of women. Right now, to him, they were goddesses.

He completely ignored the snicker he heard from Sam as his brother walked away. The bastard. He couldn't wait until the day that his elder brother needed advice.

Turning his attention back to Nina and Marcie, he listened, and learned.

Chapter 4

Kara let out an audible, heartfelt sigh as she sank deeper into Simon's garden bathtub, the hot water and bubbles covering nearly her entire body, leaving only her head bobbing above the water. He had offered her the use of his tub in the master bath any time she wanted it, but she had never taken him up on the offer. She had a perfectly wonderful tub and shower attached to her own room, but it wasn't nearly as elaborate as this one.

Admit it. It isn't the size of the tub. It's the fact that it's his that made you come in here.

Frowning, she grabbed a large loofah sponge from the ledge of the tub and starting scrubbing her arms with enough force to make her skin burn. Damn it. She didn't want to admit that she missed Simon so desperately that she wanted to use the tub he used, breath in his scent that lingered in his bathroom.

Refusing to have sex with him was your brilliant idea.

Yeah, it was. But she was seriously re-thinking that decision. It had felt like the right thing to do at the time. She wanted to be with him knowing that he trusted her completely. Not knowing what had happened to him could cause her to make other mistakes, to hurt him inadvertently. She couldn't stand that thought. She'd hoped he might open up and share his experience with her, let her help him through it.

But she had been dead wrong.

He had distanced himself, pulled away rather than share his internal torment. He hadn't touched her, hadn't kissed her, since she had told him that she couldn't make love with him unless he told her about the incident. What in the hell had happened to him? Had she pushed him too far, too fast? Would it have been better to settle for only what he was able to give?

I could let him tie me to the bed and fuck me senseless. That way, I can't hurt him unintentionally.

She groaned as she stopped scrubbing her arms raw and lifted a leg from the water, resting it on a seat at the edge of tub. God, the thought was tempting. She might be an independent woman, but she had loved his sexual dominance, his take-charge assault to her senses. In some strange way, it aroused her beyond endurance, and he exercised that alpha side of him every single time he touched her. Mixed with his added tenderness and vulnerability that peeked through on occasion, it was an impossible-to-forget lure that sucked her toward him like a moth to a flame.

Simon made her feel beautiful.

He made her feel safe.

God...she loved her primitive, protective, possessive male who had a heart of gold.

Lifting her leg, she ran the sponge over her calf, slowly to her knee and gently across her thigh. Images flashed through her mind, making the sensitive flesh between her legs pulsate with need and her heart ache.

Being bound to Simon's bed, at his mercy, his mouth devouring her.

On the couch, her wrists restrained while he rocked her world.

In the elevator, opening to him, him pummeling her until she screamed.

Three nights ago, holding him as he made her come apart.

Oh hell, he was her every erotic fantasy come to life in stunning, glorious color and there wasn't a thing she didn't love about him.

A lone tear streaked down her cheek as she switched legs and worked on the other one with the sponge.

Three days. It had only been three days and she was already a mess. The lonely yearning for him was already pulverizing her, swallowing her whole. Not only was he her erotic fantasy, he was her complete fantasy. The whole damn package. She had never met a man like him, and probably never would again.

He was sweet, although he would deny it.

He was tender, although he would deny that too.

Kind.

Compassionate.

A freaking genius, a man she learned something from every single day, although she definitely knew he would blow that off too.

Because he was also humble. Simon Hudson didn't ever see himself as someone special. But she saw him as he was; a man to grab hold of and never let go.

A second tear flowed down her other cheek as her heart crumbled.

She didn't want to go back to her life before Simon. And not because she cared about being poor. She had always lived in poverty and had never planned on being anything other than comfortable. Secure. Money didn't buy happiness, and having material things couldn't even come close to competing with having love, having that one special person who could make her complete, whole. What good were things and money if a person wasn't emotionally fulfilled, happy with their accomplishments, no matter how big or how small?

I'd feel exactly the same way about Simon even if he wasn't wealthy. As long as he was happy.

Granted, Simon was too intelligent, too ambitious not to be successful. But there were times when she wished he wasn't quite so wealthy, didn't work so hard. But his intelligence, his drive to make his products the very best, were parts of him that she loved. She accepted the whole package, freaking adored the sexy, masculine, quirky bundle of testosterone that made him uniquely...Simon.

Taking a seat on a high ledge of the tub, she closed her eyes as she ran the loofah up her stomach slowly, letting her images of Simon take control of her mind, the elusive smell of him on the loofah assailing every one of her senses.

Kara bit her lip as the slightly abrasive loofah slid over her breasts, teasing her swollen, hard nipples. She imagined Simon biting them gently, swirling his tongue over the tips, her erotic thoughts and arousal making her let herself go. Giving in to the pounding demands of her body, she opened her thighs and allowed her other hand to slide up her slippery thigh and begin a decadent indulgence, a fantasy.

If she couldn't be with Simon in reality, at least she would be with him in her mind.

Kara has no reason to stay.

Simon's gut clenched as he knocked on the door of Kara's room, waiting for her to answer. Hoffman had called him less than an hour ago, informing him that the police had apprehended the second offender, the other bastard who had tried to abduct Kara.

Cursing under his breath, he pushed the door open, finding her bedroom empty. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw her cell phone and her backpack sitting on her bed. She was home, still somewhere in the condo. She'd never leave without her pack.

Does she know? Had Detective Harris called her? Knowing very well that he shouldn't, he picked up her phone, thumbing through her missed calls. There was only one that was recent. It had occurred thirty minutes earlier, and it was from Harris. There was a voice mail, but he drew the line at listening to her messages. He already knew what the message was about. She was safe, the men who had attacked her both locked up.

The reason for her being here with him...gone.

He had to tell her. He might be a selfish bastard, but he wouldn't let Kara spend another minute fearing that someone was on the loose, trying to kill her.

As far as he knew, she hadn't suffered another nightmare. God knew that he listened closely every night, left his bedroom door open in case she needed him. She hadn't.

Dropping her phone back on the bed, he yanked at his tie, undoing the knot completely, leaving the material to drape around his neck. He had discarded his jacket in the kitchen a few minutes earlier when he had arrived home. Uncertainty settled over him like a dark cloud as he exited her bedroom. Would she stay even though the immediate threat to her was gone? And if she wanted to leave, how in the hell could he ever let her go?

Not happening. She's mine, damn it!

Gritting his teeth, his emotions bouncing between determination and fear, he went in search of her. Most likely, she was in the computer lab. His lips curved upward, wondering if she would badger him for clues in her pursuit of mastering Myth World II. She played his game exclusively, declaring that the other games weren't as challenging, alternately praising him for being a genius and nagging him for tips. He knew she didn't really want him to tell her, to spoil the challenge of the game. Hell, if she had really wanted to know, if she had just once turned those baby blue eyes in his direction with a questioning glance, he would have spilled every damn secret she wanted to know about the game and probably some she had never even thought about yet.

He checked the lab, but she wasn't there. She had to be in the gym. Hesitating as he headed in that direction, he started to unbutton his shirt, heading toward his bedroom. He wanted to get out of this irritating, stiff shirt and pants, throw on some workout clothes and pump iron until his body relaxed. How in the hell he could relax when he saw Kara in her skimpy exercise clothing he didn't know, but he wanted to be with her, ached to see her.

He wouldn't blame her if she turned on her heel and left the minute he walked into the room, but he hoped she didn't. Honestly, he would deserve it. The last three days had been tense, and he had been a complete bastard to her, answering her cheerful questions with one-word, terse answers, practically

ignoring her presence when she was in the room with him. Slowly, she had become as withdrawn as he was, speaking only when they had to communicate. Still friendly, but distant.

As he made his way down the hall to his room, he promised himself that he would resolve that issue. He couldn't take it anymore. Sam was right -- for once! He needed Kara, and feeling her move further and further away from him was like cutting off a limb. Fuck! It was more like cutting out his heart with a dull knife.

Ripping the tie from his neck, he dropped it on his bed and finished unbuttoning his shirt. He had just picked both of them up to put in his hamper when he heard her.

Heart pounding, his head tilted to listen. He picked up a whimper, a feminine moan, and then...his name.

"Simon."

The choked, urgent longing in her husky, seductive voice sent shivers down his spine. The garments in his hand dropped to the floor unnoticed. He moved toward the needy sounds, stopping at the door to the master bath. He could no more turn away from that door than he could stop breathing. The door was closed, but it wasn't latched. In a daze, he pushed the door open slowly, light steam greeting him as he silently took a step and pushed the door wide open.

Holy Christ!

His heart paused, breathing halted, as his hungry eyes landed on Kara. She was spread out on a high ledge in the tub, above the mass of bubbles, water licking her ankles, caressing her thighs, lost in erotic ecstasy. Her thighs were spread wide, exposing the mouth-watering, glistening flesh between her thighs. Head thrown back, eyes closed, she wasn't aware of him watching her, mesmerized by the hand between her legs. Her luscious breasts bounced as her hips rose up and down in the water, meeting the furiously moving fingers that were teasing her clit.

He struggled for air, his cock hard enough to split diamonds. Biting back a groan, he knew he should leave her to her privacy, but he couldn't. It wasn't possible. Nothing less than the whole world ending in a cataclysmic catastrophe was ripping him away from one of the most erotic, beautiful things he had ever seen.

"Simon."

She was fantasizing about him. Imagining him. He wanted desperately to know what he was doing to her in her imagination. Probably exactly what he wanted to be doing right now. Burying his head between those silken thighs, fucking her tight channel with his fingers as he pleased her clit with his mouth and tongue.

He stripped off his pants and briefs, his eyes never leaving her writhing body as he dropped them silently to the floor, stepping away from them. Part of him wanted to approach her, worship that begging, swollen pink flesh between her thighs, give some attention to those hard, pebbled nipples. But he couldn't move. He was swept up into her arousal, a sight so carnal that it had him palming his engorged cock, stepping closer to the tub.

A low, throaty groan that he couldn't hold back startled her. Her head jerked up, her eyes full of lust and sultry need.

"Don't stop. Please. I need to watch you come." His voice was graveled, raspy with desire and

longing.

Her hand quit moving, but she left it on her pussy. "I'm sorry, Simon. I--"

"Make yourself come, Kara. Keep going. Think about me. There's nothing more that I want in this world than to watch you pleasure yourself. It's beautiful." She didn't know how beautiful she looked, skin flushed, wanton, abandoned.

Her eyes roamed his body, hesitating, narrowing in on the cock that he held tightly in his grasp. "No. You're beautiful, Simon. The most beautiful man I've ever seen."

He didn't think it was possible to get more aroused. But her low, come-fuck-me voice nearly sent him over the edge, the fact that she wanted him almost his undoing.

Their eyes locked, an invisible thread keeping them focused on each other. He groaned as her hand moved, her eyes growing steamier as he starting pumping his cock.

They watched each other with naked, unbridled passion. She became wild, uninhibited as she licked her lips, watching him jerk on his ready-to-explode cock.

Rivulets of sweats poured down his face as she whispered his name between jerky pants and erotic moans as they stayed connected, completely lost in a web of desire so fierce that he could barely remain standing.

"That's right, baby. Bring yourself off," he demanded as he fisted himself harder, the pure pleasure of feasting his eyes on her unrestrained lust making his balls tighten, the pressure inside of him building.

Tendrils of dark silky hair had escaped the clip holding her mane back and they framed her face, brushed over her shoulders. He was intoxicated, bewitched, enthralled with the feast for his eyes spread out in front him.

Moving her fingers from her clit, Kara pushed two fingers into her tight channel, filling herself, moving them in and out with strong, deep strokes. She gasped every time her fingers slammed into her opening, increasingly deep, faster. Simon increased his pace, keeping time with her.

"Make yourself come for me," he demanded, knowing he couldn't keep this up much longer, however much he'd like to watch her like this forever.

Her fingers moved back to her clit, gliding easily along the swollen nub. Panting, she threw her head back with a long, throaty moan.

She climaxed hard, moaning his name, her back arching, her whole body quivering.

Not able to hold back another second, Simon exploded, putting his hand in front of his cock to capture the stream of hot fluid that probably would have hit the damn wall had he not stopped it.

She leaned back, her breathing heavy and uneven, her eyes glassy. After quickly washing his hands, he crossed the space between them, and stepped into the tub.

He pulled her unresisting body into the water with him, his mouth covering hers in a tender, languorous kiss.

Her face was flushed as she pulled back, her eyes darting away from his. "I can't believe I just did that."

"Don't, Kara." His fingers gripped her chin, gently tilting her face, making her meet his eyes. "Don't"

ever be embarrassed with me. You're beautiful. The sexiest woman I've ever seen. Watching you come was so fucking hot that it damn near gave me heart failure. There's no shame in something that incredible."

Wishing he could express his desire to share all things intimate with her, his obsession to be close to her, he tugged her back onto a built-in lounge seat. After sitting and leaning back, water lapping at his torso, he pulled her between his legs. Molding her naked body to his, her back to his front, he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist to anchor her. He nearly sighed in ecstasy as she relaxed against him, her head resting against his shoulder. He buried his face in her hair, breathing in her tantalizing smell for the first time in three days, feeling like he was finally where he belonged.

"I've just never done that when someone was watching. I told you I don't have much experience." She sighed. "I missed you. I know I pushed you away. I shouldn't have. I just wanted you to share what happened with me, to help me understand what happened the other night. I'm really sorry, Simon. I--"

"Shhh...stop!" His mouth to her ear, he whispered, "It isn't you, Kara." Hell, it made his chest hurt to hear her apologizing when he should be begging her to forgive him. He'd treated her poorly. Shut her out. He just wasn't used to a woman who actually wanted to be close to him, a woman who actually gave a shit enough to try. "It's my problem. Something that I've never told anyone. Shit! I never even told the shrink that mom made me see after the whole thing happened. Not the whole truth anyway."

"Helen had you see a counselor?" she questioned in a low, thoughtful voice. Her hands covering the arms that he had wrapped around her waist, she squeezed gently in a comforting gesture.

He shivered, even though the water lapping over their skin was still hot. Taking in a deep breath, he exhaled slowly, knowing that at this point...he was all in. It was time to risk it all, throw all his cards on the table and pray that he came out the winner, that she cared enough to stay with him. Truth was, he did trust Kara. Did he want to talk about his shame and irrational fears? Oh, hell no...he absolutely fucking didn't want to talk about it. But his obsession was to be close to the woman he was holding in his arms, the woman who was leaning back against him with complete faith and trust, a gentleness and patience that held him in awe of her.

Nothing between us. Ever.

"Yeah, she did. I saw Dr. Evans for over a year." His voice was hoarse and hesitant as his instincts warred with his emotions. "Mom wanted to make sure I was okay emotionally."

She squirmed back against him, pushing her body tightly against his, getting as close as she possibly could. Her hands slid down his arms, finding his hand under the water, entwining their fingers together.

He breathed in the scent of her as she tilted her head, resting it against his jaw, her fragrance surrounding him.

"Simon?" she whispered softly.

"Yeah?" He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

"I love you." Her voice was barely audible. "I love everything that you are, every part of you. Nothing that happened in your distant past is going to change that. I even love you when you're bossy."

"I'm never bossy." He answered automatically, the walls around his heart crumbling, allowing his heart to soar. Holy shit! He had wanted her to say it, but he had never imagined that it would feel this damn amazing to hear it. He wasn't sure what he had ever done to deserve a woman like her, but he wasn't stupid. He was keeping her. "You know that I'll never let you go now, don't you?" It wasn't really a question, but he figured that she should know his intentions.

"I didn't tell you so that you would feel obligated. I just wanted you to know." In a lighter tone, she added, "And you are bossy. Now tell me about Dr. Evans."

Obligated? She wasn't an obligation. She was his whole damn life. His arms tightened around her convulsively.

She loves me!

He relaxed, the tension draining from his body. Suddenly, talking about the past didn't seem quite so difficult. Yeah, he'd much rather take his woman to bed and show her exactly how much he worshipped her, but he wanted to do it with full disclosure. He needed to explain what had happened the other night, and the only way to do it was to talk about the past.

She loves me.

He started to talk.

Chapter 5

"Before I tell you about Dr. Evans, I guess I should start at the beginning."

Kara nodded, not wanting to interrupt the flow of his words with any questions or comments. She hadn't meant to confess her love, but she hadn't been able to help herself, hadn't been able to hold back the words. And she didn't regret it. She was weary from trying to hide it, and no man deserved to be loved more than Simon.

"My father died a month before the incident. Overdose. Drugs and alcohol. He was foolish enough to steal drugs from one of the biggest drug dealers on the west coast, a guy he ran errands for or distributed drugs for in return for enough drugs and booze to feed his own habit. He rarely got paid in cash, and even if he did, he didn't use it to feed his family or his wife." His voice was low, seething with distain for the man that had fathered him. "Mom tried her best, but she had dropped out of high school and couldn't get anything but minimum wage jobs. She did whatever she could to feed us and keep dear old dad's business away from our shitty apartment and away from me and Sam. Mostly, she kept us out of trouble, making us see that we could be something more, something better." His voice cracked, his adoration for his mother evident.

Everything that Helen had told her made sense now. Helen blamed herself for not being able to give her boys a better childhood. Kara frowned as she remembered the sorrow in Helen's eyes when she had talked about her boys, their crappy childhood. Didn't Helen realize that she had given her boys something to cling to in their childhood, something they desperately needed to survive intact? Helen had given Simon and Sam love...and hope.

Simon's voice strengthened as he continued. "Rose was my childhood friend, really my only friend other than Sam. She grew up in the apartment next to ours. She was a year old than me." He shifted uncomfortably, his foot bouncing in the water as though he were nervous. "We were as close as friends can be until my hormones started to rage and I started to see her as a female. I cared about her a lot and I thought she cared about me."

"So you did have a girlfriend when you were a teenager?" She wasn't sure where he was going with his explanation, but she sensed that it was important to his history.

"Yes and no. I guess. We kissed, we held hands. I had horny, teenage-boy wet dreams about her every night. I wanted to get laid for the first time and I wasn't exactly an attractive teenager. I was quiet and skinny, not much to look at. Clumsy as hell. I read a lot. Mom made sure Sam and I had books from the library or reading programs. But Rose seemed to like me even though I was a gawky, ugly kid."

Kara's heart contracted, trying to picture a young, awkward teenage Simon. She was willing to bet her nursing career that he had been adorable.

"She started changing when she turned seventeen. She dropped out of school, started hanging with my father's crowd, wouldn't talk to me anymore or was so distant that she acted like I was nobody."

She squeezed his hands. "That must have hurt."

"It did." He didn't bother to deny it. "I knew she was using, stoned out of her mind most of the time. I begged her to let me help her, but she wouldn't listen. She just laughed in my face, saying that there was nothing I could do because I was as poor as she was. And she was right, damn it! But I wanted to help her get clean. And stop working the streets."

"She became a prostitute?" Oh God, poor Simon.

She couldn't see him, but she felt his shoulders lift in a shrug. "She had to pay for her habit somehow and I know she gave some of the money to her mom to help her younger brother."

"You didn't give up, did you?" Kara didn't need an answer. She already knew. Simon was stubborn and tenacious, his rescuer tendencies still alive and well. It wasn't in his nature to stop trying.

"No. I wanted to believe that the Rose I knew was still inside of her, waiting to come out again." He snorted. "It didn't matter how many times she tried to avoid me or told me fuck off, I still tried. I was pretty naive, I guess."

No, you weren't. You were good, even though life had dealt you a crappy beginning. You were a dreamer who wanted to believe that everyone could be saved. You must have been as guileless, honest and direct as you are now. You just didn't hide it as well then.

"Having hope doesn't make you naive, Simon."

He laughed, but it was self-deprecating. "I was gullible. I didn't see her for about a month after my father died. Then one night, she showed up at our apartment, dressed in a short sexy skirt and a friendly smile. For a teenage male virgin...that was all it took for me. Mom was working and Sam had already gone to Florida to start a construction job there. I was getting ready to graduate from high school and Sam had made enough money working construction to bring us to Florida to join him."

"You were graduating from high school at the age of sixteen?"

"I skipped a grade. Twice. School was never difficult for me." He answered in a sheepish voice, like the fact that he was smart embarrassed him.

Why was she not surprised that he was a boy genius too? "So, what happened after she came in?"

"She came on to me hot and heavy. I responded like a sixteen-year-old who had never gotten laid. She had me in my bedroom within minutes. She was experienced and I let her take the lead. She opened my fly and had my dick out of pants and a condom on before I really knew what was happening." He laughed, but there was no humor in the hollow sound. "Not that I would have objected. I had a beautiful woman above me, ready to fuck me senseless. I was a teenager in complete ecstasy."

Oh. Dear. God.

Kara bit back a horrified gasp. Her suspicions had to be wrong. It couldn't have happened that way.

"She had the knife hidden in her bra." His voice trembled.

She wasn't wrong, and the nausea started to rise in her throat.

"So there I was, getting my first fuck, drowning in erotic bliss, never once thinking that there was something strange about the whole situation. She grabbed the knife and started stabbing the moment I started to come. It took me by surprise. She had stabbed me so many times before I realized what was happening that I didn't have a chance to defend myself." His chest was heaving, his voice strangled and raw.

Kara's whole body quivering with emotion, she turned in his arms, straddled his thighs and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Why?" she asked, her question coming in a short sob. "Why would she do that?" Burying her face in his neck, she let her tears flow unchecked down her face. All

she could think about was the vulnerable teenage Simon, lying in a pool of blood, dying just because he was hormonal, a typical young man.

Wrapping his arms tightly around her, he answered in a graveled voice, "Revenge. My father died before he could be punished for stealing from a powerful boss in an organized and huge cartel. The organization was sending a message, letting people know what happens to a person or their family if they try to steal from them. They couldn't let my father's bad deed go unpunished. He died before they could send that message. I was just a substitute."

"But why Rose?"

"The boss knew we had been friends since childhood. Her loyalty was being tested. She was pretty deeply involved in the organization. They threatened to kill her mother and brother if she didn't kill me." Surprisingly, there was no bitterness in his voice.

Shaken to the depths of her soul, she choked out, "Is she in jail?"

"She's dead." His voice was flat. "She fled as soon as I passed out from blood loss, obviously convinced that I was a goner. She went straight to an alley, took a lethal amount of drugs and slit her wrists with the same knife she used to stab me. They found a suicide note and her confession in her pocket. She begged forgiveness from both her mother and mine, saying that she had to protect her family. She never knew that I survived. Mom came home a few minutes later and found me. If she hadn't, I would have been dead."

Unable to contain her horror, she sobbed into Simon's neck, crying for all of the pain that he had suffered, both emotionally and physically. How did one survive a betrayal like that? Especially by a friend, a woman he had adored. "I'm so sorry."

"Why?" he asked, sounding perplexed. "You didn't stab me." He rubbed his hand up and down her back. "Don't cry. I don't like it." His voice was demanding, but he rested his head against hers, his touch on her back gentle and comforting.

A sad smile crossed her lips as she tried to rein in her emotions. His comment was so...Simon. He had no idea why she was crying for him, hurt for him. Being loved by anyone other than his family was completely alien to him. "Tell me about your injuries?"

"I had stab wounds. Lots of them." His voice held a slightly teasing note. He paused and asked in a more hesitant, gruff voice, "Are you going to cry again if I tell you?"

Oh, good Lord. He's telling me about the most traumatic event of his life and he's worried about whether or not it will make me cry?

"I'll try to contain myself. Tell me."

"I was in the hospital for a while. Lucky for me, Rose was a lousy murderer. She managed to miss most of my vital organs and some of the wounds were shallow. They had to do surgery and repair a few organs, but I lived through it. As soon as I was well enough, Sam moved Mom and I to Tampa.' He breathed a long, masculine sigh.

"Were you scared?" She whispered against his neck, still visualizing a young, frightened, injured Simon. Her arms tightened around his shoulders, wishing she could have been there to comfort him.

"Honestly, I barely remember most of it." He shook his head slightly. "Sam said Mom was a total wreck. The only thing I remember was being ashamed when I was finally coherent. And sad because

Rose was dead."

Her head jerked back abruptly in shock. Searching his eyes, confused, she asked, "Why? You didn't do anything wrong."

"I was duped because I was horny. I was thinking with the head below my waist instead of the one above it. Rose coming on to me wasn't logical. It didn't make any sense. I should have been suspicious. Christ! All she had said to me in months was to go to hell. Should have known something wasn't right. But I didn't think about anything but getting off." His face was dark and tortured. "I was pissed at myself. I put my mom and Sam through hell because I was stupid. I knew better. I grew up in the neighborhood. I sure as hell knew how to watch my own back."

Her palm lifted to his face, stroking over his jaw, realizing that he had been a man in a boy's body when he was injured, expecting himself to make rational decisions even when his hormones were raging. Didn't he realize, although he may have had the intelligence of an older man, his body had still been young, his maturity still that of a sixteen-year-old boy? "Simon...you were sixteen. Still a boy. You may have been a boy genius, but you were still a teenager."

"Yeah, and I didn't grow up to be exactly...uh...normal." He caught her hand that was roaming over the stubble on his face and brought it to his mouth. He kissed her palm gently and entwined their fingers, resting their conjoined hands over his heart.

"No, you didn't. You grew up to be extraordinary. You have reason not to trust easily. What happened with Dr. Evans?" Sure, he needed to have control, but given the circumstances surrounding the traumatic event, she was willing to bet that anyone would have their demons from that experience. She knew she would.

"He made me talk. I hated it, but I went every week to make my mom feel better. After a while, it got easier. He helped me through my feelings about Rose's death and about my father. But I never told him what really happened. I couldn't. I couldn't tell anyone. Everyone assumed that Rose came in through an unlocked door and stabbed me while I was sleeping...and I just let them continue to think that. It seemed easier." His body tensed. "It was a coward's way out."

"But there must have been signs at the scene. The condom and--"

"Apparently, Rose had some sort of feelings for me, some guilt. There was no condom and my dick was in my pants. No one ever assumed that it was anything but an attack on me while I was asleep. A revenge hit against my father. You're the only person who knows. I couldn't even tell Sam." His voice trailed off in a husky whisper.

Her heart ached for him, her soul needing to somehow comfort him. Pulling her hand from his, she turned his face to hers, forcing him to meet her eyes. "Listen to me. You were attacked when you were young and vulnerable. You have no reason to feel guilty or ashamed. Not one bit of it was your fault. I understand why you have trust issues. I understand why you panicked the other night." She saw doubt in his eyes and it pissed her off. "But know this...you survived and grew into a gorgeous, sexy, brilliant, successful man in spite of the fact that you got a raw deal when you were younger. You're the most incredible man I've ever known. Do you understand me!?" Her statement was fierce and her eyes were shooting fire. Damn it, he needed to get it through his thick head that he was someone special.

His eyes grew warmer and his lips twitched. "Yeah. I got it. Can we go back to the sexy part?"

She rolled her eyes. Trust Simon to focus in on only the sex part of her statement.

"Is that the only part you heard?" she replied, exasperated.

"No. But it was the most interesting part." He grinned at her unashamedly.

Frustrated, she scooped up a handful of water and dropped it on his head. "I'm trying to explain something to you here."

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her back into his body, creating a ripple in the tub that had water lapping against their skin in a gentle caress. Eyes heated and intense, he speared her with a look that spoke of possession, desire that ran much deeper than lust. "Do you want to know what I understand?"

She shivered as his arms slid tightly around her body, anchoring her against him. Unable to speak, she nodded.

His voice low and raspy, he answered, "I understand that I have to be luckiest bastard on the planet because you love me, you accept me. Hell, I think you almost understand me--which is a fucking miracle because sometimes I don't even understand myself. I don't really know how to romance you like I should, but it isn't because I don't want to. I just don't know how. I understand that before I met you I was living in a very small world, and somehow you dragged me into the light, made me look around and actually see things that I never saw before. I understand that you make me a better man." He snaked a hand around her neck and planted a fierce, possessive kiss on her lips. Pulling away abruptly, he cupped her chin, his eyes molten and fierce. "Is that enough understanding for you?"

Breathless, she peered at him with her heart in her eyes. Maybe he hadn't repeated exactly what she had been trying to convey, but it was a start. He was learning to be loved. Burying her face against his shoulder, she murmured against his skin, "It's enough. For now."

"I need you, Kara. Don't leave me again." His voice hoarse, he rubbed his face against her hair.

He hadn't told her that he loved her, but he had bared his soul, shared his secrets, made incredible leaps in sharing his emotions. And he had done it for her. So yeah, for now, it was more than enough. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Damn right you're not!" he growled.

She smiled, because even as he spoke the demanding words, he was rocking her in his arms, holding her like a tender lover. He was wrong about not knowing how to romance her. He showed her how much he cared in so many little ways that were mind-boggling, seductive, and addictive. It was like a missing piece of her soul had finally found her and clicked into place, making her feel complete.

"Did you love her?" She knew she should drop the subject, but she wanted to know.

"Who?"

"Rose? Did you love her?"

"No." His low voice answered quickly and without hesitation. "I cared about her as a friend and I had a gigantic crush on her. But I didn't love her. I didn't want her to die. The sad part of the whole thing is that she died for nothing. A few days after she killed herself the whole organization was brought down by the authorities. The boss and everyone associated with the cartel are going to rot in jail."

She could hear the sincerity, the acceptance of the whole situation in his voice. He wasn't angry, wasn't bitter. "Good therapist?"

"Yeah. Dr. Evans was the best. We still have dinner occasionally. I think he's still trying to figure me out." He laughed with genuine humor.

She smirked against his shoulder. "You're a fascinating subject."

"Are you saying that I'm odd?" he growled against her neck.

"Hmmm...I'm not sure." She slid away from him and stood, hating to leave the circle of his arms, but dying for something to drink. She'd been in the steamy room for quite some time and she was parched. Unable to resist looking back at him as she climbed the steps, her hungry eyes roamed his muscular body and handsome face. "I think I need to study you a bit more before I come to any conclusions."

He came to his feet in one graceful motion, muscles flexing, a wicked grin on his face. "Sweetheart, if you keep flashing that sexy body at me, I'm going to be doing my own studying." His grin widened and his eyes grew dark as he prowled after her, his big body cutting through the water easily. "And I examine and test my data very thoroughly."

She scooped up a towel from a pile next to the tub and scrambled out the bathroom door, Simon hot on her trail. Laughing as he caught her around the waist before she could make it out the bedroom door, she squealed, "No. I'm thirsty."

As he pulled her back against his wet, solid chest, she wondered if she really needed water all that badly. God, he felt good. Melting back against him, she could feel his hard, insistent arousal against her ass.

"Are you thirsty?" His voice changed, instantly concerned. "Did you eat?" He took the towel from her hands and started to wipe her body gently, drying her back and turning her around to wipe the moisture from her breasts and belly.

She bit her lip as she peeked up at his face, his expression anxious and slightly agitated. "I'm not that hungry." Her appetite was increasing for something other than food.

By the time he was satisfied that she was completely dry, she was certain she was going to die of lust. The man was definitely thorough.

"You need hydration and food." He grunted as he tossed her his black silk robe and quickly dried his own body, going to his closet to rummage for clothing. He pulled on a similar garment in navy blue, putting it on in quickly, barely taking the time to yank the tie closed.

She nearly whimpered as he covered that glorious, masculine body. She slipped on the black robe reluctantly, her thirst being overridden by the heat between her thighs. All she wanted at the moment was to get horizontal with Simon. "Seriously, I'm not that hungry."

He grasped her hand and tugged, pulling her along behind him. "You'll eat." He stopped, piercing her with a dark, warning stare. "I plan on fucking you until you beg for mercy later."

Her nipples hardened to pebbles and the smoldering heat between her thighs went up in flames. His heated expression made her shiver with longing, every inch of her skin tingling.

I'll be begging. But not for mercy.

With a frustrated sigh, she let him pull her toward the kitchen. She knew that stubborn, determined look of his. He was determined to satisfy her needs, give her whatever she needed. One casual mention of being thirsty and Simon was a man on a mission, pushing his own needs and wants aside, taking care of her first.

And he wondered why she loved him?

Her heart turned over as he squeezed her hand, leading her with focused determination toward food and water. The man was a tantalizing mixture of sizzling male hormones, intensity, tenderness, vulnerability and compassion. The perfect male wrapped up in a bossy, handsome, irresistible package.

Why did she love him? Shouldn't the question be...how could she not love him?

She smiled as she admitted to herself that she had never stood a chance against falling madly, completely and totally in love with this man. Something had drawn her to him from the moment they met, something elemental and primal. Maybe she had been afraid to recognize it for what it was, but it had always been there. Simon was like a force of nature—dangerous, yet compelling because of its fierce, wild and raw power.

She remembered her mom once saying that true love was not for the faint of heart, but the rewards were worth the risk. Kara had been young, not even a teenager, and she hadn't understood the meaning of her mom's statement.

Now, with Simon, the meaning of those words was crystal-clear and she understood exactly what her mom had meant. And she had finally found the man who was well worth the risk.

Sending a silent thank you to her mother for the words that it had taken her many years to understand, she allowed Simon to guide her out of the hallway and into the kitchen, a silly grin on her face.

Chapter 6

Simon popped open the door of the refrigerator with a flick of his wrist. "Diet Coke or water?" He reached for the Diet Coke, already knowing how she would answer.

"Diet Coke," she affirmed, her attention distracted.

He flipped the top on the can and handed it to her. Opening a regular Coke for himself, he chugged half of the container down in seconds. Christ, no wonder Kara had been thirsty. He hadn't been in the steamy room as long as her, but he was parched.

Lifting the can to her lips, she drank, but her gaze was fixed on the archway that led to the dining room.

Shit, he had completely forgotten his earlier errands. "Happy Valentine's Day." He gulped the rest of the can of soda and tossed the empty container in the trash.

Following her into the dining room, he scowled. She hadn't said one word. Maybe Nina and Marcie had steered him in the wrong direction. Would she like any of it?

He'd tried to be organized about delivering stuff to the dining room: Flowers on the table, candies on the chairs, jewelry and perfume gifts on the floor. Yeah, there were teddy bears and other miscellaneous stuff scattered around the room, but he had thought he had arranged things fairly well. "You don't like any of it?" Damn it, he was firing his assistant and secretary in the morning. They had specifically told him that these were the things that made women feel good, special.

"Oh Simon, what did you do?" She ran a fingertip along the velvety surface of a red rose and gently tapped one of the heart-shaped balloons, watching it sway back and forth through the air.

"Okay. Those two are definitely fired in the morning!" Fuck! He wanted to please her. Instead, she looked like she was traumatized. He knew he should have gotten other things, but the Veyron and the Mercedes had been full.

"Who are you firing?" She turned and looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Nina and Marcie. They told me that these types of gifts make a woman happy."

Oh hell, he couldn't fire either one of them. They did their jobs too well.

Honestly, it was his fault that he didn't know a damn thing about how to romance his woman. But he was willing to try until he got it right. "We could go shopping. Pick something else." he suggested, hoping she'd let him take her, see what she thought was romantic.

"You asked Nina and Marcie for advice?"

"Yeah."

"Simon, this is incredible. I don't know what to say." Her voice was tremulous as she bent down and picked up a fluffy brown teddy bear and held it against her chest in a death grip. "I think Marcie and Nina were giving you suggestions. They didn't mean for you to buy everything."

Damn it. She sounded like she was going to cry. He fucking hoped she didn't. "I don't know your favorite flower. Or what kind of candy you like. I don't really know your favorite color. Shouldn't a guy know those things? Shouldn't I know how to please you?" he answered, his voice disgruntled.

Dropping the stuffed bear gently to the floor, she turned to him. "You didn't need to do all this. I've

never even gotten flowers before."

What did he do? He went shopping. Big fucking deal! Sure, he'd usually rather have a root canal than go shopping, but for the first time, he'd enjoyed it. "I went shopping. It wasn't exactly a big effort." At the last minute, because he had only just realized that it was Valentine's Day. How pathetic was that? Thank God for Nina's thoughtful husband!

"You did all of this for me." Her arm stretched out, motioning toward the full dining room. "The flowers are beautiful. I love them all. I want a piece of that candy so badly that I can taste it already and everything else is so overwhelming that I'm speechless. I would have been over the moon with a few flowers or a card. You didn't need to do this. It's more gifts than a woman gets in a lifetime. But it isn't the things that amaze me. It's you. Your desire to make me happy. You're the most incredible man on the planet. That's why I love you." She took a long sip from her can of soda and set it on a small, available area of the table.

He caught her body as it rocketed into his arms, savoring her softness as it pressed against him. Warm lips nuzzled his cheek and the side of his neck. As he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist, her body gliding slowly along his until her feet touched the floor, he decided that maybe he would give Marcie and Nina a raise instead of a lecture in the morning.

"You're insane. You know that, don't you?" Pulling back, she planted a loud, smacking kiss on his lips. "But I love that about you."

Okay. He was willing to be bat-shit crazy if it made her love him more.

Giving him an adoring look, she added, "But one gift next time, okay? Or a card."

Oh, hell no. He wasn't getting roped into that promise. "We'll see." His answer was noncommittal.

"Wait. I have something for you." She pulled away from him and scampered to her room.

She returned with a small gift bag, decorated with hearts and little devils. "The bag was definitely screaming your name." Shooting him a mischievous smile, she handed him the bag. "I don't really have my own money to spend, so I had to improvise."

"You need more money? Why didn't you tell me?" He glowered at her, pissed that she hadn't told him that she needed cash.

"I don't need you to give me anything more. I want you to take some of it back. I have almost a hundred grand in my bank account. I don't need it, Simon." She met his eyes with a stubborn tilt of her chin.

"You haven't spent hardly any of it. How in the hell are you living, taking care of your needs?"

She snorted. "You take care of my needs. What in the hell do I need money for? I don't have one single need or want. I'm living like a spoiled brat right now. All I have to do is mention something and it magically appears. I don't need to buy one single thing."

"Women love to shop. Buy things. Even when they don't need them." Hell, he knew that much from his mom. Her favorite activity was shopping.

"Not me. I'd rather be reading. Or playing Myth World II if I have time. I have every comfort, ever need met." She reached a hand to his face, tracing his lips lightly, running the back of her hand softly over his five o'clock shadow. "The only recurring need I have is you."

She was trying to distract him, and damn him, it was working. "The money was a gift. You're keeping it." he snarled, determined that she wouldn't get her way by getting his cock hard...which it was. Extremely hard. Totally ready.

"I'm not keeping it." She placed a soft kiss at the side of mouth his mouth. "Open the bag."

He had all he could do not to strip that fuck-me robe from her body and devour her whole. His whole body was tense as he opened the gift bag, trying not to think about his pulsating cock and his nearly impossible-to-ignore compulsion to be driving into her body right at the moment.

His head jerked up before he could finish the task, suddenly remembering that he needed to tell Kara that the other asshole that had tried to abduct her was in jail. "They caught the other guy today. He's in jail. You probably have a message from Harris."

"Oh, thank God. You can call off the security. I think they intimidate some of my fellow students. They don't exactly keep a low profile anymore." Her voice was light, but her body visibly relaxed.

He saw the relief on her face. No matter how much she denied that the man had been a threat, he knew it bothered her, knew that she was still frightened. She'd have to be a fool not to be. She had come too damn close to losing her life on the day they had injured her. "Not happening. The security stays."

"I don't need them anymore--"

"No! I can't take the risk of something happening to you. There are too many crazy people out there and I've made enemies over the years." Granted, he hadn't pissed as many people off as his brother Sam had, but you couldn't become a billionaire without having a few people out there who hated your guts. "The security stays."

He pulled on the red tissue paper in the bag, sending pieces of heart-shaped paper fluttering to the carpet. He caught one in his hand, clutching it tightly, before it hit the floor. She dipped a hand into the bag and pulled out the material that lay at the bottom.

She held up the black silk boxer shorts by the elastic. Generally a boxer-briefs type of guy, he stared for a moment before his lips curved upward. The black silk was dotted with little devils and hearts.

"They're so...you, Simon." She wiggled her eyebrows and the underwear at the same time. "You'll look hot. Not that you don't already, but all I could think about was how sexy they'd look on you." She pulled the material to her face, nuzzling the soft silk.

He stared at her with horny fascination, imagining his cock inside those boxer shorts, her lips on the material. Holy fuck! Those underwear had just become his very favorite. He didn't give a shit if he didn't usually wear traditional boxers.

"I already took the tags off. Try them on so I can take them off later." She held them out to him with a seductive smile.

He had his robe open in seconds and the shorts over his hips a moment later. He shuddered as he felt the soft brush of her delicate hands on his shoulders as she slipped his robe completely off, leaving him standing before her in his new pair of favorite underwear.

"Hot. Definitely very hot," she whispered.

The needy, breathy sound of her voice nearly made him come undone. Actually, he liked the feel of

silk next to his skin, caressing his engorged member. And he positively loved the look of hunger in his woman's eyes as they roamed over his body, narrowing on the bulge at his crotch.

She didn't bother to hide her desire for him and it made him insane. "What's this?" He opened his fist, exposing the tiny cardboard heart. Flipping it over, he saw the handwritten words.

Good For One Wish!

He looked up at her, perplexed. She was worrying her bottom lip, looking anxious.

"It's a heart-wish. I didn't really have my own money--" She held her hand up as he drew in an audible breath to argue. "Don't start that again. Anyway, I made these up. You can cash them in any time. They're good for one wish or favor that you want from me. Anything that you can think of that's in my power to grant you."

"Anything?" His heart pounded as his mind filled with images.

She raised a brow. "Anything I'm capable of doing."

"I wish you would keep the money I put in your bank account and not argue about the security." Feeling a little guilty that he was using his gift against her, he frowned.

She gave him a look that his mother used to give him as a child. It was the dreaded "I'm-so-disappointed-in-you" look. Fuck! That hurt.

She folded her arms in front of her. "That wish interferes with my morals and values. Plus, that's two wishes. Not fair."

"Compromise?" he breathed softly, not liking the disgruntled look on her face.

Her face softened. "I'm open."

"Keep the money in your account. Use it if you need to. I'm not saying you have to keep it forever. Just keep it for now. Until you graduate and get a job. We can renegotiate later." Of course, he'd refuse to take it back later. But this was now, and he wanted her to be safe if anything ever happened to him.

"Wish granted." She let her arms slide down her body and planted them on her hips. "Security?"

"Let me leave the security in place, but I'll make them back off. You'll barely know that they're there. But let me keep security on you." Holding his breath, he watched her expression. "For my peace of mind, Kara. For me."

"I'll do it for you provided they back off and quit scaring my classmates. Wish granted." She snatched the paper heart from his hand and tore it up.

He dropped to the floor, searching frantically for the other heart-wishes. "How many were there?" He'd found two. Seeing another one lying under the table, he crawled forward, totally oblivious to the carpet burns on his knees. He wanted every one of those bad-boys in his hot little hand. They were definitely made of solid gold.

"Five," she choked out with a laugh.

He heaved a sigh of relief as he snagged the last one from the carpet. As he stood, she had her hand out and an expectant look on her face. "What?" No way was she getting another one to tear up.

"You made two wishes. You owe me one of those."

"I compromised." he said heatedly. Compromise should count for something. It wasn't like he did it every day, or for just anybody.

"Gimme." she answered, wriggling her fingers.

Oh, hell. He had gotten his way. Mostly. Pulling one of the small hearts from his palm reluctantly, he handed it over with a grunt. "Can I have these every holiday?"

"We'll see," she muttered vaguely, a secret smile on her lips, as she tore up the paper.

"What did you mean when you said you'd never gotten flowers? You had a long-term boyfriend."

She sighed heavily. "He didn't do gifts. Thought they were a waste of money. Especially flowers, because they eventually die."

"No offense, sweetheart, but why in the hell did you stay with him for so long?" His jaw clenched, wishing he could beat the hell out of her ex.

"I honestly don't know. It probably had something to do with the death of my parents. I missed them. I felt so alone after they died. I guess I was pretty young, vulnerable and stupid." Her voice was forlorn.

Simon hated the bastard even more. She had been young and alone, stunned after losing her parents. He wished he could have been there for her then.

But he was here now. He pulled her unresisting body into his arms, vowing to protect her from this moment on. "Never again, baby. You'll always have me. I'll never let you be lonely."

Neither one of us will ever be lonely again.

He took the clip from her hair and dropped it on the floor. As he ran a soothing hand over the silky strands, he realized that he had been lonely his entire life. He'd just never really recognized it. "I've been waiting for you forever," he whispered to her in a husky voice. Somehow, he had known her from the moment he saw her. Not with his eyes, but with his heart.

And God, how he needed her.

She pulled away from him slightly to see his face. She didn't say anything, but she didn't need to. He could see her love, her heart glittering in her eyes. He traced her lips with his fingers, moving slowly to her cheeks and down her neck, savoring the softness beneath his fingertips. He drew invisible initials on her exposed cleavage, left bare by his too-big robe. His initials, tracing over them again and again, needing to stake his claim on this woman who drove him to ecstasy and to the edge of sanity.

"Simon." she whimpered his name, pulling his head down to her lips.

He groaned into her embrace as her hands stroked over his shoulders, loving the feel of her fingers on his heated flesh, a touch so exquisite that his heart was thundering against the wall of his chest.

Needing to make her his, claim her, he thrust his tongue into her mouth with desperation, need so intense that it was almost painful. The possessive beast in him sighed as she opened for him, letting him in, asking for more. He plundered until they were both breathless, panting. Pulling back, he sucked in a deep breath, nibbling at her lower lip, unable to separate himself from her, but also needing to have her naked.

He moved back, cupping one of her silk-clad breasts, running a finger around the prominent nipple.

"Do you remember what I told you about this robe," he rumbled against her lips, tracing them with the tip of his tongue.

"Every word," she answered in a low, sexy voice. "I have very fond memories of this robe."

"Me too." he replied hotly, reluctantly releasing her and pulling one more tiny heart from his other hand. "But right now I wish you would get naked."

With a graceful move, she swept the heart from his fingers and tore it up. Slowly, she opened the front tie of the garment, letting the silk glide effortlessly off her shoulders. He swallowed hard as her perfect breasts appeared and the garment caught at her elbows for a heart-stopping moment, before it slid to the floor in a pool of shimmering black.

He had to force himself to breath, make the air move in and out of his lungs. She was so fucking beautiful. So very his.

Mine.

"I love these fucking hearts," he rasped, his hand clenched tightly around the remaining two.

Her gorgeous blue eyes danced, but they were also hot with desire. "You wasted that one. I would have done it for nothing. I need you."

I need you.

His soul echoed her desire, his body clamoring, clawing to possess what belonged to him. His cock was as hard as marble, ready to be buried in her wet, hot pussy. At this point, he was afraid he was going to explode the moment he buried himself inside of her. He tucked the tiny hearts beneath a placemat on the table for safekeeping.

She took a step forward, bringing her silken skin against his, making him shudder. Her hand fluttered gently against the material of his boxers, stroking his ready-to-explode cock like it was a treasured pet.

He moved her hand and swept her up into his arms, unable to wait a moment longer. "Time for bed."

"About time." she murmured against his shoulder, obviously impatient.

Immediately, his mind shifted from his cock to the wanting woman in his arms. His woman. She needed him, wanted him to pleasure her, sate her needs. He'd get his satisfaction, but she came first. She would always come first. Literally.

Chapter 7

Simon dropped her gently on the bed. She rolled and popped open the drawer on the bedside table, jerking out his restraints and handing them to him. "Tie me. I don't mind."

Please. Tie me and fuck me before I die of longing.

She was panting, both her mind and body out of control. If she didn't have his muscular, hot body possessing hers within moments, she was going to scream.

He looked at her with confusion. "You want me to tie you up?"

"I want you. Tie me up. Tie me down. Whatever you want. It's hot. You're hot. I just want you to fuck me. However you're comfortable with it."

Oh God, I'm babbling. He's making me crazy.

"Sweetheart, the possessive caveman in me would love nothing more than to have you at my mercy and make you come until you scream, but I don't need to." He took the restraints from her hands and dumped them beside the bed. "But now that I know it makes you hot, I'll do it another time. Right now, I just need to watch you come, make love to you until neither of us can move."

Every light was on. They hadn't shut them off earlier. The expression on his face was fierce, tender, and strangely peaceful. She took a deep breath, her whole body quivering, her pussy saturated, ready for him. She became intoxicated as he stretched himself over her, the silk of his new boxers sliding along the tender folds between her thighs. She opened for him, moaning as his rock-hard erection pressed firmly against her mound, stimulating her already-sensitive clit.

She clutched him to her, almost afraid that he would escape, needing some sort of reassurance that he was real, that he was hers. She had never, ever been a possessive or obsessive woman, but Simon was so incredible, so completely amazing, that it seemed almost impossible that he really existed, that he was truly hers. Sometimes he almost seemed like a dream, a lovely dream that took her existence from ordinary to extraordinary.

"Relax, baby." Simon whispered in her ear, his warm breath making her shiver.

Relaxing her arms, she wrapped them around his neck, trying to control her feral instinct to bind him to her, protect herself from ever having to live without him. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm feeling desperate." She hadn't meant to say it, it sounded pathetic, but it was true. Her emotions were on overload and her body was clamoring for more.

He trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses up the side of her neck. "No more desperate than I am. Every time I hear your voice, see you, talk to you, I want to get closer. Hell, all I have to do is think about you." Lightly, his tongue licked her lips, tracing the contours of her mouth. "I want inside of you. I want us to be fused so tightly that you can never get away."

Yes. Yes. That's how she felt.

His mouth came down on hers, no more teasing, no more seduction. He invaded, pillaged, ravished with his lips and tongue, and she opened to him like a flower to the sun. She moaned as he sated a small portion of her desire for cohesion, her hips automatically lifting, wanting other body parts to merge, needing some relief from her hyper-aroused state.

He pulled his mouth from hers, his breathing ragged. "Fuck! You're sweet. So sweet and so damn

hot!" Pulling her arms from around his neck, he gripped her wrists and imprisoned them at her side, sliding slowly down her body.

She squirmed, pulling at her wrists that were held tightly, one on each side of her waist. He licked and kissed his way down her chest until he reached her breasts, making her want to scream with frustrated desire.

He wasn't gentle, and she didn't want him to be. His teeth abraded a sensitive nipple, pulling the tip into his scorching mouth, using both his teeth and his tongue.

Pleasure and pain.

"Simon. Oh, God. Please." Her head thrashed as he switched to the other nipple, torturing her arousing her until she could barely draw breath.

He kept up his erotic assault on her breasts, laving, gently biting, switching from one to the other while he kept her hands clamped firmly at her side. The feeling of being at his tender mercy was maddening, intoxicating, breathtaking.

His mouth dipped lower, moving in circles over her belly, leaving a trail of heat in its wake.

Finally, he let go of her wrists, using his hands to spread her legs wide as he moved between her thighs. "You smell so sweet. Like aroused woman. My woman. Mine to satisfy. My honey to lick up." He growled, taking deep breaths, the hot exhalations caressing the tender folds of her pussy.

Her body nearly exploded just from his possessive, completely aroused, masculine snarl. "Yes, Simon. Please. I need you. I need to come."

"I need to make you come. Satisfy my woman."

He pushed her legs up, bending her knees, opening her for his hungry mouth.

His attack was immediate and totally carnal. Mouth devouring, tongue penetrating, he claimed her pussy with an intensity that made her cry out his name as her body quivered.

He breached the tender folds, delving deep, licking up her cream with a sensual abandon that left her breathless and whimpering. His tongue found and attacked her swollen clit with mindless focus.

Kara speared her hands into his hair, oblivious to anything other than the total ecstasy her body was experiencing from his primal, animalistic mission. He was going to make her climax. Hard.

He laved the tiny bud over and over. Faster and faster. Again and again.

Her body shaking, she fisted his hair, pulling his mouth tightly against the pulsating flesh of her pussy.

Her body wound tightly, her nerve endings sizzling with heat, she detonated with a force so powerful that her back arched and she tried to pull away from his relentless mouth, the pleasure too sharp, too vehement.

Gripping her hips, he held her tightly, making her ride the waves of the volatile pleasure as she screamed his name. He didn't stop until the last spasm subsided, leaving her as limp as a wet dishrag.

Still gasping for breath as he crawled up her body and lay at her side, she rolled into his body and threw her arm over his massive chest, burying her head against his shoulder.

"Feel better?" his voice was raspy, but laced with amusement.

She batted his shoulder weakly. "Were you trying to kill me?"

"Only with pleasure, baby," he whispered, his voice heated.

"Well, then you were successful." She ran her hand down his chest, tracing his scars, wondering why a man as wonderful as this one had suffered such pain. Sometimes life just wasn't fair.

Her hand trailed down his abdomen, tracing every toned muscle. He was sculpted like a Greek statue. And had a cock much bigger than those depicted in any of those marble nudes. "You're so gorgeous," she whispered in awe as she followed the silky trail of hair from his navel downward.

"I'm starting to think we need to take you to an eye doctor," he rumbled, his voice graveled, but adoring.

"My eyesight is perfect and so is my perception. You're so strong. Handsome." Her fingers curled around his engorged cock. "And big."

He sucked in an audible breath as she dipped her hand into his boxers and swiped her fingertip over the head of his cock, spreading the moisture of a drop of pre-cum over the silken tip, rubbing it gently, slowly.

"Fuck! I love feeling your hands on me. It's the best damn feeling in the world."

Gripping his shaft a little tighter, she started to move it sensually, provocatively. This was something that Simon had always missed because he couldn't let a woman have her hands free during sex. Until now. Simon would never be tame, but the fact that he felt comfortable with her touch, that he actually wanted it, humbled her. After all he had been through, he trusted her.

He groaned, a tortured sound between pleasure and torment. His larger hand covered hers. "Ride me, sweetheart. Fuck me senseless." He stripped off his new favorite underwear, letting them drop to the floor.

Her head jerked up to look at his face as his arms came around her, lifted her over him. "Are you sure?" She wanted nothing more at that moment than to take that mammoth cock into her body and watch him take his pleasure under her. But she was trembling from the thought, terrified of making him live through another bad memory.

"Yeah. I want to watch you ride me. I want to watch your face as you come from riding my cock," he answered, his expression dark and desperate.

Straddling his hips, she hesitated, her heart racing. Could he do this? He didn't have to. "You don't need to prove anything to me. We don't have to do this."

"Take me inside of you, sweetheart. I need you." He grunted, his voice husky with desire.

I need you.

Those three little words had her lifting up, grasping his engorged cock and placing the head at the opening of her slick channel. Need surged through her, an elemental, pure desire to feel him fill her, have him moving inside of her, as deeply as she could take him. Her hands on his chest, she maneuvered up and down, taking him slowly, getting used to the angle. She lowered again, taking most of the shaft as his hips lunged up, trying to go deeper.

Big, strong hands gripped her hips, pulling her down to meet him as he surged up, their skin slapping together sharply as she finally had him deeply imbedded inside of her, filling her

completely. He stretched her, opened her, held her hips tightly as they completely joined, his cock buried to the root.

"Christ! You feel so good. So tight and hot." His voice was wild, feral.

She watched his face, looking for any sign that the position was troubling for him. There was nothing but pleasure. His liquid chocolate eyes met and held hers fast. His hands guided her strokes, his hips moving up with powerful thrusts.

Their eyes stayed locked and a tear trickled down her cheek as she saw no sign of fear in him, no doubt of who he was fucking.

"Only you, Kara. It's only ever been you," he told her, his chest heaving. "You look so beautiful. Let go. Ride me. Come for me."

She let her eyes flutter closed as he pummeled her, holding her hips in his strong hands. Her head fell back as she let herself be consumed by the pounding strokes of his cock, the friction of his furious thrusts, the feel of him owning her again and again.

Her breasts bounced with every powerful entry. She lifted her hands and cupped them, pinching them lightly.

"Yeah. Take what you want, sweetheart. Whatever you need." He panted heavily as his strokes became deeper, harder.

Her fingers plucked at her nipples as his grip on her hips got tighter, more demanding. She rode him hard, grinding, taking him so deep that she shuddered.

Throwing her head back, she imploded. The muscles in the walls of her channel clenched and released, repeatedly squeezing the cock invading her. As her body quivered, she felt his body tense beneath hers.

She watched, their eyes meeting, as he came.

He was hot and wild, masculine and perfect. The low, reverberating sound that ripped from his throat the most beautiful sound she had ever imagined.

A hot, explosive stream emptied into her womb and they both collapsed. She could feel his body trembling as her body crumpled, covering him like a blanket. "I love you," she murmured with a sigh against his chest.

His arms came around her, holding her tightly against his body. They were both sweaty and spent, but she felt so complete, so content.

It took a while for her breathing to return to normal and her racing heart to quiet. She started to crawl off Simon's body, to move to his side, but he wouldn't let her. He grunted and pulled her back over him. "Stay."

It should have pissed her off that he was giving her a dog obedience order, but the way that he said it, with such longing in his voice, made her smile. She was also so sated that she could barely move.

She snuggled her head back onto his shoulder, determined to get up the energy to move shortly or she would end up crushing the poor guy.

His breathing became deep and even, his arms still locked around her, but relaxed.

He's sleeping. We just had sex in his nightmare position. And he's sleeping with me on top of him.

Her heart flipped and a bone deep ache penetrated her body. He trusted her so much that he could be at ease when he felt most vulnerable. She turned her head and kissed him lightly, her heart overflowing with love for this man.

This man who put her needs first.

This man who trusted her.

This man who would go to any lengths to please her.

This man she loved.

She'd always treasure his trust, nurture it as though it were precious. Which it was.

Exhaustion made her eyes close, her body relax.

Really, you need to roll off of Simon. It can't be a comfortable way to sleep.

Her breathing became deeper, matching the same rhythm as the man beneath her.

They woke the next morning in the same position, completely rested and comfortable.

Epilogue

Simon paced the courtyard of the elegant resort with a frown.

Was he about to make a big mistake? What if she wouldn't have him? The last six weeks had been the happiest of his life. Did he really want to screw that up?

He looked out at the water, reliving those memories with a contented sigh.

I don't want to screw it up. But I need her. I want her to be mine. The need to brand her as his, to stake his claim, was nearly overwhelming.

Looking toward the outside door to their suite made him shudder. Fuck! Why was this so hard? He and Kara shared everything. There wasn't a corner of his heart and soul that she didn't know.

His phone vibrated in the pocket of his suit jacket. He was in a suit and tie, and it wasn't even a damn work day. He was currently in Orlando, to visit Disneyworld of all places, to realize one of Kara's dreams. Incredible that a woman born and raised in Tampa had never been to Disneyworld!

Of course, neither had he. But, then again, he had come to Florida as an almost-adult.

He clenched his last heart-wish in his palm, squeezing it until his hand was white, his blood circulation nearly cut off.

He had saved one wish. The other one had been used to get her to come on a vacation trip during her spring break. He had given her the heart a month ago and told her he wished that he could take her someplace that she wanted to visit during her spring break.

Okay. Yeah. He expected Paris, London, The Orient, or even Africa. Instead, she had mumbled quietly that she had always wanted to go to Disneyworld. Barely more than an hour's drive from Tampa, and with a private jet available for travel anywhere in the world, he hadn't expected this to be her dream vacation.

Granted, it had actually been fun. He especially liked it when she got scared on a ride and threw herself in his arms with a shriek and a delighted laugh. Tonight was their last night at the resort, and he was taking her to dinner in one of the best restaurants in Orlando. He just hoped that they had something big to celebrate.

Fishing his phone from his jacket, he looked at the caller ID. Hudson, Samuel.

"What?" he snarled into the phone.

"Did you ask her yet?"

Simon nearly laughed at the slightly nervous voice on the other end of the phone. Sam acted like this event was just as important to him as it was to Simon. "No. She's getting ready for dinner."

"You've had a week. What the hell?"

"What do you care?" Actually, Simon knew very well why Sam cared. He'd let it slip that if Kara said yes, Sam would very likely be seeing Maddie Reynolds again.

"She's good for you. You need her. Plus, I don't want to put up with your shitty mood if she says no."

She wasn't going to say no. She couldn't say no. He would just have to convince her. Anything else was not an option.

The door of their suite opened, and Simon lost all interest in his conversation with Sam. "I'll call you later."

"Ask her."

Simon clicked off the call and pocketed his phone, his eyes never leaving the beautiful woman in red that was framed in the door of their suite.

God, she's incredible. Will I ever get used to the sight of her?

Most likely...not. It didn't matter where she was, or what she was wearing, he started having palpitations the moment he saw her.

Tonight, dressed in a red cocktail dress that flirted with her knees, and a pair of matching heels, she took his breath away. Her hair was down, and tiny strands ruffled from the slight ocean breeze.

"You look beautiful," he told her truthfully as he reached her side, planting a light kiss on her lips. You look like a fucking goddess.

Every day. Every single time he saw her.

"Thanks. You're looking very handsome yourself, Mr. Hudson. Are we ready?" she asked, shooting him a happy smile.

I'm ready. Ready to strip off that sexy dress and see what kind of underwear you're wearing. Then I'll strip them off with my teeth and fuck you until you scream.

His cock was rock-hard, but that was nothing new. It happened every day, every time she smiled at him. Or when she didn't smile at him. When she frowned. When she argued. Fuck! Her mere presence was all that was required to give him an erection.

Or her voice. Or just the thought of her. Damn...he was easy when it came to Kara.

"In just a minute." He guided her back in the door, closing it behind him. "I need to talk to you."

Her smile faded and he wanted to kick himself.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, her voice suddenly concerned.

"No." He sat on a leather couch in the opulent suite and pulled her down into his lap. "I need to ask you something."

Do it. Just do it. Before you go crazy.

He opened his clenched fist, showing her his final heart-wish.

"Don't waste it on asking for sex, 'cause I'm pretty much a sure thing." she answered, laughing softly.

He slid her off his lap and seated her beside him. Reaching into his pocket, he handed her a small box.

She looked at him, then the heart, then the box. Taking the box in her hand, she lifted the lid slowly.

"I wish that you would marry me." His voice was husky and filled with part hope, part fear.

"Oh, my God. Simon, I didn't expect this." She pulled the huge, sparkling diamond ring, housed in a platinum setting, from its velvet home with trembling fingers. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes. Please." Say yes or I'm gonna lose it.

She looked at him with a stunned expression. "You want to marry me? Simon, you haven't even told me that you love me. I assumed you just weren't ready. I didn't expect this."

How in the hell could she not have suspected? She'd owned his heart, body and soul for what seemed like forever. "I love you. I love you. I love you." Surely he had said that to her before? "I do. I can't believe I've never said it, but you had to have known."

She smiled up at him. "I know. I just wasn't sure if you were ready to say it."

"I'm more than fucking ready. You're mine and I want it official." His eyes were intense, his body tight. "I should have told you that I loved you. I'll make sure you hear it so often from now on that you'll be tired of hearing me say it. You deserve to hear it every fucking day. Maybe I haven't verbalized it because there aren't really words to explain how I feel about you. Love seems lukewarm, not enough. But I love hearing it coming from your lips. I should have known that you wanted to hear it." He sighed. "You're my life, sweetheart. Please be mine. Mine forever."

She threw herself into his arms. He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes tightly, knowing he held his whole world in his arms at that very moment.

"Mine forever," she breathed, close to his ear, her voice incredulous.

He pulled back to look at her face. She was crying, tears spilling from her eyes in an endless stream.

"Don't cry. I don't like it."

"I know. But they're happy tears."

Fuck! Crying was crying, and he hated to see her cry. He plucked the ring from her trembling fingers and grasped her hand gently, sliding the ring on her finger. His heart raced as he stated, "You're marrying me."

"I thought you were asking," she shot him an amused look. "I haven't said yes."

"You will," he warned, his expression dark. "Say that you will." Say it. Before I have a damn heart attack. Say it.. Now. Right fucking now!

She pried his fist open and pick up the heart gently. She tore it up, letting the tiny pieces scatter over the couch. "Wish granted."

He blew out a relieved breath, his heart hammering. "Yes?"

"Yes. I'll marry you. I love you, too."

"Soon," he demanded.

"We'll see. Compromise?"

"No!" He took her hand in his and gently kissed the ring he had placed on her finger. "No compromise this time."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, dropping a soft kiss on his lips as she caressed the nape of his neck. "A small compromise?"

"No."

He groaned as she pulled his head down and gave him a toe-curling, hot embrace that had him

panting in the aftermath.

"You can give a little," she told him in a low, persuasive voice.

He growled as her hand moved down his chest and palmed his erection through his pants. "Are you trying to seduce me into compromise?"

"Maybe. Is it working?" she answered in her irresistible "fuck-me" voice.

"Hell yes, it's working," he growled, pulling her into his arms. "Fine. We'll talk terms. Later." He stood and pulled her to her feet.

Fuck! He was easy.

"Later." she agreed. "Much later." She grabbed his tie and tugged, leading him willingly toward the bedroom.

Maybe being easy wasn't always a bad thing.

They missed dinner and ordered room service hours later. In the hours preceding their celebratory engagement dinner in the suite, Simon learned that compromise wasn't bad at all and that being easy could be a very, very good thing.

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